FIRST DAY OF CLASS:
CREATING A *HOOK*

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Adapted from Understanding By Design (Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins)

You enter the classroom. The clamor begins to die down, and one hundred pairs of eyes stare at you. You feel a little sick to your stomach. How do you seize the next moments to set the tone and intellectual environment for the course?

The following steps promote a method of preparing for the first day of class that builds on principles of good overall course design and course structure. This method involves designing "from end to start"—that is, working backwards from the big ideas and big questions of the course to the actual "hook" that catches students' interest and begins to engage them in the intellectual rigor of the course.

1: DESIGN FROM END TO START

CLARIFY THE BIG IDEAS, ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS, AND TARGET UNDERSTANDINGS FOR THE COURSE

BIG IDEAS connect specific course topics to larger pursuits of academic disciplines and of humanistic inquiry in general. Big Ideas unify the more specific skills and knowledge of a course and promote understanding across course and disciplinary boundaries.

In a general chemistry course, a Big Idea might be as simple as *Energy is Conserved* or *Entropy tends to increase*. These broad ideas serve to unify more specific details of the course; they also transfer to more advanced studies of biochemistry, inorganic chemistry, etc.

In an Intro to Shakespeare course, one Big Idea might be that *Shakespeare's plays were part of the popular entertainment of his time*. This idea helps link course content to questions of early modern culture as well as to contemporary popular media.

Why do we have to study this?

Students will ask this question, and you should be well prepared to answer it from Day One. Before listing syllabus requirements and engaging in Ice-Breaking activities, make sure that students know and can say WHY they are in the course as well as HOW the course fits in with their specific academic pursuits. Even better, help students know how the course addresses larger life questions in terms of understanding how we behave, how we engage in community with others, and how we understand the world around us.

"The first object of any act of learning, […] is that it should serve us in the future. In essence, it consists in learning initially not a skill but a general idea which can then be used as a basis for recognizing subsequent problems."
Jerome Bruner, The Process of Education.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS frame course ideas in terms of broader inquiries that may have multiple answers and require philosophical speculation and discussion. Asking essential questions in a course is central to developing lifelong habits of thinking critically and asking why? Essential questions address the basic inquiry, *why does this matter*?

In a general chemistry course, Essential Questions might include *How does matter interact with energy to cause change and do work?* and *How can we use chemistry to organize matter?* These big questions transcend the specific details of any class period and help frame course goals in terms of broad inquiry rather than easily-memorized facts.

In an Intro to Shakespeare course, one Essential Question might be *What distinguishes literature from other popular entertainment?* This question can be addressed at multiple points throughout the course, and it encourages students to develop both opinions and their own arguments over the course of their studies.

TARGET UNDERSTANDINGS clarify what students need to know and be able to do in order to "perform" answers to the essential questions of the course. These understandings "transfer" with students to other courses and other life pursuits.

Is there a text in this course?

Although you may be assigned a course text for your class, particularly if you are teaching an introductory course, keep in mind that the organization of the textbook does not have to determine the organization of your course. You should avoid simply moving from one unit to the next because that's the way the textbook is laid out. On the first day of class, you can "sell" the course text(s) to students by explaining how the text(s) will help to address the bigger ideas and questions of the course. This approach has the advantage of making the focus of the course the pursuit of learning rather than the required textbook.

In a general chemistry course, a Target Understanding might be framed as *Students will understand that chemical bonds in molecules determine chemical behavior in such important areas as energy, the environment, and nanoelectronics.* Such an understanding provokes exploration, thought, and inquiry. It is not simply a prompt for listing memorized answers.

In an Intro to Shakespeare course, a Target Understanding might be written as *Students will understand that festivities such as Bartholomew Fair influenced Shakespearean theater and that the puppet shows featured at such fairs also furnished complicated retellings of other plays from the time*. This understanding is specific to the course, but it also connects details from the course to the big ideas about popular entertainment in the early Modern period and about popular media in our own time.

2: HOOK AND HOLD

CREATE EXPERIENCES THAT CONNECT STUDENTS TO THE DEEPER QUESTIONS AND IDEAS OF THE COURSE

CHALLENGE PRECONCEIVED KNOWLEDGE. One strategy for opening the class is to introduce an idea or concept that goes against conventional thought about the subject. In an Intro to Shakespeare course, for example, you might play with conventional expectations of a Shakespeare course by beginning the class with a snippet of the puppet promo for Bob's Burgers.* After showing the clip, you might ask what this contemporary example has in common with Shakespeare's staging of *Hamlet*. A quotation from a secondary source on Shakespeare's staging might help to encourage insightful discussion. The ensuing conversation can be a useful introduction to the main ideas of the course. It uses students' familiarity with popular media to draw out some of the principles of popular entertainment that will underlie the course's intellectual approach to Shakespeare. *This promo can be viewed on the Adult Swim website at http://www.adultswim.com/videos/promos/bobs-puppets/)

PRESENT A CONTROVERSY. As reported by *Time*, the car-ride company Uber has been accused of ordering and then cancelling close to 5,000 rides from competing company Lyft in order to damage the reputation of its competitor. How might this ultra-aggressive example of modern business tactics be used to raise questions about business goals and ethics to begin a course on Business Policy or Organizational Behavior? Questions such as this one present a controversy that helps students understand the larger stakes of their studies in business, arts, sciences, etc. You might lead in to this question by getting students to discuss their own experiences with aggressive business practices as consumers.

USE EXAMPLES TIED TO STUDENT INTERESTS AND CULTURE. Another strategy for creating a hook into course ideas is to open with an example from popular film, music, or web media. Instructor Chris Magee, for instance, has used *The Fast and the Furious* franchise to discuss the phase change of N_2O in the combustion engine—the famous "Nitrous" used to turbocharge the supercars in the films. Magee capitalizes on intersections of a specialized academic study (chemistry) with a slice of culture that students know and likely follow with interest. Find aspects of your own course topic that intersect with popular media or current events, and you can help students begin the course by accessing their existing knowledge in order to thinking deeply about the relevance of the course topic.

PRESENT LITTLE-KNOWN, MYSTERIOUS OR FASCINATING ASPECTS OF THE TOPIC. Marcus Tullius Cicero, one of ancient Rome's most influential politicians and orators, was highly influenced by his reading of Aristotle's treatise on comedy. Aristotle's treatise has since been lost to history, one of the greatest and most mysterious gaps in Western literature. Presenting the mystery of this lost text and its influence on rhetorical/literary history might open up a lively discussion of other lost literature, such as Homer's _Margites_ or Shakespeare's _Cardenio_. Additionally, this discussion might leads to bigger questions about what literature is worth preserving and why—a nice "hook" into the big ideas about literary history and value in a World Literature course.

CONNECT TO QUESTIONS OF LIFE, RELATIONSHIP, ENVIRONMENT, AND WELL-BEING. How might to recent spill of lead, arsenic, and other pollutants into the Animas River in Colorado be used to introduce a number of course topics, from Business Ethics to Environmental Philosophy to Biology or Chemistry? Simply beginning the course by having students talk about an event such as this one and their own impressions of it can be a useful way to draw student participation and prior knowledge into the course content.

3: SKIP THE FORMALITIES

SAVE ROLL CALL AND SYLLABUS READING FOR THE END OF THE CLASS PERIOD

MAKE THE SYLLABUS AN ACTIVE OBJECT From a student's perspective, nothing is worse than having to sit through an instructor reading from a syllabus that is right in front of everyone in the class. Some instructors avoid this pitfall by giving students a quiz over the syllabus during the next class period or having students sign a contract acknowledging that they have understood all policies and assignments. Make the syllabus reading an opportunity to learn about students rather than a mindless reading exercise.

FIND CREATIVE WAYS TO TAKE ROLL Another frequent time waster on the first day is roll call. Rather than having every student sit and wait for his or her name to come up, consider breaking up students into pairs or groups and having each group "report" on the year, major, and interests of one another. Collect these reports at the end of the class period, and you will have the names of everyone present. Another option for roll call is to have students write an answer to a short question relevant to the course. For instance, in the business course mentioned above, you might ask each student to write about his or her most frustrating experience as a customer. This question would then lead into the example of Uber's aggressive business practices as discussed above.