

Chapter 6: The First Class

You're about to enter your first classroom as an adult educator. Are you feeling nervous? Elated? Apprehensive? Excited? Or just plain scared? Even the most experienced adult educator had to face their first class at some point. Walking into your first classroom can produce a whole series of emotions. Teachers have reflected on their first class experience as a combination of riding a roller coaster, a horse, or an airplane for the first time. In other words, a mix of emotions, including excitement coupled with apprehension, and even fear. However, all teachers have endured this experience. You are not alone.

The first class sets the tone for the entire semester, and it is your opportunity to establish a supportive, positive learning experience and environment for students. This is critical because adult education, by nature, is one of the most democratic experiences you will encounter. Adult education students, for example, often come to school voluntarily, know what they are looking for, can be impatient, and need a comfortable learning environment. Adult students vote with their feet. If they find value in their initial experience, they will probably return. If they don't, they won't. This is why the first class can be a challenging experience for even the seasoned adult educator.

Good planning will help by alleviating, or at least minimizing, some of your fears and concerns. The more planning you put into the initial class, the more organized (and better) you will feel as you walk through the door. Also, remember that however anxious you are, your students are equally if not more frightened. Here are some ideas to consider.

First, try to visit the classroom a day or two prior to your start date. Is it a traditional room with individual tabletop desks? Or, does it have longer tables with chairs. Can you adjust the tables or chairs to form a square or circle? Will you be teaching in a larger common-area room that is partitioned with cubicle type walls? Having a better sense of your teaching environment will help you plan and alleviate some of your own fears about the unknown. An important note: If you decide to alter the physical nature of the room, please

remember to return the room to its former state after class is over. If you do not, you may find an unpleasant note waiting for you from the school administrator or teacher when you return to teach again. No one likes to see their work area altered.

Second, check to see if your student roster (attendance sheet) is prepared a day or so prior to your start date. Call ahead to the adult education office to see if you can pick it up when you visit the classroom. The combination of the number of students enrolled, coupled with the type of room you will teach, can be critical to how you design the first session. How you start off a larger group (ten or more students) might vary from your approach with a smaller one (six students or less). Be prepared for late “add-ons” to the student roster. Some adult education programs will enroll students right up to the start of class.

On class day, arrive 15-20 minutes early. This will allow time to set your materials out for easy access and greet students as they arrive. Remember to smile; nothing helps put students at ease more than a smile. In many ways, the principle is identical to interviewing for a job. Your body language and demeanor will be better served with a smile on your face. This has an immediate positive impact on the learning environment you are trying to develop.

If possible, try to seat yourself among the students (this is where a circle or squared seating arrangement is helpful). If you are teaching where only traditional classroom seating is offered (e.g., high school rooms and some computer labs are often set up this way), try your best not to start off with students being seated in the traditional manner. If possible, try moving seats into an initial discussion circle. Computer courses are notorious, because the terminals act as defensive shields for students to hide behind. Some computer classes have large worktables located in the same room. You may want to start there.

Introduce yourself, and write your name and the course title on the board. Don't worry about attendance right away; there will be plenty of time for that later. Some students may come a little late if they don't know where the classroom is. As they arrive, give them a friendly greeting. They will often feel awkward and uneasy.

If you feel nervous, let the students know. Many teachers have expressed their anxious feelings to the class, using it as an opportunity to talk about everyone learning together. This can reduce student apprehensions and fears by reminding them they are not alone in their feelings. Even experienced teachers can use this as an opportunity to relax.

Have plenty of blank paper or old manila folders and markers for students (and yourself) to make nameplates. These can be made with students writing their names in large print and folding the paper (or folders). Some teachers like to use stick-on nametags instead of nameplates. Use your best judgment. Addressing each other by first name is another small step that helps to develop a “learning community.” Spend a few minutes briefly describing the course. You can hand out the syllabus later after introductions have been made using an *icebreaker* exercise.

There are some common elements to consider in the first class. These are:

- Establishing a safe learning environment
- Introducing yourself, students, and class content
- Getting a sense of how your students learn and their current abilities