

The Freshman Experience— A Piece of Cake!

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The Freshman Experience class offered at California State University, Northridge, was initially created as a response to an unmet need. Although freshmen were introduced during the University's Orientation to "services" on campus, students often spent years trying to learn how to navigate the "system." They needed an opportunity to explore more deeply the issues that would impact them later (Grade Point Average, General Education requirements, multiculturalism), skills that would serve them well on campus (time management, study habits, library skills), and skills that would serve them well in life (communication, critical reasoning, social interaction, health).

In developing the curriculum for the section of this class which focused on the needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, the professors took the position that incoming freshmen would benefit from two other areas as well. One class session allowed a panel of deaf sophomores who were incoming freshmen the year before to relate their experiences of their first year. Another significant session literally "turned the tables" and put the deaf students in the position of serving as an interpreter or captionist so that they might have a better understanding of the services they use.

Based on years of experience and research which indicate that students learn more from "doing" than from lectures, the class was designed to be "hands-on" at all times. Research resulted in the identification of activities to support skills and experiences critical for this course. The course text, *Becoming a Master Student*, by Dave Ellis, is supported by a professor's copy which provides a number of exercises for

each topic. Other activities were taken from library, internet, and personal resources. Based on students' evaluations of the class over the past three years, these activities have been effective in getting across critical points and have added to the students' enjoyment of the class. We include in this article the three projects presented at the PEPNet Conference; our Conference handout included all other projects.¹

In addition to the specific benefits of direct application (skills building), research has demonstrated that this type of "Introduction to College" provides the necessary transition needed to move from high school to college and to succeed. A study conducted at Phillips County Community College in Arkansas found that students who completed a freshman orientation class (experimental group) were twice as likely to remain in school as those who has not taken the course. That study also showed that the mean Grade Point Average at the end of the first semester for the experimental group was 2.28, compared with a 1.72 mean GPA for the control group.

Although research to replicate the results of the Phillips study is still in process, the professors who team-teach this course have found that students who complete the course are more successful in negotiating the changes and demands that are made of them in college. The experiences in the class and the related discussions help students

¹These activities were included in the handout packet and are available from the presenters at the National Center on Deafness, California State University, Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, California 91330.

identify the relationships and processes by which they become (or fail to become) members of the social and academic communities on campus. Since the class is taught in direct communication (sign language), students have the opportunity to interact with peers and have their opinions and feelings validated.

The final exam for the course asks students to “become the instructor” for the next year’s class, to select topics they think they would like to keep or drop, and to justify those selections. Their responses in their presentations and their later independence and success are strong defenses for continuing the class.

The Rocks of Our Lives

Time Management
(Taken from the Internet)

A while ago, I was reading about an expert on the subject of time management. One day this expert was speaking to a group of business students and, to drive home a point, used an illustration I’m sure those students will never forget. After I share it with you, you’ll never forget it either.

As this man stood in front of the group of high-powered over achievers he said, “Okay, time for a quiz”. Then he pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed mason jar and set it on a table in front of him. He produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks could fit inside, he asked, “Is this jar full?”

Everyone in the class said, “Yes.”

Then he said, “Really?”

He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped some gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the spaces between the big rocks. He smiled and asked the group once more, “Is the jar full?”

By this time the class was onto him. “Probably not,” one of them answered.

“Good!” he replied.

He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He dumped the sand in and it went into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel.

Once more he asked the question, “Is this jar full?”

“No!” the class shouted.

Once again he said, “Good!” Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim.

He looked up at the class and asked, “What is the point of this illustration?”

One eager beaver raised his hand and said, “The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard, you can always fit some more things into it!”

“No,” the speaker replied, “that’s not the point. What this illustration teaches us is that: If you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.”

What are the ‘big rocks’ in your life?

- Time with your loved ones?
- Your faith, your education, your finances?
- A cause?
- Teaching or mentoring others?
- A project that YOU want to accomplish?

Remember to put these BIG ROCKS in first, or you’ll never get them in at all. So, tonight or in the morning when you are reflecting on this short story, ask yourself this question: What are the ‘big rocks’ in my life? Then, put those in your jar first!

Hats

Stereotyping & Prejudice
(An activity from *Becoming a Master Student*)

Janie Perez of the University of Texas in Galveston uses the following exercise to demonstrate the impact of prejudice and stereotyped expectations on behavior. It requires the use of ten headbands or hats with one of the following messages printed on each one.

- Clown: Laugh at me
- Stupid: Criticize me
- Senile: Patronize me
- Helpless: Interrupt me
- Insignificant: Ignore me
- Expert: Ask my opinion
- Important person: Listen to me
- Powerful person: Agree with me
- Genius: Ask me to speak
- Attractive person: Play up to me

Ask ten volunteers to sit in a circle in the center of the room. Ask the rest of the class to observe closely, remain silent, and focus on the reactions and comments of the volunteers.

Place one headband or hat on each volunteer so that the volunteer cannot read his own, but the rest of the group can see what it says. Introduce a topic for discussion and instruct each volunteer to interact with the others in a natural way. Further instruct the volunteers to react to each person who speaks by following the instructions on the speaker's headband. Emphasize that volunteers are not to tell each other what the headbands say but simply to act consistent with them. Begin the discussion and let it continue for 15 to 20 minutes until everyone has participated. Then stop the discussion and ask each volunteer to guess what their own headband says, and then take it off and read it.

Discussion: Begin the follow-up discussion by asking the volunteers to share their reactions. What is it like to be consistently misinterpreted by the group? Did you find yourself changing your behavior in reaction to others' treatment of you? Ask the observers to join the discussion with what they noticed about changes in body language and attitude among the volunteers.

If you are interested in soliciting written feedback, ask students to write about a time when they related to a person as a "headband" instead of as an individual. Questions could include: What assumptions did you make about that person? How do you imagine that person after they have completed their writing assignment?

Sponges — Our Brains!

Study habits & Time Management (An activity from *Becoming a Master Student*)

This exercise requires the following supplies:

- 3 glasses with equal amounts of water in each
- 3 large sponges that have been saturated, and then dried until they are hard
- 3 plates
- 3 bowls

Prepare 3 sets of implements on a table in front of the class. Each set should include a glass filled with water, a hard, dried sponge, one plate and one bowl.

Begin by explaining that each of the sponges represents your brain. If possible, let three students volunteer to have the sponges represent their brains.

Start with Johnny's brain. Johnny is away from home for the first time. He is excited about living in the dorm and meeting new friends. Although he knows school is important, his first semester has been less than ideal in terms of commitment to academics. The first week he went to classes and kept up with his studies. By the second week he had discovered the beach. The third week he pledged for a fraternity and found that those fraternity brothers sure knew how to have a good time! He was dismayed when midterm time came around and he didn't do well, but he had difficulty getting motivated. A couple of his friends went snowboarding later in the semester and he didn't want to miss that trip! The week before final exams, however, he decided that he'd better buckle down. He hadn't reviewed any of his notes, he hadn't done any of the reading, and hadn't paid attention to what the professor had emphasized in class. So the week of finals he really had to cram and try to pour that whole semester into one week.

Hold the first sponge (Johnny's brain) over the bowl. Explain that you will count down the weeks of the semester and for every week that Johnny DID study, one-fifteenth of the water from the glass (information) will be poured over the sponge. Although little is used in the first week, pour the remaining portion of the glass over the sponge quickly at the end to represent the cramming for finals. Allow the excess to spill over into the bowl. Then place the sponge on the plate.

Next we have Susie's brain. Susie was a bit more diligent than Johnny. She was on top of her class work for the first three weeks before she started to slack off. She fell in love with Stanley and found it difficult to concentrate on school when he kept inviting her out. She did, however, study for her midterms for one week. Then she lost it again. She and Stanley went up the coast to visit his parents during Spring break and Susie slipped back into her old pattern. As professors began talking about preparations for final exams, Susie panicked and decided she'd better get her act together or her parents would kill her! Three weeks before finals, she organized all her notes, reviewed them, caught up on her reading and studied with friends for finals.

Hold the second sponge (Susie's brain) over the bowl. Count down the weeks of the semester, pouring one-fifteenth of the water each week Susie studied. Pour the remaining over the sponge quickly at the end.

Finally we have Hector. Hector has friends and enjoys activities but has decided that if he is going to become a doctor, he'd better do well from the start. Each week Hector reads the assigned work, takes notes to summarize, and reviews his notes from class. A week or two prior to each exam, he organizes his materials and studies in a way that he can remember the information. He reviews his

information repeatedly to ensure that he will do well on his exams, and he does.

Count down the weeks of the semester with Hector's "brain," pouring little by little for each week, including final exams. You should come to the end of the glass by the time you come to the end of the semester week count.

Open discussion with the class to see how they perceive this activity. Let each share examples of when they may have been like Johnny, Susie, or Hector in their school lives. This can lead to more specific activities in time management or study skills.