

# Part One of Practical Mid-Career Teaching Reflections: Early Week Classroom Activities

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With PhD in hand, I joined the academy without any real teaching training. As I sought to establish my teaching routine and define my teaching philosophy, I found an author who provided useful guidance: James M. Lang in his first book *Life on the Tenure Track: Lessons from the First Year* (Lang 2005). Lang captured my attention immediately with his suggestion that one day per semester you should cancel classes spontaneously to recharge yourself. Beyond this provocative statement, Lang's practical tone was appealing, and he challenged me to think creatively about how to get the most out of my students. Lang has gone on to author several more books on teaching and learning (Lang 2008, Lang 2016) and a series of highly useful shorter blog posts, many of which are cited in this article. My aim is to build on Lang's approach by collecting in one place a number of teaching tips. These are practically oriented suggestions in the spirit of *Faculty Focus's* interest in publishing pieces on "how it works." Many of these suggestions are applicable to online learning. This five-part series is structured as follows:

- Early Week Classroom Activities
- Classroom Activities Throughout the Semester
- Assignments
- Guest Speakers and Tutorials

- Grading and Further Reading

One technique to establish at the outset of a course where you practice participatory decision-making is to work with students to draft a mini-constitution for the course. You can begin by explaining the aims and features of constitutions and then form working groups. Different systems can be used to approve the final elements of the constitution, such as negotiation between working group representatives or full class voting. The constitution should be aspirational, while also setting out some of the rules for your time together in the course.

Some teachers design anonymous surveys on Google Docs or similar platforms that students fill out before the first class. This gives teachers a more precise picture of the range of views among students in the course. The teacher could present a class profile in the first week based on these data. My suggestion is to ask the class to complete the same survey toward the end of the semester, so that you can analyze how students' perspectives have changed and how they have not.

Another opening gambit is to bring speed dating into the classroom. While the sighs of some students will be audible, this technique forges new connections at the start of the semester. I implement what I call guided speed dating as opposed to simply letting students interact freely during their "dates." I set a question for each speed date and alternate between more serious global topics and more lighthearted topics. Some illustrative examples are as follows:

- Should an environmental tax be placed on online shopping and delivery?
- What are some of your favorite television shows of the last five years?
- Will technology seriously threaten employment levels in the next decade?
- Come up with a global political economy themed date

Depending on the class size, groups could be two, three, or four students of mixed genders. Half of the groups move around every five minutes and half of the groups stay in one place and host the rotating groups.

On a similar note, Forbes (2020) is an engaging read on the role that ice-breaking activities play in bringing students together. The website she recommends for students to randomly choose ice-breaking questions is full of thought-provoking questions. Interested colleagues can also sign up to her larger [Professors at Play project](#).

During the early part of a semester, collaborative problem-solving exercises are another fun but intellectually challenging tool for fostering closer ties among students. I ask three volunteers to come to the front and work together to answer an online test. Sporcle quizzes, especially those that are map-based, work well. The three volunteers try to answer as many questions as possible, and then, in the last few seconds, the rest of the class steps

up and tries to help them complete the task. The tense but playful atmosphere creates bonds among students, encourages a better grasp of political geography, and leads to conversations outside the classroom.

While on the subject of political geography, I think that instructors from a range of disciplines should do more to use images, especially maps, in their teaching. This point fits well with Lang's recommendation that "instructors post an image on the screen at the front of the room and ask two questions about it: 'What do you notice? What do you wonder?' . . . Obviously you could substitute anything for the NASA picture of the day: a great sentence in a writing class; a newspaper headline in a political-science class; an audio clip for a music class; an artifact in an archaeology class (Lang 2015)."

The Connectivity Atlas and the Harvard World Map of Connectography are useful resources for this activity. The forthcoming book *Terra Incognita: 100 Maps to Survive the Next 100 Years* (Goldin and Muggah 2020) will be another valuable reference point. Honeycutt (2019) also invites students to move beyond looking at visuals to fashioning their own images. Teams of students could be asked to "create a mind map, draw a comic strip, color code a map, create a diagram." Honeycutt's suggestion fits with Lang's attempt to find class activities that span multiple disciplines; this approach can be applied broadly in university teaching. Looking at images helps students to visualize patterns. Honeycutt's additional step enables students to more actively engage with visual information.

The next part in the series continues the focus on classroom activities and addresses a range of activities, including films, incentive systems, one-minute papers, and student mini-lectures.

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