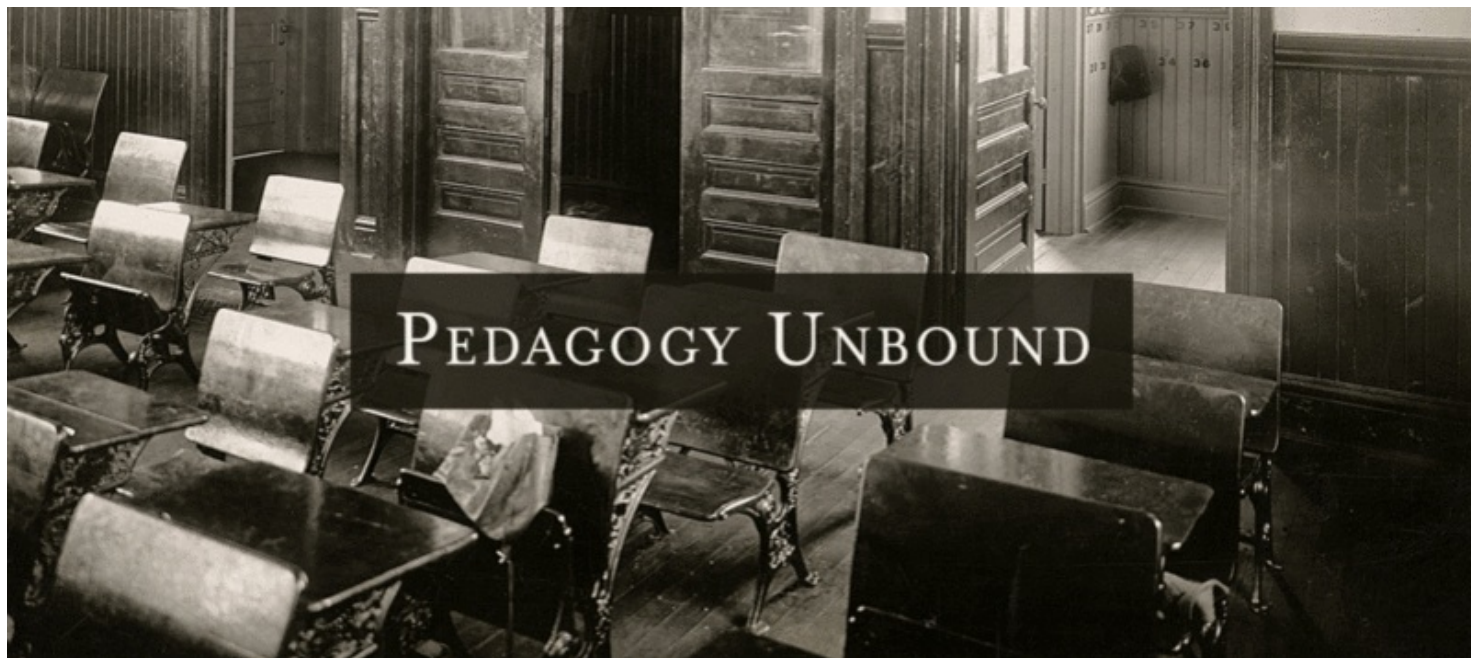


Reeling Them in Early

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Every morning, before the coffee kicks in, I unload the dishwasher. This is more or less mindless work, but there often comes a moment when I'm forced to pause. I take out the silverware basket, put it on the counter, and look at the disorganized jumble: forks and spoons and knives sticking out every which way. For a split second, I am overwhelmed with a kind of paralysis — I don't know where to begin. Of course, I soon snap out of it and start putting everything away.

That strikes me as similar to what instructors — particularly novice ones — face at the beginning of the fall semester.

It can be overwhelming to think of all of the objectives you have for your students. In my own writing courses, I want my students to learn how to construct an argument and how to write good sentences. I want them to understand the place of research, and how to integrate outside sources into their writing. Of course to become good writers, they need to be good readers, understanding how other writers create. And what about learning how to draft and revise? Trying to balance that glut of important skills, my head can become very muddled, very quickly.

I spent much of last week working with graduate students who are about to embark on their first semester of teaching. Over and over, we came up against the overabundance of imperatives. I felt like I had too much to tell them, too many most-important things to underline. Given the amount of freedom our department gives instructors to craft their courses, I worried that these rookie teachers would succumb to the [paradox of choice](#) and be paralyzed by anxious indecision.

So I tried to leave them with a very straightforward piece of advice: During the hectic first few weeks of the semester, as you try to arrange the many moving pieces of your course into a well-oiled machine, focus above all else on generating student engagement. If all you do in your course's opening weeks is entice students to see your course as their own, you will have succeeded.

To be sure, many of those imperatives flooding our minds are important to cover in the opening weeks of the semester. And I'm not suggesting we spend the first 10 class periods doing icebreakers and trust falls. But if we step back and think about our tasks as teachers, we'll see that getting students invested is the most important objective to aim for at the start of a course.

We can't force them to learn. Everything we understand about [the way the learning process works](#) suggests that, to create new understanding, students must actively revise their preconceptions. The necessary precondition for such revision is student investment. If students don't care about their courses, if they're [only completing assigned tasks](#) to get a good grade, there's a limit to how much they will learn.

Early in the semester is when we can make a lasting impression on our students, and pave the way for the weeks to come. At the outset, make your classroom an enticing space where students can discover what they think and what they can do. If you create a classroom environment that is absorbing, intellectually challenging, relevant, and fun, students will want to come to class and participate. When, later in the semester, you introduce more challenging material — stuff that requires students to buckle down and put in a lot of work — you'll thank yourself for building such a strong foundation. Students are more likely to work hard for you if they are invested in the course, if it matters to them.

I've written often in the past about various strategies to encourage student ownership. From [undermining our authority](#) so students can take the lead, to [building student-directed elements](#) into our course design, to [collaborating with students on course policies](#), there are many relatively easy ways to encourage students to make our courses their own.

Equally important is our mindset and affect in the classroom. When we resist the urge to do everything at once and instead focus on selling our subjects and creating a cohesive academic community, we make it much more likely that students will buy in to our courses.

So as the semester starts up, think about what initially drew you to your discipline. Think about what's most exciting and intriguing about your subject. Think about how to pass that excitement along to your students. As well, work to create a space where each one of your students can find the conditions to develop that excitement and interest. Thinking about these "soft factors" early on can make the serious stuff a lot more successful down the line. And try to relax a little: This is important but that doesn't mean it can't be fun.

[David Gooblar](#) is a lecturer in the rhetoric department at the University of Iowa. He writes about teaching for Vitae and runs the teaching website [PedagogyUnbound.com](#).

Find him on Twitter at [@dgooblar](#).

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