

▲ *Dr. Vali Siadat's Keystone Project won the 1999 "Exemplary Initiatives in the Classroom" award. He explains the guiding principles of his approach to Ms. Rosa Cabral, student and clerical assistant at Daley College, Chicago.*

**T**eaching in any field is a challenge, but mathematics may be the toughest. You've seen it. Three weeks into the new term and your students feel lost, washed up on the shoals of remedial math. The challenge: How can we help students catch on to math?

Dr. Vali Siadat at Richard J. Daley College accepted the challenge. He began with the premise that student failure at math is a subset of the larger problem of student failure. Siadat and his mentor, Dr. Yoram Sagher at the University of Illinois

at Chicago, began exploring contemporary educational research on why students fail. Summarizing the work of numerous scholars, they focused on eight reasons for student failure:

- Poor attendance.
- Short attention span.
- Inadequate homework.
- Short time horizons—limited to several days.
- Failure to learn from errors.
- Passivity in class—not asking for help.

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- Ignoring offers of help from instructors.
- Low self-esteem.

Clearly, a set of coordinated strategies was needed, strategies that would register with students and improve performance.

Dr. Siadat tested and refined the following techniques in his own classes, and working with Dr. Sagher, circulated them in a research paper. When the paper caught the eye of Madge Goldman, President of the Gabriella and Paul Rosenbaum Foundation, she offered to fund a controlled pilot study of "The Keystone Project."

### Strategies

Siadat and Sagher developed a strategy to mitigate each reason for failure. To address the attendance issue, the instructor makes it clear the first day of class that students will be dropped after three absences; this sets a standard of expectation.

To develop a student's attention span, the instructor administers time-pressured quizzes that require the student's full concentration. To encourage homework completion, quizzes are based on the homework. Time horizons are addressed through the assignment of frequent deadlines. Students learn from their mistakes when the instructor provides immediate feedback and repeats sticky questions on follow-up quizzes.

To combat passivity, the instructor brings students together for group work which promotes cooperation and peer tutoring. Offering students repeated evi-

*Continued on page 2*

## Secrets of Success— The Keystone Approach

*Continued from page 1*

dence that following instructions results in success, helps students learn to listen and ask for help.

In addition, the instructor gives well-defined tasks, the tools required to complete them and quick, meaningful feedback. Self-esteem is built as the student experiences the joy of repeated success on cumulative tests.

Most importantly, this approach applies the standards of the workplace to the mathematics classroom. Students are brought in as partners in a goal-oriented venture, and they are required to meet the standards of this partnership.

Emulating the standards of the workplace means:

- ❑ Establishing a clear attendance code.
- ❑ Demanding quick and accurate completion of assigned work.
- ❑ Ensuring individual accountability for the quality of the work.
- ❑ Basing the evaluation of performance on absolute, rather than relative standards.

### Results

The results have been gratifying. In spite of higher standards and greater demands, there is no greater attrition; in fact, Keystone classes show 81 percent retention compared to 77 percent in the control classes. Most significant, however, achievement soars! In the 1998-99 academic year, 65 percent of Keystone students passed the final examination for Elements of Algebra compared with 18 percent in other classes—that's almost a fourfold increase.

However, that's not the only positive result. Students improve their ability to concentrate. Although the course



▲ *The keystone in an arch is the piece that holds the others in place. Thus, mathematics taught in this manner can become the keystone for other learning.*

requires no reading, pre-and post-tests in the classes show a remarkable 27 percent increase in reading comprehension. This compares with an average decline in reading scores for students in other classes. This finding gave the Keystone project its name: The keystone in an arch is the piece that holds the others in place. Thus, mathematics taught in this manner can become the keystone for other learning.

### Analysis

Educational research has shown that frequent testing encourages regular study habits and discourages cramming. In addition, scholars have found that cumulative tests are effective in consolidating learning. The Keystone project classes begin with a short period of question/answer followed by a multiple-choice quiz. Computerized scoring provides an item analysis. This gives the instructor valuable information for planning the next class session.

The instructor adjusts the learning pace based on the quiz results. When the standard deviation exceeds 25 percent, indicating the class is splitting, cooperative learning is employed. In addition, the daily quizzes become a key

form of communication between students and teacher.

Increasing success on the cumulative tests builds student motivation. When the messages are frequent and clear, teaching is responsive and motivation is fed by increasing success, students respond to meet the instructor's expectations.

### Importance

In postsecondary institutions remedial mathematics courses constitute a large portion of the curriculum. At Daley College in Chicago more than half the course offerings in mathematics are remedial. Using traditional methods is to fail these students as it has failed before. That's why the Keystone approach is so important. The insight to this approach actually goes back more than 2000 years to the observation attributed to Plato in *The Republic*: Training in mathematics can sharpen the mind and thus produce positive results in other areas of student learning as well.

For a full project description including citations and statistical analysis, contact Dr. Vali Siadat by phone, 773-838-7632 or e-mail, vsiadat@ccc.edu.

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## Stuck with Dull Discussions? Try the Human Continuum

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**A**re you looking for a fun, innovative way for your students to use conflict resolution skills, critique ideas and express their opinions about a controversial subject? If so, the Human Continuum (HC) exercise may be the right cooperative group activity for you!

The HC provides excellent practice in cooperative group skills, while allowing students to take a stand on an issue and clarify their feelings in relation to the rest of the class. Also, it allows your students to paraphrase the ideas of others, while listening critically.

Start by presenting a controversial statement to your class. You may want to use a current issue from the headlines, or a bold statement made by a famous personality of the past. It's helpful if you write the statement on the board so the exact wording is available for all to see during this exercise. Then, instruct students to arrange themselves along an imaginary line on the floor.

Students should arrange themselves so that the student who agrees most strongly with the statement is on one end, and the student who disagrees most strongly is on the other end. As they are arranging themselves, they will need to check with the persons on either side of them to make sure they are in the correct place in the line. If they do not hold a similar opinion with the students next to them, they should move their

position in the line. Give your class about three to five minutes to arrange themselves in a continuum.

Next, have each student pair up with the neighboring person—suggest everyone pair up with the student to their left (if there is an odd number of students, you may pair up with the unpaired student). Have one student listen carefully to his partner's viewpoint on the issue. When finished, the listening student should be able to paraphrase the viewpoint of the speaker. Repeat this process so that the listener becomes the speaker. Allow about five minutes for this exchange of ideas.

Then fold the HC so that each student is paired with a student who holds a very different point of view (i.e. the person who strongly disagrees is directly opposite the person who strongly agrees with your statement). Have each pair listen carefully and paraphrase each other's perspective. Allow about five minutes for this exchange of ideas.

Finally, have your students break into groups of four with each pair joining another pair so that two students who strongly disagree (standing next to each other) are joined with the two students

who strongly agree (now standing across from them). If there is an odd number of students, the small group discussion may consist of only two or three students. Allow each group approximately 15-20 minutes to have a discussion about the issue.

At the end of the discussion, have each group present all the views represented in the group to the class. Was the group able to come to a consensus about the issue? Which pairs of students ultimately changed their minds? Was one pair of students able to convince the other pair that their opinion or view is more reasonable?

Moreover, the HC challenges your students to listen to the opinions of others even if they don't agree! It also encourages the participation of the entire class instead of the usual participation of only a few students.

As an option, the HC can also be split in the middle and slid so that the middle of the line is paired with an end. In this method the students who don't have a strong opinion are paired with those students with the strongest opinion.



▲ Then, instruct students to arrange themselves along an imaginary line on the floor.

## Bio-poems Create Community

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**O**ne of the biggest problems instructors have, and subsequently one of the biggest complaints of college students, is that of getting to know each other. The students and the instructor benefit from knowing a little bit more about each other—thus enhancing the ability of each to remember the other, especially names.

In my classes, I like to have the students write a bio-poem. This is done by writing the student's first name on the first line of a piece of paper—this is the title of the poem. The



letters of the first name (and last initial if the first name is short) are written in a column along the left margin of the paper.

Then they describe themselves in short poetic lines (rhyming is not necessary) by starting each line of the poem with the letter at the left of the page. Some students write single words, others write phrases or sentences. In any case, it gives everyone in the class a short introduction and begins the process of creating a community of learners.

## How Cyber Persona Develops in Distance Learning

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The experience of learning at a distance is not new. While the roots of distance education can be traced to the development of the postal service in the 19th century, postsecondary distance learning continues to change and evolve to include two-way interactive video, computer-mediated learning and multiple technologies (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1999). In fact, the current practice of distance education in collegiate America is defined by the psychological undercurrent supporting the changing computer-mediated environment.

In the traditional classroom or lab, each student develops patterned behavior, which reflects the individual's maturation level, personal learning characteristics and understanding of the expectations of the teacher and the specific course. The teacher in turn learns to effectively interact throughout the course with this 'projected personality,' which may differ markedly from the student's personality outside the classroom.

### What is cyber persona?

Personal growth within the cyber classroom represents a synthesis of dynamics that are both individual and group in nature. Cyber persona development differs from self-presentation in the traditional classroom and elsewhere. If successful interaction and learning is to take place, then each person involved must develop a persona within which to interact. In the virtual classroom each learner must develop and project a persona that not only incorporates and reflects her customary learning behavior but that also is defined by her response to the technology itself.

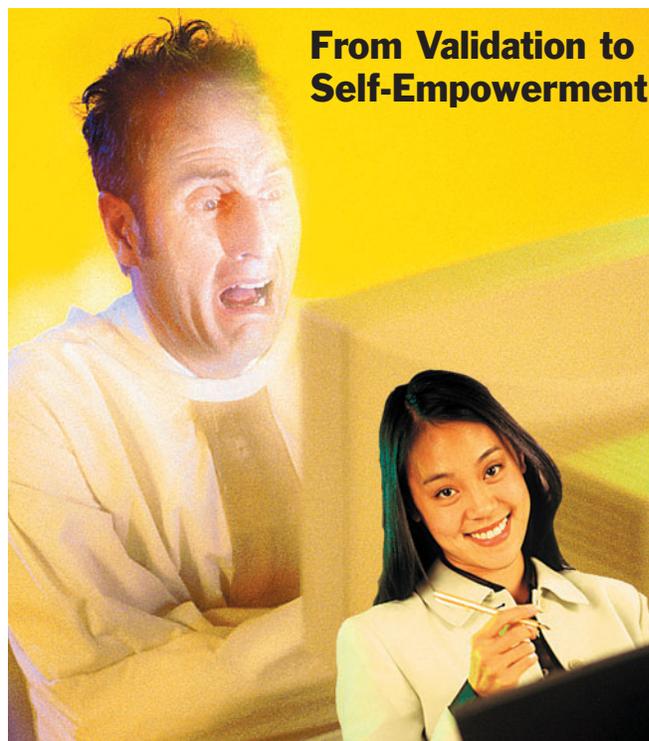
While each cyber classroom makes different technical demands of

### A Four-part TFS Exclusive

students, each student must learn both to manage the technology and to reflect this technical competence in her virtual persona. This persona is not necessarily an extension of one's personality. In many on-line courses the student never meets either her peers or the instructor, and the development of a cyber persona is unique to on-line learning.

Individual learners and faculty alike define a wide range of behavioral variability at the onset of each new distance learning class. The development of the cyber personality of each individual is a function of on-line cognitive growth. It is a perceptible public facade, shaped by ideas and beliefs, and angled to answer the needs of the on-line environment. One's cyber persona does not necessarily represent her truest inner personality, but is surely a potent sub-component. The personage presented is defined by a strong need for boundary reestablishment and survival instinct. Weil, M.M., and L.D. Rosen, 1997, writing in *TechnoStress* explain:

People's strong need to maintain control over their interpersonal and perceptual space comes from our inborn need for self-preservation and survival of the species. Well-maintained space boundaries make us feel protected and safe. They also serve as an advance warning system, giving us time to think or act if the need arises. Equally important [in the virtual classroom] our space



### From Validation to Self-Empowerment



Individual learners and faculty alike define a wide range of behavioral variability at the onset of each new distance learning class.

boundaries provide us with a predictable environment in which we can function successfully, free from jarring external surprises and intrusions (54).

Students are coming to the academy more damaged and more frightened than in the past (Levine and Crouton 1998). They are multigenerational, market oriented and time based. There is no quintessential on-line learner and no prototypical on-line classroom. The distance learner is nontraditional and joins instructors in forced adaptation to this evolving medium, which must constantly monitor itself and reorganize in response to recognition of its inherent diversity. Some students are apprehensive within the openness of the cyber environment, while others feel more comfortable there.

### Self-actualization classification

In 1989, Michael G. Moore, *The American Journal of Distance Education*, defined three of the four stages of interchange between participants in the on-line classroom. The four levels of interaction in distance education are:

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- **Learner-learner:** communication and trading of ideas between students, alone or in group settings, on-line or in real-time, with or without the presence of an instructor. Discussion boards, private chat rooms and telephone discussion accomplish this network.
- **Learner-instructor:** the exchange between the instructor who prepared the on-line study materials and the student. In this interaction, the aims of distance educators are similar to those of teachers in traditional classrooms. This pairing is often established through the use of e-mail.
- **Learner-content:** the relationship between the student and the subject matter presented for study in the virtual course.
- **Learner-self:** the communication struggle within the mind of each individual cyber student. The most defining interaction in the on-line learning experience.

The learner-self coupling is most critical to the weaving of a successful cyber classroom. This interaction initially presents itself as a cyclical process in response to the vastness of the cyber environment. Students appear to behave as if they are rebounding from the free-fall intrinsic to the start of each cyber class. They feel lost in cyberspace.

### Why a free-fall?

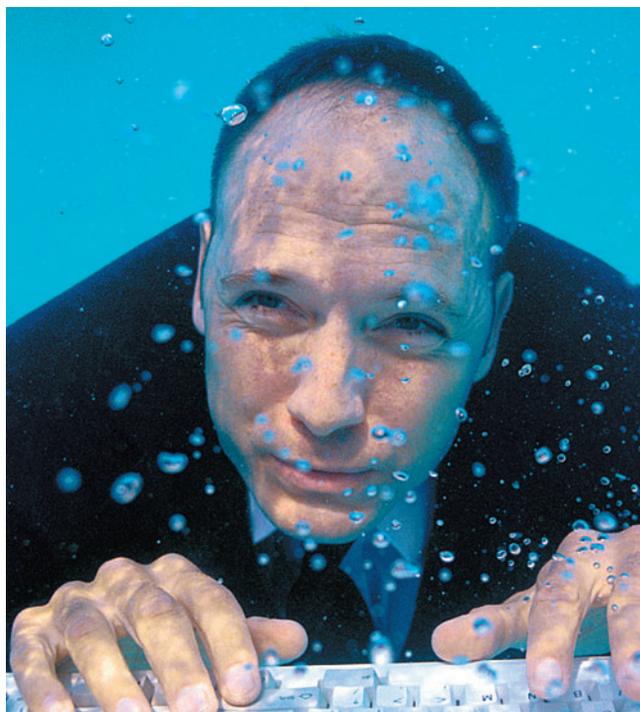
This free-fall is defined by a constant lean toward reestablishment of self through testing behaviors played out during on-line interaction with instructors and fellow cyber students. In this way, the on-line learner is developing independent orientating and coping behaviors necessary for existence within the virtual space. If this transition is not handled well by both learners as well as instructors, then there is a real possibility that all of the learning that follows can be affected. In fact, in our experience, this rocky initial interaction 'poisoned the well' for us on more than one occasion.

Learning does not move forward with any assurances until the self-actualization process is at a comfortable pace and place for all involved. It is the job of the teacher to be consistently

responsive to the developmental needs of each student and the group during this time. Classroom boundaries such as cyber collegiality, instructor responsiveness, class size, learning style compatibility, technological ease and comfort, as well as course content, all combine to serve as a filter through which individual core beliefs are strained and settled atop the existing structure of the cyber university.

The positioning of the class members occurs in similar patterning to that of family. There are many issues that surface during the developmental cycle of every cyber student and teacher. The cyber students initially gauge faculty on abandonment issues in an attempt to bond. Crouch and Montecino (1999) agree that on-line students repeatedly wonder if e-mail has been received and instructors wonder when students will contact them. The forced staging, publicity and fluidity of the Internet space provide a naturally daunting backdrop for even the most structured course materials or the most gifted learners. For example, if the student is not comfortable with the demands of the technology, then learning is delayed while the instructor assumes the role of computer consultant.

Cyber students often compete for attention and display lively sibling rivalry patterns during on-line exchanges. Possessiveness, familial loyalty, helpfulness, protectionism and conflict surprise instructors as behaviors necessary to productive on-line learning. It is during this time at the beginning of a course that nonactualizing learners become overwhelmed and withdraw into themselves, and often from the class. After the class size stabilizes and class members have arranged themselves, a delicately subtle but long overdue flow toward sharing of knowledge and experi-



*The forced staging, publicity and fluidity of the Internet space provide a naturally daunting backdrop for even the most structured course materials or the most gifted learners.*

ence occurs. Learning begins in earnest, and a progression toward critical thinking and productive evaluation evolves.

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**Coming next month, validation theory and how to use it to understand cyber relationships.**

## Ice Breaker Transforms Negative Attitudes

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Inspired by a recent instructional workshop examining multiple teaching techniques, I came upon the idea of using Post-its™ to break the ice with my students. Shortly after introducing myself, I hand each student a Post-it™ and announce that we're going to play a little word association. I tell them I am going to say a word and then they are to write down the first thing that comes to mind. It's anonymous, so they can write down anything as long as it's decent. As they anxiously wait, I say "math," and they write down their response. When they're done, I ask them to walk up and stick their Post-it™ on one half of the board.

You can imagine their sudden sense of liberation in being able to express what they think, get up from their desks, greet an acquaintance and slap their Post-it™ (or math frustrations) on the board. While they're posting their responses, I use the other half of the board to make a chart with three columns labeled "+ / - / other."

After everyone is back in their seats, I read the Post-its™ one-by-one

and ask them to help me decide in which column each one belongs. "Is it a positive, a negative, or other?" I ask. There's decision making, collaboration and even laughing. After all of the Post-its™ are sorted, there is the realization that almost nobody wants to be there. The negative column overflows.

This is the second semester I have done this activity and I've already received feedback. One of my students told me that when he saw his response hanging up there in the negative column with all the others, it was then that he realized that maybe his negative attitude towards math is the reason he's having to repeat the same class for the third time.

Think of the possibilities in other subjects. Instead of using the word "math" for the word association, instructors could use their own subject or even a word as general as "college." Also, instead of labeling the columns "+ / - / other," an English instructor could label them "noun / adjective / adverb." Whatever the subject may be, this activity helps the students relax, diffuses fears and heartens hearts.

## All These New Students...Who's Who?

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Learning students' names and calling them by name is key to building a good instructor/student relationship and thus enhancing the learning environment. Everyone likes to be called by name, and students are no exception! However, we all know that learning a hundred or more new names a semester is particularly difficult (especially in a computer lab situation where equipment failures necessitate students having to move to new stations from time to time). I've come up with a very simple solution that I believe could be implemented in almost any lab situation.

I provide each student with a yellow sticky note on which to write his or her name. Students are responsible for sticking their yellow name tag up on the bottom corner of their computer monitor at the beginning of each class period. They stick the tag back in their notebook at the end of class so it's available for the next class period. Lost name tags are quickly replaced before class from my supply. In fact, many students carry their own sticky note pads and don't even need to ask for a replacement.

As I move around the classroom daily, these tags provide a visual reminder of each student's name and also allow me to begin calling students by name even before I've committed their names to memory.

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## Quick Questions— Awesome Answers

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**H**ow do you reduce tardiness, encourage students to take the syllabus more seriously and prompt students to take lecture notes?

To find an answer, I might ask my colleagues, surf the net and search the library. Then I must wade through the suggestions, if there are any at all, until I find one that works.

I believe there's a better way. Why not pose questions to the readers of *TFS* and benefit from their expertise?

To get the ball rolling, I'll pose a question I've either asked or been asked. If you have questions or answers, please send them via e-mail to (quickquestions@teachingforsuccess.com). We will publish the best questions and answers in *TFS* and publish additional responses on the *TFS* Web site at <<http://www.teachingforsuccess.com/quickquestions.html>>. Your name, school and e-mail address will be identified, unless you indicate otherwise.

### Quick Question of the month

How do you encourage students to take lecture notes?

### Answers

Joe Howe, Assoc. Prof. of Mathematics, St. Charles County Community College responds, "On the first day of class when we go through the syllabus, I make it very clear to them that keeping a lecture notebook is a requirement for the course. It's not just for me, or for themselves, but for the whole class. Keeping notes prevents disruption. If some students refuse to take notes, I wait a few minutes and give them a problem to work, which usually gets them to do something. The success rate has been very high."

Becky Schantz, Adjunct Instructor of Mathematics, St. Charles County Community College says, "I give the students a short daily take-home quiz. Most of the questions come from lecture, which encourages students not only to take notes, but also to review their notes frequently."

## Blunting the Horns of a Common Dilemma

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**C**ollege freshmen have a lot to deal with, not the least of which are professors. Professors can be formidable. Many of them trade on this fact, while others do what they can to make students feel at ease.

There have always been two types of professors: the aristocrat, who believes only the most gifted students should be permitted to pursue a college degree, and the democrat, who believes anyone who wants a degree should have the opportunity to earn one. These two camps can be broken down even more between accessible and inaccessible.

In order to alleviate "Professor Anxiety," I use the following method with freshmen classes. The first week of class, I follow standard procedure by discussing the syllabus and class assignments before moving ahead to the first lecture or activity or whatever has been planned. During this time, students form an opinion about me even as I form one about the class in general as well as individual students.

Before the first week comes to a close, I give students an opportunity to test their skills of perception because I know they have been observing me even as I observed them. Since they have made assumptions, I will allow them an opportunity to test their first impression.

I ask students to take out a piece of note paper and number down the left-hand side of paper from 1 to 12. Each semester, I change the list of options of favorite things. Based on their first impression of me, they are asked to select the option that they believe I would choose from the following:

- Tony Bennett, Phil Collins or Neil Diamond.
- Iced tea, Dr. Pepper or bottled water.



▲ Have they turned green? Did they sprout horns?

- Harrison Ford, Robert Redford or Pierce Brosnan.
- Plays golf, tennis or runs.
- Sneakers or dress shoes.
- Lives in suburbs, downtown or on a farm.
- Drives Toyota, Lincoln or Volvo.
- Vegetarian or carnivore.
- Luxury vacation, camping trip or cruise.
- Prefers to watch football, hockey or wrestling.
- Writes poetry, fiction or non-fiction.
- Any children? If so, how many?

Students exchange papers for grading as I go through the options, commenting occasionally about the options the students chose vs. the truth, revealing even more that I am human. While some are congratulating themselves on their ability to read me, I inquire if there are any education majors in the class, asking for a show of hands. While their hands are still in the air, I ask them to look long and hard at those students who plan to be teachers. Have they turned green? Did they sprout horns? In other words, do these education majors look or act any differently than they did before they revealed this information?

This revelation is followed by a quick lesson from "Ten Tips for Talking with Teachers" Judy Galbraith and Pamela Espelander. *Freespirit*, 1988. Presenting this information after humanizing me, the instructor, makes it much more palatable, and alleviates much of my college freshmen's "Professor Anxiety."

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## How to Turn Your Syllabus into a Contract

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The college syllabus is a vital tool for both the college professor and the student. Even the most detailed and best-elaborated syllabus is useless unless presented sincerely on the first day of class and constantly reinforced throughout the semester.

From the first day of class, I stress that the syllabus is an academic contract between the professor and the student. I list all the class rules such as attendance, grades, homework, etc. in the syllabus. As a contract, the syllabus is similar to many other legal documents students will encounter for the rest of their lives. In the case of a dispute later in the semester, I clarify class policy by reading directly from the syllabus.

### First-day activity

On the first day of class, distribute the syllabus; call names from the roster and have the students read a section of the syllabus aloud. This provides an opportunity for the students to ask questions in order to clarify class policy.

An added benefit is that you may analyze students to see if they are ready for college work. After reading the syllabus, point out important dates such as quiz and exam dates, holidays and other important class activities. List each day the class meets or is off due to an official holiday. Never leave any days blank because some students will misconstrue this as an opportunity to miss class.

Explain to the students that their job is to attend class, do the assignments and study for exams. If they fail to perform their duties in their job description,

they will not be paid, i.e. receive a passing grade. Remind the students that some facets of the syllabus are etched in stone, while others, such as the course outline, are tentative. However, point out what material will absolutely be covered and tested by the end of the semester. The students should review the syllabus whenever they are unsure about what they will do for the next class.

### When disputes arise

Occasionally, students will want to relax the course requirements. This is the time to tell the students to pull out their syllabus. When everyone is looking at the appropriate section, read the disputed course requirement aloud. Remind the students that the requirement is still in effect until the end of the semester, and that every student present agreed to the terms of the contract.

From time to time, a student will state that he or she did not agree with those terms, but you must remind the class that they all accepted the terms of the contract by their continued attendance. The students who disagree with the contract often drop the class soon after the first day.

In addition, presenting the syllabus as an academic contract under such a regimented program impresses upon the student the exacting demands of the course. Some students may see me as an extremely strict professor by the time



▲ The students should review the syllabus whenever they are unsure about what they will do for the next class.

we finish reading the syllabus together. However, students know exactly what they are expected to do. This does not imply that you cannot bend your own rules from time to time.

Also, your students will warm up to you if they realize that they may turn in homework late without penalty if they have a valid excuse such as an illness of the student or his or her child, a sudden change in work schedule, etc.

Most importantly, students must still fulfill all the course requirements, but not under the severe conditions they imagined on the first day of class. Because they know the course requirements from the first day of class—and the requirement never changes—the students may formulate a successful completion plan for the course.



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With this issue, *TFS* begins its 12th year of providing you with outstanding teaching improvement ideas and critical success factor thinking. Now you can ask questions about teaching and receive solutions to your most pressing teaching problems. E-mail your questions to [quickquestions@teachingforsuccess.com](mailto:quickquestions@teachingforsuccess.com). Becky Shantz, a *TFS* partner author and community college instructor, will strive to find an answer, e-mail a response to you and forward the best question to *TFS* each month for publication.

### Good Questions for a New Century:

- What is your task? [How are you teaching today?]
- What should it be? [How should you change it tomorrow?]
- What should you be expected to contribute? [What can you bring to your classroom that no one else can?]
- What hampers you in doing your task and should be eliminated? [What is the choke point in the learning process in your class, and how can you widen it?]

Adapted from "knowledge-Worker Productivity," *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* by Peter F. Drucker, 1999.