

Teaching: First Impressions First, or Choosing Atmosphere over Method and Management

> Aaron Levy

As a writer who teaches and a teacher who writes, the author offers creative ways of producing a positive first impression on the first day of school.

It's not written in any classroom management textbook, but all new teachers are inducted into their first solo flight in the classroom with the phrase, "Don't smile until Christmas." Methods classes encourage the notion of gaining control of your classroom immediately by passing out the syllabus and perusing your classroom policies almost as if they are commandments. Veteran teachers back that claim and pass their beliefs on to new teachers, advising them to paste dicta on their classroom walls and to have a stack of discipline forms in their top drawer. And they will smile when they too repeat, "Don't smile until Christmas."

Maybe it's time to take the emphasis off of classroom management and instead place it on classroom atmosphere. Yes, this begins on the first day, but that day begets the first week, and the first month, and before you know it, students are so involved and excited, they forget to act up. There is an enthusiastic writer and an avid reader inside every English teacher, not a dictator or a taskmaster. Let us substitute method for attitude. Teachers need to remember what attracted them to the subject of English in the first place, and play that card on the first day of school, and every day thereafter.

I am a writer who teaches and a teacher who writes. After earning my M.F.A. in playwriting in 1994 and experiencing a few professional productions of my plays, I found myself in a sort of no man's land. I was making some money with my writing, but not enough to live on. I wrote for a couple of newspapers, but found that spending the day in front of a computer writing features about other people made me too tired to spend more time at the computer writing my own material. So after two years of working and looking for the perfect job to support my writing habit, I decided to try teaching and went to work to earn my secondary education certification. The more I taught, the more attracted to teaching I was. I discovered that the many things that made me passionate about writing—creativity, performing, being out on a limb—were also inherent in successful teaching. A good lesson takes the same amount of energy and caring that goes into a decent

draft of a short story. As I started to feel more comfortable in the classroom, the writer and the teacher in me began working together.

This year, on the first day of classes, I delivered a monologue of my own creation. I wrote it years ago and have since tampered with it to suit my purposes. So this year I conducted a little experiment—a piece of informal research.

I just finished teaching three WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) 101 classes at Arizona State University. These are first-year composition classes that are available for students who test lower on their SATs and ACTs. The class is part of the “stretch” program because it takes the curriculum for English 101 and stretches it out over two semesters. The idea is to provide students with more time and more consistent guidance through having the same instructor and being with the same classmates for a solid year.

I gave an evaluation on the last day of class, asking students to compose letters letting me know what worked for them, what didn’t, and what they would always remember. Out of the thirty-eight students who were present for the first day of class in August of 2001 and who were also around for the final class in May of 2002, ten students mentioned that they would always remember the first day of class. That’s over a quarter of my students.

I came in on that first day and said nothing. It was a waiting game in the beginning as the students trickled past me, some on time, some too early, some lost, some in the wrong class. The trick was to hold my face—keep a straight look, a teacher look, a get-ready-for-the-syllabus-look. Finally I stood in front of the class, saying nothing, and waited. There’s something about the first day of school, that guarantees that when a teacher stands before the class, the class will ultimately get themselves quiet without a prompt. Later, when I began teaching about writing, I mentioned this moment as we discussed *audience*.

Too much time went by and I knew my students were slightly uncomfortable. My waiting caused some slow, somewhat irritated glances around the room. The students felt as if they were being surveyed. Finally, I said:

I gotta, gotta tell you about my shoes. (pause as class looks at shoes) Not these shoes (refers to shoes he’s wearing). Please don’t look at these shoes. Please?

At this point, I left the room. At my last job, in a high school, I had had an office attached to my classroom. I would say my last “please,” stand there for a moment with a slightly irritated face (I had to practice this to keep from cracking up), and then exit into my office—slamming the door. It works best when I slam the door. In the college class, I had no office to dive into and no door to slam, but from the hall I retrieved an old pair of Nike basketball shoes, and placed them on a desk in front of the class, and said:

These shoes (smiles at shoes, and then becomes intense again as he/she continues). I gotta tell you about my shoes ‘cause, ‘cause, if I don’t tell you, somebody else is gonna get

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shoes just like these shoes and tell you about their shoes and then you won't get my whole thing, and, and you'll judge me. You will. You are. And, and you will. What I've got here, has become a whole 'nother part of my body, like I grew the actual shoe out of my foot like foot hairs, that's how light this shoe is—like foot hair—foot hair light. Don't judge me, man. Please. I'm askin' you nicely. (pause, lets that hang in the air a bit) What I got here, what I got here on this table, but what I really can't wait to put on my feet, is Nikey Lightweight High Performance Flights, the lightest shoe Nikey makes to this date. To—this—date.

On the second day we met, I handed the students a copy of the monologue so they could read the whole thing and we could talk about the inherent lessons in it.

Whether I'm teaching an English composition class, a theater class, or a creative writing class, the lessons available in the context of my monologue are

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many. I begin by saying that I originally wrote this piece for a character trying to explain why he had sold bad drugs to a friend. He had a shoe fetish—he really liked a pair of shoes and the money he got to complete the deal would buy him the shoes.

Subconsciously, perhaps, I'm establishing credibility. If the students put two and two together, they might realize that this guy really does write. But when I talk to them about this monologue, I can talk as a teacher introducing ideas that go into the process of writing and/or entertaining.

As my students stare at the pair of shoes on the table, I've introduced two crucial elements to writing successfully—audience and surprise. All writers must consider their audiences, and all teachers who teach writing, whether they write or not, must introduce this notion. As a teacher on the first day of school, I know a couple of things about my audience. I know they are trying to size me up and see what kind of semester or year they are going to have. In high school, and to some extent college, students also want to know how I'm running the classroom ship. Students expect a syllabus and some rules. Students expect me to tell them my expectations.

I give my students none of the above. Instead I'm talking about shoes. But they give me something: their attention—unsolicited. In her article "Notes from a Marine Biologist's Daughter: On the Art and Science of Attention," poet and educational researcher Anne McCrary Sullivan asks, "What exactly are teachers asking for when they say, 'Pay attention'? What are the relationships between attention and intrinsic motivation? Is it possible to teach habits of attending? How can we enroll peripheral attention to the advantage of education?" (211). Sullivan asks some interesting questions that apply in whatever subject you teach. Can we get students to pay attention without calling actual attention to that wish? Colleges of education spend considerable time teaching future teachers how to manage a class, how to form a discipline system that's fair, firm, and consistent, and how to arrange the desks or tables in the optimal position for learning. Perhaps if we taught our student teachers about audience and surprise, they would be able to devise lesson

plans that allow students to learn without realizing they are learning. Sullivan describes her history of paying attention through the analysis of her own poetry. The poetry gives different snapshots of her life growing up as a marine biologist's daughter. She suggests that when she was learning many of the lessons that exist in her poetry she wasn't even aware she was being taught. "My mother made order of the raggedness of the living world, and I was paying attention. But I didn't know at the time that I was, and I'm quite sure that she didn't think I was." As teachers, we need to realize or have an inkling as to when students are paying attention, whether it be partly, as Sullivan did with her mother, or directly. Overt attention may not be such a bad thing all the time because it's the student's choice. Who is to say that if you ask your class for their attention and they grant it to you, what you do and say they will always remember? A little overt attention can create beautiful poetry. When teachers ask, or, as is more often the case, demand attention, they had better have something to present that's worthy of the request.

Sullivan goes on to talk about a high level of consciousness that aesthetic vision can inspire. The notion of alertness, or what Maxine Greene terms wide-awakeness, should motivate educators and researchers to learn from artists. This potential "wide-awakeness" is a good reason that education should be recruiting artists to teach. Sure, not all artists will be good teachers, but then not all teachers are good teachers. A willing artist, however, can be invaluable. My hope on the first day of school is not necessarily to say look at me, I'm a writer, but to tempt students to pay attention:

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The, the material is made out of this material, that's that, that's really (can't locate the word) light. The shoes themselves are self-contained geniuses. They've got pumps, man, and they're socked away, hidden within this material so they don't stick out, but they do pump, they gotta pump, and they pump at the heel and at the ball of your freakin' foot. I'm sayin' at the ball as well. I'm talking about vertical leaps. Everything is about being vertical. Scottie Pippen, Pippen wears 'em and Jason Kidd wears 'em, and Michael Jordan don't need to wear 'em, but he would if Scottie Pippen, if Pippen wasn't already wearin' 'em. And it's not just about the game. I used to have a game. I used to, but I've got a, a disease, rare bone disease, in my a, a fibula, and, and my meta-fibulas, but that's a whole 'nother—don't judge me 'cause a that . . .

Some students stared in disbelief. Some started taking notes. Some laughed. Most eventually laughed. I tried my best to stay in character. If I started to lose it, I did it in character. Staying in character on the first day of school, in retrospect, is something I can introduce to my theater classes. In a writing class, I can talk about creating character. We can also introduce description through character, obsession, vulnerability, etc. So I've brought up audience and the element of surprise with my students as we review the monologue, but what this monologue is really about would be first impressions.

The character, me, keeps telling his audience not to judge him. Afterwards, I ask the students if they were judging me. Most are honest and say yes. On another level, I have opened up our lines of communication.

By asking them questions about their experience on the first day of school, I also introduce to them that good writing, just like good theater, is all about first impressions. Teaching is all about first impressions as well. Veteran teachers often tell first-year teachers to act like a jerk or a tough guy (or girl) for the first two weeks of school. This is supposed to be a classroom management technique. It's also a first impression. The message the students are supposed to get is, "Don't mess with me."

I can't do it. It's not in my nature to be a jerk to people I've just met. And it doesn't make sense to me either. Instead of being a jerk, how about being interesting for the first two weeks? I subscribe to the philosophy of one of my education instructors, Dr. McClain, who says, "If you teach an interesting subject in an interesting manner, you will always find success in the classroom."

Ironically, the effectiveness of my first day monologue finds success partly because it is such a contrast to what other teachers are doing: giving out their syllabi, explaining the rules, being jerks and tough guys. That's the first impression they make on their students. Now would you rather pay attention to that, or to some bald guy in a tie talking about his shoes?

Also, in talking about audience, I know that the students are trying to figure me out. They admit that. They have every right to try and determine what the climate of the class is going to be. So far, because I'm discussing my shoes and how wonderful they are, students aren't able to put a finger on anything. But, again, they are paying attention:

Can I be truthful? I'm going to be honest, I'm going to tell you how I really feel. Please, promise me you'll keep it in this room. Can you do that? If I'm honest here, if we share a truthful moment, can you make a promise to keep it in this room? I would like to tell you the real deal about me, if, if that's allowed. Can that happen? I wonder this. Out loud.
(goes to shoes) *These shoes . . . suck. Actually, I stole them—found them—got 'em as a gift. I spit in these shoes. When I need to spit, I find these shoes and spit in them.* (spits in shoes) *They don't fit me. They hold me down, take about two inches off my vertical. So, so what I'd like to do is to start off our time together by giving. I'd like to give. That will be your first impression of me. You'll say he is a giver, a giving man. Okay, the first person to guess my age gets these shoes. (no takers) Okay, the first person to guess my mother's maiden name gets these shoes, and, and, if you spell it right, I'll throw in this highlighter—pink. No takers?*

Surprise! Right? Well, I've changed the subject and told the students that everything I've been saying so far is nonsense. It's not a Mustang-wrapped-in-a-bow-in-the-driveway surprise, but it does keep the audience on their toes. They still can't figure me out, they still continue to judge me even though I've asked them not to, and they have now seen their brand-new teacher spit in some shoes.

I ask students if they thought the charade was over and I was going to become a real teacher when I asked, "Can I be truthful?" The majority seemed to think so. And then I do it again:

(pause) *Okay. Okay.* (fast) *Okay, okay, okay. I'll be honest. Now, for real. Here comes the truth. You can write it down if you want. I mean that's why you're here today, right? For a little honesty. You walk in, walk out with the truth. That's fair. I've been stalling, I'll admit. Well, here it is. For real. Have you ever been some place, some place real public, some place where you wanted to leave a somewhat impressionable impression, like a long bathroom line at a party. Some place where you're forced to be among people. You've got to pee, he's gotta pee, she's gotta pee, everybody in line is waiting for the person who had to pee before all of you. Nobody's goin' any place until watermelon kidney in there gets done with his or her business. You're captive, you know. Like in a classroom, you almost have to be there. Here. And all of a sudden, I mean you never saw it coming, but it's inevitable, the focus is on you. And you feel like this special soul x-ray is cast on your entire person, and it gets past your bones, cause they don't matter, right? It gets right to your guts, see, and while it's happening time becomes like . . . like subtime, metatime, and everything that happens in your esophagus and your Adam's apple (if you have one, maybe you have an Eve's apple) and your stomach and your blood and your cells only reminds you that when the people see your soul and, and guts in the little x-ray picture, all that will be there will be a big can of Play-doh? I mean . . . do you ever feel that way? It's probably just me.* (pause) *Please write your impressions of the class so far.*

I hope with the rest of this monologue that I'm creating a change of tone. My goal is to challenge them with a metaphor. As a teacher talking about a piece of literature, we might break off into groups and see what they come up with for this last part. Then we discuss this Play-doh metaphor as a whole class. Again, perhaps in a subtle way I'm establishing some sort of credibility as a writer without giving them my bio. But as a teacher I'm establishing some key elements of the class. Somehow we get the idea that our souls, in a metaphorical sense, are all Play-doh—to mold and be molded by others. This notion that we're all fools, including me, and so let's just get that out of the way so we can be creative and productive, is clear now. I've introduced first impressions, audience, surprise, and finally the number-1 rule of writing and theatre—*Don't be boring.*

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“Don't be boring” is the only rule I introduce on the first day of school. I introduce it as rule number 1 and show that you don't need any other rules if you can accomplish rule number 1. That being said, as an artist, the process of adhering to rule number 1 means that you have to feel comfortable enough to be boring before you can be *not* boring. My class is the workshop for this. Play-doh in a can is boring until somebody molds it.

Writing the monologue and “performing” it on the first day of class has worked well to set the kind of tone that I want. “I think I will remember the first day of class. It wasn't your typical English class,” said Nicole Lewis in her WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) 101 evaluation. I'm not after beating out my fellow English teachers for the best-English-teacher-of-the-year award. I am, however, seeking my students' attention. I like the fact that Ms. Lewis's first impression

is an atypical one. This means that she will be open to considering new ideas and thinking beyond herself. The one thing she will expect, I hope, is the unexpected. I think this would fit Sullivan's notion of paying attention without knowing you are paying attention. A student from a different WAC class, Matt Nelson, wrote, "The thing I remembered most was my first impression of you. The whole shoe skit was cool. You only get one first impression." This is another comment about the first day of class given on the last day of class. There were other constructive comments about the class, but most important Mr. Nelson felt he would always remember the idea of making a good first impression. I know most of my students have heard this before, but I teach it on the first day of class by modeling it. Giving a good first impression takes some work and consideration of audience. We attack these issues on the first day of class before students know these issues are being attacked.

Some teachers would not feel comfortable writing and delivering a monologue to their students any day of the year, let alone the first day of class. If you as a teacher, no matter what the subject, believe that during your teaching year you subject your students to a certain amount of your own story, your narrative, then you must believe you use it as a tool to attract attention—without directly soliciting it. According to Laurel Richardson, we use these narratives to invite the reader, in this case the audience, to "re-live" certain events with the author or teacher. "Accuracy is not the issue; rather narratives of the self seek to meet literary criteria of coherence, verisimilitude, and interest" (521). This doesn't mean that you have to relate to your students what you do in your free time, but there is a way, using techniques of fiction and applying them to your life, that you can use your story to get your students' attention.

In "The Fatal Flaw: A Narrative of the Fragile Body-Self," ex-physical-education teacher Andrew C. Sparkes asks, "How are we to write the body-self and produce narratives that draw the readers in, engage them, and provoke their feelings so that, as [Norman] Denzin hopes, they experience, or could experience, the events being described?" (466). Sparkes was a physical education teacher until he forced himself out of the business because of chronic back problems. He describes how ashamed he was just walking the halls of his high school knowing his body had failed him. By telling his story in a written narrative form, he hopes to stimulate the reader to reflect upon his or her own life in relation to his. He considers himself a "wounded storyteller" and is more concerned with the evocation rather than the "true" representation of his life. He refers to Frank, who reminds us, "To think with a story is to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one's life" (23). If Sparkes had stayed in the ranks of secondary physical education teachers and shared his story with his students, there is no doubt that he would have had their attention. His story is honest and a little scary, and this appeals to a secondary school audience, especially aspiring athletes. Imagine a P.E. class that is not just about dressing out and tossing the football and the flags around. If he were to share, say on the first day of class, one of the journal

entries that appear in his study, instead of discussing the dressing-out policy, Sparkes would have the attention of his class.

It's crucial not to waste the first day of a class. A teacher doesn't necessarily have to write something personal and share it with students. The key is to find a way to surprise your audience, create a first impression that somehow introduces the tone you want your class to have. I have tried many different things given to me by other teachers and/or writers. One writer friend gave me a sketch by award-winning playwright Howard Korder, "The Laws." Again, I usually wait a little longer than is comfortable before I address the class. Finally I say, "My name is Mr. Levy, and these are the Laws." I pause and then I write "The Laws" in big letters on the blackboard. Most students will start to take notes. The key here, again, is to stay in serious teacher mode. "The Laws" start out, "Respect the Temple. Honor the judges. The exchange of goods shall be unconfined. Nudity is not permitted." There are thirty-plus laws, and then I ask them, as in the *Shoes* monologue, to write down their "impressions" of the class so far. In groups afterwards, they rate each law as (1) a rule, (2) advice, or (3) nonsense. I have used "The Laws," especially in English composition classes, to introduce the idea that it's important to pay attention to *what* is being said and *how* it's being said as well. The actual laws themselves, the way they are stated, are *all* nonsense. "Nudity is not permitted" sounds like a rule because it applies to class. But if the actual statement were true, one could never be naked—ever: in the shower, being born, etc. It's an enjoyable way to introduce some general ideas that will be brought up in the course.

People have told me that English or arts teachers have more latitude with what they can do on the first day since they can be more abstract. I don't necessarily think that's true. It just takes a little creativity and thought. I wish my geometry teacher had taken us on the first day to a really small room. Perhaps we'd measure the angles of the room. Then he would tell us we must fit several sofas, a refrigerator, and a washer and dryer in that space. It's true that I never really learned geometry until I was in college and had to move three times during one summer. If you try to fit a sofa bed through a small hall and a smaller doorway enough times, you too will start to have geometrical epiphanies about high school.

I continue to look for new and different ways to make a first impression because I know this first day sets the tone for the whole year. It's time to start thinking about first impressions in our classes the same way we would in any other first-impression situation. Knowing that we only have one shot at it, why do teachers feel the first-impression message they want to send out to their classes is one of control and order? The notion that we need order first and foremost and then we can teach content may be placing the buggy before the horse. I'm not suggesting that teachers relinquish control of their classes, or pose as weaklings. I have learned, however, that if I can keep my audience on their toes starting on the first day, then

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it's a little easier to keep them on the edge of their proverbial seats the rest of our time together. Maybe our students will pay attention without realizing they are paying attention, as Sullivan shows us. I keep that in mind every year and every first day of that year as I have another opportunity to chase rule number 1—*don't be boring*. ◀

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Contributors are sought for a collection of essays focusing on teaching writing at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). This anthology will represent theorizing and practice from teachers at HSIs from a wide variety of regions, with diverse populations, in order to address the needs of the teachers of writing who are increasingly dealing with different segments of the Latino/a population in their classrooms. Please e-mail papers of 20–25 double-spaced pages, by November 15, 2004, to: Cristina Kirklighter, Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, at Cristina.Kirklighter@mail.tamucc.edu. Phone: (361) 825-2263.
