NEW STUDENTS, NEW SEMESTER
HOW TO REMEMBER NAMES AND FACES

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Introduction

It's the first day of a new semester. In addition to the enthusiasm and optimism inherent in a new beginnings, we as teachers also must confront a humbling task: how to learn the names and faces of the 20 to 40 unfamiliar students expectantly sitting before us.

And we must learn them quickly! In teaching, as in so many other fields, first impressions count for much. Before becoming teachers, all of us were students; we learned, if only subconsciously, that teachers who were slow in learning the names of their students tended to be uninspired and uninspiring. Although we certainly don't want our students to come to that harsh prejudgment of us, we are only human. Almost all of us find it difficult to put together names with the faces of so many new people in short order. The only individuals who seem to succeed, apart from professional memory trainers and sales representatives, are politicians.

Actually, there is a technique that can reliably be used to associate the names and faces of at least 75% of a typical first day class size of 20-40 new students. Even better, skillful use (i.e., the right amount of showmanship) of this technique can leave the impression that you have gotten to know almost all the students' names and faces by the start of the second class meeting.

Step 1

Before coming to class, read the class roster several times. Focus on the last names and honorifics (Mr./Ms.). Memorize as many of them as you can.

By familiarizing ourselves with the names beforehand, we set up a kind of cognitive dissonance: If we know there is a Jones in the class, them we can concentrate on looking for Jones and remembering what he or she looks like. Under this procedure, paradoxically, students with unusual names become easier to remember. At this point there is no need to focus on the first, or given names. That just increases memory burden without yielding initial benefits.

Step 2

Start the class by introducing yourself and describing your background and expectations for the course. Conclude by saying that you would like to learn more about them, but there isn't time for everyone to be as longwinded as you've been. Hand out a "Student Expectations Survey" that asks for a name,address, and phone number(s), and includes an open-ended essay question about backgrounds and expectations. Allow students at least 15 minutes of writing time.

While the students are busy writing, take the opportunity to study their faces, clothing styles, posture, haircuts - anything, in short, that you can use to personalize the individual student. This visual information also sets up a cognitive dissonance; you'll certainly want to learn the name of the punk rocker with the purple hair.
The writing exercise is not only a chance to study the physiognomy of your students, but is also a way to take attendance and gauging the overall intellectual potential and interests of your new class.

Step 3

In addition to absorbing the "tableau" of visual information presented by individual students, set up a mnemonic position framework. For example, in a traditional classroom layout, call the first row on your left "A", the second row, "B" and so on. Similarly, call the first student in row"A", 1; the second, 2, etc. Modify this positional framework to fit various possible seating arrangements.

This framework is the heart of the techniques presented. It relies on a curious fact of student sociobiology: students almost invariably return to the same seat they occupied during the first class, or in reasonable proximity. For example, students who choose to sit in the back of the room on the first day will almost never voluntarily change their seats to the front, and vise versa. Students who seem to prefer quick access to the door will sooner die than sit over by the windows, and vice versa.

Step 4

Collect the student papers. Then, starting with position "A1," ask the students to introduce themselves and say a few words about themselves and their expectations for the course.

Again, this step, like the preceding ones, is not very different from ordinary classroom practice and sound group leadership. But it does set up the next step.

Step 5

While listening as carefully as possible to what student "A1" is saying, find the name on the class roster and code "A1" next to it. (Obviously, if the student is not on the roster, write in the name and the code.) If you have memorized or nearly memorized the set of names, and have carefully studied the faces and appearances of your students, then the positional code will serve as the link or index between names and faces!

At first glance, Step 5 appears to be the result of cross-pollinating cognitive psychology with an electronic spreadsheet, like LOTUS 1-2-3. Despite the resemblance, it isn't. You might be surprised to learn that the technique described above is virtually identical to the method used by ancient orators like Cicero to deliver complex orations without reading them to their audiences. (For more information on the techniques, consult any scholarly work on ancient oratory, particularly Frances Yates.)

Step 6

As soon as you can after class, read the "Student Expectations Surveys," covering up the names of the student. Attempt to remember the name, based on your recollections of what students said in class about themselves. Refer to your class roster and position-code the "Student Expectations Survey" so that you can "triangulate" if necessary.

This step provides additional reinforcement of the links between names, faces and places.

Step 7

Before the second class meeting, review the surnames and honorifics of the students on the class roster. Reread the "Survey" and attempt to recollect names, faces and places.

By this point, the majority of the names, faces and places should be almost committed to memory, and if during the second class you don't mind using the roster with positional codes as a kind of crib sheet -- well, you can make it seem as thought you know more names and faces that

you really do. In fact, with the right amount of showmanship, you can appear to be a close relative of the "Amazing Kreskin."

CONCLUSIONS

Make no mistake: this technique does require a certain amount of work. Like anything else, practice makes it easier and easier to apply. Bit is it worth the effort?

There is no doubt, in my mind at least, that "the pain is worth the gain." In my own career as a student, I remember that my best teachers always seemed to take some extra effort to learn (and use) students' names as quickly as possible. The worst (i.e., graduate assistants in large undergraduate lecture courses) never bothered. Teachers cannot claim to be concerned about how well their students learn, if they themselves do not try as hard as they can to show they care about one of the most important possessions anyone can have in a mass civilization: a face and a name.

MAGICALLY "LEARN" STUDENTS' NAMES IN MINUTES

By Doug Madden
Honolulu Community College. Printed with permission, August 26, 1999.

Years ago when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Miami, I had a speech teacher who amazed me, as well as I'm sure the entire class, with his extraordinary recall and ability to memorize things almost instantly. I think most of my impression was based on his having "learned" the names of all 25 or so students in just a few minutes. Much more recently, though, when I took a non-credit class in magic tricks, I realized he had probably fooled everyone in the class. Remembering how he demonstrated his purported skill, I now think he used a simple old trick known as "pushing a card," a magic trick usually performed with playing cards.

What the instructor did was have everyone print his or her name, major, home city and state, and special personal interest (or something like these things) on a 3x5 card. He then collected the cards row by row, laid them out in order on his desk, took just a couple of minutes to "appear" to be connecting the information on the cards to the students' faces or something, then neatly gathered the cards together by row, each row into a small pile. He then placed the piles upside down one on top of another so that the last row was on the bottom of the stack and the first row was on the top. One exception: I don't actually remember him having done this, but I'd guess he looked especially hard at the card of the first person in the first row and made sure that that card ended up out of place on the bottom of the stack.

He then proceeded to recall the names supposedly from memory. In doing so he essentially introduced the students one by one. From having looked at the first person's card before he placed it at the bottom of the stack, he was able to correctly introduce the first person. He then turned over the top card of the stack, looked at it, and confirmed that he'd been correct. Remember that he'd previously placed the card of the first person on the bottom of the stack, so he was really looking at the card of the second person.

When he went on to the second person, of course he knew the person's name because he'd just looked at that person's card (in pretending to be confirming the first person's name). He went through the entire class like this, always one card ahead of the one he was pretending to be reading to confirm a name. Occasionally he'd pretend to have a little difficulty, but in the end he always came up with the correct name. Just as amazing (so I thought at the time) was his ability to "recall" where a person was from, what a person's major was, etc. Interesting, huh?

Would I recommend this first day activity to other instructors? Done as I THINK my own instructor did it years ago, I think it'd be a fairly clear case of misrepresentation, and I would not recommend that. But with probably a group of students I already knew and with a clear explanation at the end that it was really a trick, it could be fun -- and it might serve a good purpose. The objective ought to be a novel way of introducing students and could include opportunities for students to add to their introductions and respond to other student or instructor questions. When at the end it's revealed to be only a trick, it could also provide a light or humorous break in the normal tension of a first day. And of course the instructor ends up with the cards to use for other purposes later. Student interest in how the trick was done might also valuably promote first day involvement and interaction of students. The activity is offered here, however, only as a possibility or idea, not as a recommendation and probably not for everyone.

THE NAME GAME

By Bonnie Kendall
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The Name Game is a collaborative learning exercise which accomplishes a variety of important things:

- It makes you learn your students' names quickly and it makes your students learn each other's names quickly.
- It creates a sense of fun and involvement in the early weeks of the semester.
- It demonstrates that collaboration has advantages over working in isolation.

Lots of professors play a variant of the Name Game, but my version is based on what I call "the group mind" technique. I tell the students that we have three weeks (or three classes or whatever) to learn each other's names and that we are all responsible for insuring that everyone does it. I explain that cultures all over the world have developed strategies for insuring the social distribution of knowledge, such that if one person is lost, the knowledge is retained somewhere else in the group (you can skip this step if you teach, say, engineering and don't want to talk about fuzzy stuff like culture). I encourage them to help each other in the learning process.

Start by having seven to ten students introduce themselves and then ask an individual in the group to name other individual: "Luke, which one of these people is Rick?" "Rick, point to Susan." "Susan, what is the name of the person sitting next to Attila?"

If Susan doesn't know the name of the person next to Attila, I'll say, "Ask Attila" or "Ask Luke!" In doing it this way, I can keep everyone on his or her tiptoes, because anyone might be made responsible for an answer at any time -- and everyone knows that someone nearby can be counted on for help. No one is made to feel stupid, because the entire group helps out.

At the beginning (and sometimes at the end) of each class in the designated period, we play The Name Game: "Susan, is Attila here today?" "Bob, what is the name of that woman coming in the door?" "Kathy, point to two people named Mike."

This is also a nice technique to interject into the middle of a long class, just to shake up people's minds and get their attention revved up.