



The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

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**Faculty Forum:
"Shopping Period" How do you handle it?**

Although not officially sanctioned, the concept of a “shopping period” to give students the opportunity to browse possible courses they are considering enrolling in has become a hallmark of the Brown open curriculum. Brown faculty have different ways of responding to the impact of this period of flux on the learning (and teaching) in their course and ensuring that students have a positive learning experience.

Many thanks to the colleagues below for their contributions to this issue. The "Faculty Forum" is a regular feature of *The Teaching Exchange* and we hope that YOU will be inspired by these ideas to share yours in the next issue – or suggest other issues you feel should be addressed.

Leslie Bostrom, Prof. (Visual Arts)

Since it is hard to get into courses in the Visual Arts Department, we may not be as affected by shopping as some other departments. Students tend to stay in courses once they are in them, and the courses fill the first day, so they are less liable to be shopped. That said, on the first day of class I lay out a couple of rules. 1. During the first 2 weeks of class students MUST attend or they will be removed from the class list, and 2. If students do decide to drop the class, they should tell me so I can contact a student on the wait list. I do not make any concessions to shopping in the syllabus or how I conduct the class. If a student does enter late, it is up to them to catch up.

Gregory Elliott, Prof. (Sociology)

In all my courses, I do not do much about shopping. I try to present in the first 15 minutes of the first meeting what the course will entail, especially what I will expect of the students. I then break for 2 minutes, allowing those who have changed their minds to leave. After they have left, I begin the course proper. In the next lectures, I do not make any explicit allowance for shoppers. I tell new students that it is their responsibility to catch up. Basically, I put the onus of shopping on the students. It is their choice to shop, and I welcome it, but they must take responsibility for any long-term indecision.

Shirley Brice Heath, Prof. (Education and Anthropology)

I take care of the looseness around the need for students to commit to a course by assigning on the first day a piece of writing due the next week, giving no possibility for make-up, and deducting 5 points from a total of 100 for every class missed, including those which one did not attend as a result of shopping. Amazing how I have no shoppers after week 1!

Stephen Houston, Prof. (Anthropology)

In my short time here, I've found it useful to proceed as though people were there to stay, so: quizzes and exams based on all material covered from Day 1.

Patrick Malone, Prof. (American Civilization)

I have mixed feelings. I always want as many students as I can get, assuming that room size is adequate and that I have enough TAs. I also feel that there is some value in recruiting concentrators if a lot of students sit in for a few classes and see what Urban Studies and American Civilization is all about. I would not cap the course in advance, and I would not try to scare anyone away. If they join after a week or two, they are responsible for all the readings they missed, and they have to find someone to share notes.

I think the hard part is trying to guess how many are going to stay in or join a lecture course. If I don't have enough TAs and can't get more, then I take attendance every day and cut the class size at the end of the second week. I give priority to those who have been there each day and cut the later arrivals first.

Barbara Meier, Visiting Lecturer, (Computer Science)

I teach a class with limited enrollment that requires permission. Students have to submit an application after the first class in order to be admitted. I know some students would prefer to get permission during preregistration the previous semester, but I find that some who do so don't take the class, which takes away places from students who actually show up.

If there are more students who want to take the class than there is room for, I usually allow a couple "wait list" students to attend class because one or two students usually drop the course after the first week.

Talbot Page, Prof. Emeritus (Economics and Environmental Studies)

Before I became an emeritus member of the faculty, I tried for a short period of shopping, but one that would be a good introduction and useful for students deciding which courses to take. Incidentally in 19 years at Brown I never got to like the term "shopping."

The way I used to handle it was to:

- On the first day, I have them read the syllabus and schedule for the first 5 or 8 minutes as students dribbled into the class. I give a short overview of the course on the first day, try to make it brief, and a little of the motivation for the course, and to avoid just repeating the syllabus. I ask for questions, and hope for substantive ones, not just ones about the grading system (which was explained in the syllabus).
- Give them a reading assignment on the first day, so we would have something to discuss on the following class day; and then let them go early, so they could shop another class; I might of course get some shoppers who arrived late, having just left a previously shopped short class; I'd give them the syllabus and schedule and talk with them more informally.
- On the second day, I'd recapitulate a bit, to accommodate new arrivals; then try to do something that didn't really require the reading to get the newcomers and "old timers" more engaged, and then work into the reading, realizing that about half the class would not have done the reading; sometimes this would work because those who did the reading might raise issues that would elicit response from both those who read and those who were there for the first time and hadn't read but still had ideas about the issues; there would be another reading assignment given this day too; in later years the readings for the first several class meeting would be on WebCT.
- On the third day, the course would become more serious and I'd expect it had really started; after that they would need to make their decision to take the course or not, and if so they would need to buy one or two books.

Kenneth Sacks, Prof. (History)

I'm a strong believer in the shopping period, since I believe that it supports student choice. On the other hand, it is a pain for faculty and does sometimes frustrate some of our academic plans. One of the definite benefits of the shopping period is that it has forced me to be as clear as possible with my pedagogical goals and themes from the very beginning. That allows students to make informed choices and has also, I believe, improved the overall intellectual experience of the course for all of us.

Seminar: Following a suggestion from one of my colleagues, I assign graded work in the first two weeks of a seminar as a way to deter late entries - although I certainly allow students to talk their way in and make up the work. The key here is that they **MUST** talk their way in: so that I get a sense of their interest, commitment, etc. The really hard thing about shopping periods and seminars are the students who drop

the course after semester assignments are made. This doesn't happen often (maybe one student every two seminars), but it requires a significant amount of reshuffling.

Lecture: With lecture courses, I'm somewhat resigned to the process and temporary chaos. But in the end, when the smoke clears, the students sitting there are the students who WANT to be sitting there. I'd much rather have that than have students in my class only because they've been trapped by some regulation.

Peter Scharf, Senior Lecturer (Classics)

I begin the class with true content immediately and give an assignment to be handed in the second class or a quiz to take place at the second class. This goes some way to separate the wheat from the chaff. Otherwise I brace myself for the chaos of shifting faces while I try to learn names (or simply don't try until faces stop changing if there are too many). The major complaint I have about "shopping" period is that students show up in the second week and want to join while I do not want to have to repeat instruction just for them as they are already behind. I consider it essential that all descriptions of the "shopping" period in the literature and by advisors emphasize that the proper use of the period is to attend all the prospective classes one is interested in from their first meeting and drop the ones that one decides not to continue with and inform the instructor and update one's registration promptly.

Kerry Smith, Assoc. Prof. (History)

- It is okay to begin teaching content on the first day of class.
- A very useful tip, which I learned from someone else at a Sheridan Center function, is to announce at the beginning of the first lecture/class session that (a) you realize some people are shopping, which is fine, and (b) that you're going to stop the lecture or whatever it is you're doing in 15 minutes, and take a very short break during which anyone who wants to exit can feel comfortable doing so. Announcing ahead of time that you realize people will be leaving makes it a little less weird for everyone, and setting a time when they can do so makes things a little less disruptive.
- Bring extra syllabi on the first day and for several sessions thereafter.
- Plan on offering a brief overview of the course and your expectations at the start of the second class session. Ask how many students at the second session weren't present at the first, and proceed accordingly.
- You might want to establish a clear cut off date after which you will not allow new additions to the course. For example, what does one say to the student who shows up two weeks into the semester (or one week - you pick) never having attended your class, promising to catch up, and offering a litany of reasons why only your course and no other will do? Some instructors include a statement in their syllabus to the effect that they welcome shoppers but will not sign add slips after a given date, often a week or ten days into the semester. (Any student not officially registered for your course once classes start will need your signature on an "add slip" in order to register for that course.)

Kathryn Spoehr, Prof. (Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences)

I start covering material on day 1. Except for enrollment-limited courses I let people add my courses whenever they want to during shopping period with the understanding that it is their problem to make up missed work, not mine. I also remind late joiners (in courses where class participation and attendance counts toward the course grade) that their absence for a week or more at the beginning will have an effect on their grade. For courses that meet for longer than 50 minute sessions, I tell people at the beginning of class that they must stay until the class period is over on that day or they will lose their spot in the class.

Jan Tullis, Prof. (Geological Sciences)

I begin teaching content on the first day of class. Getting into content is the best way to attract the students you want to be in the course, e.g. those that truly are interested in the content.

The shopping phenomenon makes it even more important to design a really good syllabus that not only has dates and assignments, but also course GOALS, assessment criteria, information about office hours, WebCT or whatever. You want the shopper to be fully aware of what he or she is 'in for' especially if they miss the first class.

Instead of taking class time from those who were present at the first class, just announce that all new students should be sure to pick up a copy of the syllabus (plus separate sheets on course info, goals or whatever is appropriate) and that they should stay after class a few minutes to meet with you, to go over a few key points.

Establish a clear cut off date after which (it is best to put something like this in writing on your syllabus or course info sheet or whatever, for 'protection') it is always possible to make an exception if you want. There are different (legitimate) reasons for restricting additions, ranging from class meeting room size to availability of TAs or lab section space or whatever. In my intro course, Geo 22, there are only 4 labs during the semester but I schedule the first one in the first full week of classes, e.g. after only 3 lectures, specifically in order to help finalize the number of students taking the course (e.g. I cannot sign an Add slip if they have missed the first lab).

Gary Wessel, Prof. (Bio-Med-Molecular, Cellular Biology and Biochemistry)

I would say it is expected to begin teaching the first day, for several reasons:

- For me, I need/want the time. Thirty-eight (38) lectures seems like a lot to me, until I try to cover all the material I feel I need to cover.
- I want to begin some serious introduction to get everyone started thinking about the material. Class one is the time to do so.
- Shoppers are likely to leave half-way through the class, to go to another class. If you stop half-way, those coming to your class second, will find an empty room. Recall, it is just as likely for students to leave early as to show up late in a shopped class.
- What better way for a student to begin to see your teaching style than to see you teach. If you wait for day 2, those shopping day one are forced to shop you again in day 2.
- Students are expecting to miss some material - the way to accommodate this is simply some posted notes/outline on the course website.
- Cut-Off date: this depends somewhat on the size and type of class. In a large lecture class it is less disruptive to accept a late student, and I would take it on a case by case basis. Here I would feel more obligated to follow the registrar's calendar. For a smaller class in which discussion and student interaction is an essential aspect, a late student can penalize all students, so in this case, I would enforce the deadline for the benefit of the class. I would expect that students could decide within 3-4 classes, so timing might depend on MWF versus TT course schedules.

Sally Zierler, Prof. (Bio-Med-Community Health)

First class we jump right into the material. I take a count of shoppers in the beginning of class 1 and usually this is only a few students.

The benefit of shopping is that I think the students undermine their own academic experience by shopping if it means missing classes early in the semester, a key time for creating a learning space for cognitive development as well as spiritual grounding (for example, student sense of safety in the learning environment; openness to the dialectic of learner and subject and teacher).