

The “FIRST CLASS” Experience

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In June, I happened to board an AI flight to Hyderabad. It just turned out that my seat was 1A. Before you get any ideas, let me state that I was going on business, but not in business. It was an all economy flight. As I was the last to get into the bus that ferried the passengers to the flight, I was the first to get out. When I climbed the steps of the flight, I realized that I was not only occupying the first seat, but I was also the first passenger to enter the aircraft. To be welcomed by the airhostesses as the first passenger into a just then cleaned aircraft was a heady experience, though it lasted just a few seconds. What I had just said was a yet another experience for me that highlighted the psychological impact of the first impressions.

The first signal or impression foreshadows things to come. First rains of the monsoon, first shoots of the crop, early blossoms of the spring, all of them are considered as harbingers of how the entire season is going to turn out. When Kambar describes in his Ramayana the instance of Rama and Sita seeing each other for the first time (அண்ணலும் நோக்கினார்; அவளும் நோக்கினாள்), we get a sense of love and respect that would develop among the divine couple, which forms the basis of the epic. As we enter a restaurant, the first impact of the look and feel can significantly affect the experience of the rest of the event.

Thinking in the same vein, I have always felt that the first class of the course is a very important as it sets the path for the rest of the lectures. Many years ago, I happened to spend a term at the London School of Economics (LSE) on a sabbatical, in a group that comprised of mid-career professionals from different fields. I was working in the industry then. Several faculty of the LSE were scheduled to lecture us and each one of us among the group took turns to escort and introduce the faculty to the others in the group. It was my turn that day and I found the speaker, a popular professor at the LSE, in an excited mood. We started talking on the way, and he mentioned that he had just finished the first lecture of the term. “The first class is the most important in the whole course”, he paused and continued, “Students judge you within the first five to ten minutes, and it is important that we strike a resonant chord with the students in the initial few minutes. If we miss that, it becomes doubly difficult to get them interested in what we say.”

In the last eight years or so at IIT Madras, I have also realized the importance of a great first lecture. I spend more time preparing for the first class, when compared to the subsequent classes. The TLC (I mean the Teacher-Learner Contract here!), which I believe is critical for the learning process also gets established in the first lecture. While I personally spend time discussing the course outline in detail during the first class, what I intend to communicate is much more – the class room environment, the ground rules on acceptable standards, my expectations from the students, and my commitment to the class. While some students do find these a bit restrictive, a large majority of them seem to like the clarity in communicating the expectations.

I also see the first class as an opportunity to tell and convey to the students on how excited I am to be teaching the course, and how the course concepts are going to help the students. An average student, goes with the flow, and may neither have a clear awareness of the course coverage nor its utility. An understanding of the big picture and how the course would benefit them makes the students more enthusiastic and excited. Enthusiasm is infectious, and if the faculty is genuinely excited about what is being taught, then it clearly rubs on the students.

More often than not, what begins well also ends well. I have always felt that a good first class upholds the vibes for the rest of the course. As with the first, the last lecture of the course is also very special. Perhaps, that's another story for another day and time!
