Cultivating organic traditions

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Materials needed: variable, depending on specific tradition

Learning challenge addressed/predictable outcome: Increased class cohesion

Best used for: Any class (although could be challenging for online classes)

Learning objectives/skills fostered: n/a

What to do / how to do it:
Elevate some of your basic practices to a more formal/ritualized “tradition”. Ideally, the tradition evolves organically from something that is funny or interesting in the moment. Examples from my experience:

• an 8am seminar class in which I brewed coffee and students who wanted a cup paid a quarter and took some (this evolved into students bringing coffee on occasion and voluntarily making a filter-cleaning schedule)
• a 230-student lecture in which I held unannounced exams; after a five-minute question period, I put up a slide with a picture of either my dog, denoting no exam, or the actor Danny Glover, denoting an exam. (The backstory I’d need to supply to make this make sense is somewhat elaborate, but have faith – it arose organically.)
• a senior capstone in which each week focused on a different applied topic (e.g., voting, education, online life, dating and sex); I ended each week’s lecture with a “Bold Statement of the Week” in which I said and attempted to justify something outrageous based on the principles we discussed. I found that students came to expect – demand, even – bold statements of the week.

Tips for implementing: Early on in the course, be vigilant for opportunities to establish a tradition. After the first two weeks, for example, review each class session to determine if a possibility has arisen. It’s not a bad idea to “seed” your course with opportunities, and some clear opportunities exist in almost every course: a ritualized check-in at the beginning of the week, “question time” in the first five minutes of every class, a physical activity in the middle of every class (e.g., stretch break), etc.