How do you approach the final weeks of your course? Most of us include some sort of summation activity: a final review, a course evaluation, sometimes a reflective paper. Recently, I have begun to incorporate these kinds of activities much earlier in my courses, with good results for learning and for those final teaching evaluations.

Here’s an example of what I’ve been doing: About halfway through my literature course, I come to class and ask the students to generate a list of all the things they think I will include in my discussion of the day’s assignment. If we are reading, for example, Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, I would expect students to list things like the significance of the title, the use of irony, symbols like Ivan’s *Respice Finem* medallion, the importance of minor characters, the relationship between Ivan and his wife, Christian symbolism, and the reference to light in the ending. Students work in small groups, and I give them about 10 minutes to come up with their lists. Then, as a class, we put the lists on the board, talking about each element of the story as we go. They never disappoint me. Their lists mirror my own, and sometimes expand my thinking in interesting ways. At the end, I congratulate them on becoming informed readers of literature. I remind them that the lasting value of any literature course is to prepare them to read effectively and intelligently on their own, for the rest of their lives.

I use an activity like this to remind students of the goals of the course (to learn to read carefully and insightfully) and to assure them that they are achieving those goals. Here’s another in-course summary activity I use: Partway through the course, I ask students to list the concepts that they have learned, or that have been reinforced, or that have been challenged so far in the course. This can begin as an individual activity that directly leads to group discussion. I also like to ask individuals to write two or three concepts in these categories, then I collect and collate them anonymously. The next class session, we spend 10 or 15 minutes assessing how the course has affected their learning. We can compare their responses to the goals and objectives listed in the syllabus and see (hopefully) some congruence. An activity like this conveys the idea that all courses ought to change us in some way, either by deepening existing knowledge, introducing new perspectives, or challenging us to examine preconceptions.

In still another midterm summation, I challenge students to think about their own activity in the course so far. Sometime during the third or fourth week of the semester, I ask them to report the average number of hours they are spending per week on the course, including reading, writing, and studying. I collect their estimates (anonymously) and report them on a spreadsheet. (This could also be done immediately in class with personal response technology.) When we look at the results, we talk about the idea I call “value in, value out”: increased effort at a task generally yields better results. I invite students to compare their own amount of effort to the average. If they are spending lots of time with little result, I meet with them individually to try to sort out the problem. On the other hand, if they see that their effort falls on the low end of the class average, this can help them see why they are learning less and not doing as well as they would like.

My goal here is to remind students that the real responsibility of learning new material is theirs, not the professor’s, and that by investing time they increase the worth of any class experience. The value of reflective and summative activities before the final days of a class derives from the way these activities encourage students to look at the big picture, to assess learning in meaningful ways, and to take ownership of their own learning. Doing these activities early in the semester increases satisfaction with the learning experience. That satisfaction shows up on our end-of-semester teaching evaluations, which ask students to comment on how well their professors helped them to do these very things.

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Is It Live or Is It Professor X?

By James Ricky Cox, Murray State University, KY
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A couple of semesters ago, a student I’ll call Marty enrolled in my biochemistry course. I had met Marty before, as he had taken other courses in chemistry and biology in the science building. Marty rarely attended my course that semester. I assumed that he was not very thrilled with me and/or the course. We happened to meet one day in the student center. He approached me with a big smile and proclaimed, “I love your class.” I thanked him and then asked how it was possible to love a class that he rarely attended. Marty explained that he was downloading the archived lecture notes and audio podcasts in his dorm room and having class late at night, the time he preferred to study. He listened to the audio podcasts and made his own notes on the archived lecture notes. He concluded, “I wish this class was offered at midnight.” His statement still rings in my ears and reminds me of the pedagogical diversity that has been made possible by the use of various forms of instructional technology.

In Marty’s class, I was investigating the synergism of pen-based technology and audio podcasting. Indeed, educators across the country are using technology to capture classroom lectures (audio or video podcasting), provide online supplementary information, and conduct Web-based discussions and office hours. Much of this material is not for public consumption and resides on protected areas of university servers. However, the amount of publicly available instructional material on the Internet is growing rapidly. In my own discipline of chemistry, searches on YouTube and iTunes produce numerous examples of chemistry-related videos that range from quite useful to completely bizarre. For example, on YouTube, one can find a rapping organic chemistry professor, a truly elegant explanation of how to determine the structure of an ester with spectroscopic methods, and a demonstration of how to produce a violent chemical reaction with a gummy bear. It is clear that we have entered a time in higher education when our students can find a tremendous amount of information related to our courses on the Internet. It has made teaching, for better or worse, more visible.

Teaching has also become more visible through the open-course initiatives of universities such as MIT, Yale, and the University of California, Berkeley. I have watched every lecture of an Introduction to Psychology course (PSYC 110) taught by Professor Paul Bloom at the Open Yale Course website (psy.yale.edu). I never took a psychology course in college, and I thoroughly enjoyed watching the videos of his lectures from the spring 2007 semester. These universities have invested a great deal of time and money into bringing instructional resources to their students and the world. I suspect that the educational value of open courses and digital media will be investigated and debated for some time.

My point here is to encourage colleagues to think about how technology might positively impact their courses. Our students are using digital media in many different ways. Although I am not advocating an “if you can’t beat them, join them” philosophy, I do think instructors skeptical about incorporating such elements as podcasting into their courses will be surprised by how students respond and use the media. Marty’s use of the media in my biochemistry course was not the way students typically took the course. Almost all of them regularly attended class and downloaded the podcasts to use as study aids. However, as more students enter higher education with significant demands on their time, it is likely that they can benefit from podcasts (audio or video) either of entire class periods or used by instructors to deliver supplemental information or ideas. As for me, I am tempted to email Professor Paul Bloom and write, “I loved your class,” followed by a smiley face emoticon.
Reciprocal Interviews on the First Day of Class

The first day of a course ranks among its most important days. It is the first chance teachers have to set up those norms that will make the class conducive to learning. It’s the first chance teachers have to showcase course content. It’s the first chance students have to see teachers in action and to find out important course details, like the grading policy, the kind and number of assignments, and how the teacher plans to present the material.

Two psychology faculty members have developed a unique interview activity that they have been using with some success. It not only addresses all the important questions about the course, it gives both students and faculty the opportunity to share their goals and expectations. Here’s how it works. Students arrive in class and are given a very brief overview of the syllabus. Then they convene in groups and, using a series of questions provided by the instructor (the article includes a complete set of these questions), they discuss their goals for the course and what the instructor might do to help them achieve these goals. They share any reservations they have about the course and discuss both the best and worst thing that could happen in the course. Next, each group selects a representative whom the instructor then interviews, individually but in front of the rest of the class. This representative reports group responses, not just what he or she thinks. The instructors say that this part of the activity provides “a valuable opportunity to better understand our students’ perspective about college and our courses.” (p. 146)

In the second part of the activity, the groups reconvene, only this time they generate a series of questions they would like to ask the instructor. A handout suggests things they might want to ask, but they are free to ask any question so long as it relates to the course in some way. Another representative is selected and given enough time to ask several of the group’s questions. Typically they ask about the instructor’s approach to grading, his or her expectations for students, or more detailed queries about a particular course assignment. Again, while students benefit by getting their questions answered, instructors benefit by discovering what issues are of concern to students.

The two teachers who use this first-day activity have been doing so in a variety of psychology classes, and they have been soliciting feedback from students about the activity. Uniformly, the response has been positive, with more than 80 percent of students indicating that they would recommend the activity to other professors to a “great” or “very great” extent. The activity has also increased students’ comfort level in approaching the instructor and participating in class. This result was verified empirically by assessing comfort levels before and after the activity. As the instructors note, it’s an activity that accomplishes multiple goals. It provides students with course-related information that at the same time gives them the opportunity to interact with new classmates. It provides a comprehensive introduction to the course and its instruction, which results in more positive attitudes toward the course. Finally, it helps professors tailor teaching by providing valuable insights into the needs and expectations of students enrolled in a particular course.


An Important Reminder

In our August/September issue, we announced the creation of the McGraw Hill-Magna Publications Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning Award. Briefly, this $1,000 award will recognize an outstanding piece of scholarly writing on teaching and learning. The article (containing at least 1,500 words and published after 2006) may address any topic related to college-level teaching and learning. Preference will not be given to one type of article over another (research over personal experience, for example). Complete information about the award can be found at www.teachingprofessor.com.

This reminder is to let you know that nominations are due November 30. You may nominate something you (and colleagues) have published or an article written by others. Details regarding submissions are also included on the website.

We are thrilled to be part of an award that recognizes outstanding scholarship on teaching and learning. The review panel, which includes several discipline-based journal editors and published authors, has been appointed and is ready to begin review of submissions. We need you to submit favorite articles—good material that has informed, inspired, and improved your practice. Few rewards exist for this kind of scholarship. We would love to have you help us make this an award that recognizes truly meritorious work on postsecondary teaching and learning.
Three Reminders for Guiding Classroom Discussion

By Kevin Brown, Lee University, TN kevinbrown@leeuniversity.edu

I recently took a group of students on a trip to New England to explore historical and literary sites. One of the sites was a Native American museum, where the students were scheduled for a session on unlearning racial stereotypes. The students and I were excited about this discussion, but the discussion leader made some errors in her presentation. As a result, the students ended up bored and they checked out. Being on the other side of the podium, I had the chance to observe her mistakes, which, unfortunately, reminded me of some of my own. I’d like to highlight three of them here.

**If you’re going to ask questions, specifically, difficult questions, allow the students to answer them.** Repeatedly, our discussion leader asked questions about identity and race that required a few minutes to process. Either because of time constraints or discomfort, she didn’t give students time to answer. Instead, she responded and moved the “discussion” along. It reminded me of a professor who interviewed for a position in our department. We had him teach an American Lit class that had been assigned a story by Eudora Welty. Some of our very best students were taking this course. They were known for generating interesting discussion, but he refused to allow them to answer any questions he posed. He made the situation even worse by commenting at the end of class, “I was really hoping you would talk more today so that we could have had a better discussion.” The students felt insulted, and rightly so.

Similarly, **if you’re going to complicate the question, be willing to discuss more complicated issues.** Our leader would try to make the ideas of identity and race new, such as by showing us a cartoon that simultaneously stereotyped both African-Americans and Native Americans. It was an approach that could have yielded significant discussion, but she was unwilling to let students pursue other issues. They wanted to raise the idea of context with identity, an approach that made perfect sense to me, but the discussion leader simply ignored the comment and moved on.

I have been guilty of the same mistake. One day when my department chair happened to be observing, I was teaching a poem that made a rather radical comment about Jesus. When a student made a comment about being bothered by the poem’s portrayal of Jesus, I actually said, “Let’s leave Jesus out of this.” Needless to say, discussion withered. My department chair later pointed out my comment, and I was embarrassed by my unwillingness to deal with something students wanted to discuss. Of course, letting students discuss more complicated issues can lead us to uncomfortable places, for them and for us, but that’s why we raise those issues in the first place.

Finally, **discussion needs to be brought to some sort of conclusion.** Even though we should have an idea of where we want the students to end up, that doesn’t mean we should follow our agenda inflexibly, as our discussion leader did. That evening I discussed the topics she raised with several students, and they all had great comments. However, they pointed out that the leader had an idea she was clearly trying to get across, so they decided to just let her make it and stopped trying to actually discuss it.

There’s another problem, though: the difficulty of taking a wide-ranging 40-minute discussion and summarizing it succinctly at the period’s end. Once a colleague observer pointed out to me that the discussion in my course would be much improved if I knew where I wanted it to end before I started. Since I did not know where the class was going, I could not prompt certain ideas and let others die.

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Using MySpace to Build Community in College

By Beth L. Gainer, Bensenville Campus, Robert Morris College, IL, bgainer@robertmorris.edu

Students benefit when the college experience connects them with peers and faculty. They don’t have a lot of trouble fostering peer relationships, but students can feel awkward and intimidated interacting with faculty. This is why I decided to build a stronger sense of community with my students on their home turf—MySpace. Most students are MySpace aficionados; most faculty are not. Therefore, I was stepping out of my comfort zone and warily into theirs.

Initially, I had reservations about MySpace. Like everyone, I’d heard horror stories about this public venue, but truth be told, inappropriate materials are potentially available to students and me in any medium, whether it’s a website, email, voice message, or written note. So, with help, I proceeded to set up my own page, using a fun, approachable layout. Through this process I learned to use many of the available MySpace features.

Now, two years later, MySpace has exceeded my expectations. Besides thinking I’m “cool” (or a nerdy instructor who thinks she’s “cool”), my students enjoy learning about me, seeing uploaded pictures of my family and friends, and reading my blogs—which range on topics from my hobbies to humorous life episodes to tips for college success to inspirational encouragement. Students who are my “friends” can post public comments on my page. Likewise, for those students whom I accept as “friends,” I can learn about their lives and their challenges, and see their pictures. I can post encouraging, inspiring comments on their pages; respond to their blogs; or send them messages in their personal, private inboxes. It is so empowering for students to know that an instructor takes an interest in their lives. I am amazed by the number of students who visit my page and how many ask for advice and confide in me. This medium also enables me to keep in touch with my student “friends” long after they graduate.

MySpace’s Status Update feature allows expressions of current moods and issues of importance. For example, if a student writes, “I’m stressed about my exam,” I can quickly respond by posting an encouraging comment, maybe adding a graphic that says, “Good luck!” On my page, before the term even started, on my Status Update I wrote: “I found a typo in a bookstore. It was a good one.” During the first week of class, several students asked me, “What was the typo?”

However, for MySpace to be an effective community-building tool for students and faculty, it must also be a positive, appropriate tool. Unfortunately, many MySpace pages contain inappropriate material. That’s why, at the beginning of each term, I set my basic MySpace ground rules:

• Only students who have appropriate material on their pages are allowed as my “friends.”

• No inappropriate content should ever be posted on my page; if this happens, I will delete the comment and remove that person as my “friend.”

On the other hand, it is not my responsibility to be the “thought police” and monitor everything on every student’s page. Censorship is the antithesis of a college education, and students do have the right to freely express themselves.

Out of respect for students’ privacy, I never ask them to be my “friends”; students must initiate the “friend” request. If they initiate this, then they do understand that any of my “friends” can access their page—unless, of course, it’s set to “private.”

When I first started my venture into MySpace, I had two main reservations: that students would post inappropriate material on my page and that being “friends” with students would cause them to challenge my authority in the classroom. These fears have proven to be unfounded. All content that students have posted on my page has been appropriate. In addition, students still respect my authority.

MySpace is not only an excellent way to forge strong relationships with students, but it is easy and fun. And if you want to know how to use a MySpace feature, help is only a student away. If you’d like to take a look at my MySpace page, find it at www.myspace.com/begeeb1.

THREE REMINDERS

FROM PAGE 4

When the period ended, I really had no idea where the discussion had gone.

The trick is to find the right balance. We should know where we want our students to be at the end of a discussion, but we should recognize that discussion can follow various paths to that conclusion. If we need to control a discussion completely, then we should simply lecture and not pretend that we are having a discussion. If we want to sit around and talk about what we have read, then we should have a book club. If we want to have a class discussion, we should guide students, but without their knowing that we have an agenda.

Leading a class discussion is more difficult than many of us are willing to admit. We sometimes act as if we think that we can simply stand in front of the class with all our knowledge and ask a few questions, and the rest will take care of itself. Experience teaches us differently. Many days, I realize how easy lecturing would be compared to guiding a true discussion, but luckily, I let my students talk me out of it.
The Day I Walked Out of My Classroom

By Mary J. DeYoung, Hope College, MI
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We teachers often comment about how we learn so much from our students. It’s part cliché, part personal modesty, and part true. Usually, I learn some detail of a particular math problem when a student sees a relationship or pattern that I had never noticed. Occasionally, a student presents a new way to solve a problem. But what I’d like to write about here is the day students forced a 180-degree shift in my thinking about classroom discourse.

“Jigsaw Jorge” was the day’s problem, and this was a math course for pre-service elementary teachers. We’d been together as a class for six months. They knew my questioning style and our classroom pattern of group work followed by whole-class debriefing. As we discussed Jorge and their solution ideas, the answers fell into two very different camps. Some groups had added the relevant numbers, while others had multiplied those same numbers, with very different results. This was not a problem with multiple solutions, so we were committed to reaching consensus.

That’s when it happened. On the spur of the moment, I decided to make them sort it out on their own. I announced that I was leaving to take a lap around the building so that they could settle the debate themselves. After my first loop, I made several passes by the classroom. Each time, those near the door gave me a “keep walking” signal. I complied, finally returning when 10 minutes of the period remained. At that point, the class was conducting a final, nearly unanimous vote. They shared their conclusion and we celebrated their good work.

The following day, we discussed the method. As teachers, they will make many mathematical decisions on their own. I wanted them to see how classroom teachers might act when caught in a “which is right” dilemma. I wanted them to spar with each other over their rationales and through that process see how they might use their future teacher colleagues.

Because I missed out on the nitty-gritty of their discussions, I invited them to reflect via email. They indicated that my leaving them alone had been a good learning experience. They described initially “just looking at each other” before moving into “back-and-forth discussions” that led to campaigning for their positions, and the series of votes.

But it was the following email from which I learned the most:

While you were out of the classroom, I believe that class felt a weight off their shoulders. Not because you are a mean person by any means, but because they felt more free to say things they would not say when you are around. I think this is because you have the answer and can tell us if we are wrong or right and point us in the right direction, so maybe some people get embarrassed by that. When you were out of the classroom no one really knew the answer and everyone was throwing out ideas and speaking more freely. They were not afraid of getting embarrassed because no one knew the answer.

Did you catch what that student wrote? I was a “weight on their shoulders”? Wow—that hit me between the eyes!

As a veteran mathematics teacher, I see abundant math anxiety and even outright hatred for the subject. Students exhibit different levels of comfort about speaking up in class. But I had always perceived that it was about the other students. I believed they were reluctant to ask stupid questions in front of their peers. But in fact it was me. They did not want to look stupid in front of me. How could it take 30 years to realize this simple fact?

In discussing this experience, a colleague wisely observed how we always interpret our interactions with others through our own lens. I was projecting onto the students my own thinking about our working relationship. I see myself as their academic stimulus—their helper and travel guide into the subject of mathematics. They see me as a taskmaster (albeit a benevolent one, or at least “not mean”), and as judge and jury.

I see myself as their academic stimulus—their helper and travel guide into the subject of mathematics. They see me as a taskmaster (albeit a benevolent one, or at least “not mean”), and as judge and jury.