



The Last Class Session: How to Make It Count

FIRST AND LAST class sessions are the bookends that hold a course together.” I heard or read that somewhere—apologies to the source I can’t acknowledge. It’s a nice way to think about first and last class sessions. In general, teachers probably do better with the first class. There’s the excitement that comes with a new beginning. A colleague said it this way: “Nothing bad has happened yet.” Most of us work hard to make good first impressions. But by the time the last class rolls around, everyone is tired, everything is due, and the course sputters to an end amid an array of last-minute details. Here are a few ideas that might help us finish the semester with the same energy and focus we mustered for the first class.

Integrate the Content—Bring it all together. You could integrate things for your students, but it’s better if they do it themselves. In the interest of time, you’ll want to identify the pieces: the major concepts, important ideas, and a few significant supporting details. Then turn it over to the class and have students (individually or in groups) create a mind map that lays out the content terrain. Mind maps are a freer, more flexible format than concept maps. A whole-class review of some of these maps is beneficial so that map “accuracy” can be discussed and maybe corrected. If the course has several learning objectives, let each one be mapped by a different group.

Review for the Final—Make the students do the work. (See the January 23, 2016, blog post for ideas and activities.) Students are often at a loss when it comes to knowing how to study for comprehensive finals. Their method of choice is cramming. Consider devoting some time to working with them to develop a study game plan. How much time should they spend studying across how many days? What’s the best way to review notes? (Hint: it’s not to “go over them,” as in your eyes lightly touch the words on the page.) If they study together, what are some good ways to study with a partner or group? What strategies work when there’s lots of text material to review?

Get and Give Useful Feedback—Although institutions have all moved toward online, official course evaluations, why not use this last class to get and give feedback of a different sort?

Activity 1: Create a “stop, start, continue” structure that lists every assignment students completed during the semester. Ask students to offer feedback on the features of each of those assignments in terms of what you should stop, start, or continue doing. Be clear that it isn’t about what they “like” but the ability of the assignment to help them develop learning skills and master the material.

Activity 2: Working in pairs, have one student read the following prompt to his or her partner: “You’ve got an interview for your dream job. The interviewer, who may become your boss, is looking at your transcript and says, ‘Oh, I see you took INSERT COURSE NAME. Tell me what you learned in that course.’” The partner answers. Then the two talk about how that answer could be improved, which segues to a whole-class discussion.

Activity 3: Give students feedback on how you experienced the course. Share five things you’ll remember about this class and one thing about teaching you’ve learned from these students.

Bookend Activities—Tie the end to the beginning.

Activity 1: On the first day of class, give students a worksheet that they fill out (either in class or online). Make it a quiz that everybody gets full credit for completing. Use prompts like these: What do you know about INSERT COURSE TITLE? (No credit if you answer, “Nothing.”) What reasons justify making this a required class? (You don’t have to think they’re good reasons.) Are there skills that will you be needing as a professional that you hope to develop in this course? How many people do you know in this class? (List them by name.) Pass out the same sheet on the last day, give students time

to complete it, and then return the one they filled out the first day. Have a brief discussion about the differences and similarities of the two sheets.

Activity 2: Pass out a problem set on the first day. Give bonus points for answers and for work that shows the student spent some time searching for the solution. Calm students’ fears by indicating that they’ll see these problems throughout the course. Pass out the same problem set on the last day and watch for smiles.

Celebrate—It’s been a long semester. The class has a history; things have happened. Get everybody on their feet, walking around, talking, telling stories, and sharing memories. Be part of the crowd. Shake hands; pose for selfies. Bring snacks or invite students to contribute snacks. This is an absolutely unique collection of individuals who will never again be together with you and the course content. End with applause and say “Thank you” if it’s a class that’s made you thankful.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; “The Last Class Session: How to Make it Count;” Faculty Focus; April 13, 2016; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/the-last-class-session-how-to-make-it-count/>]; April 27, 2016.

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Six Things You Can Do to Deepen Student Learning

FOR BASEBALL FANS and players, springtime can only mean one thing: spring training. Every year professional baseball players head to Arizona or Florida to hone their craft. These are professionals mind you, but they continue to spend hours each year working on many of the same things Little Leaguers work on during the start of their seasons—throwing, catching, hitting, base running, and so forth.

As they make minor adjustments in these fundamentals of the game, the overall outcome is a major improvement. The same is true for faculty who remain mindful of their fundamentals, and make small, incremental improvements to their teaching.

It's against this backdrop that Tyler Griffin, PhD, associate professor at Brigham Young University, shared his six A's for promoting deep and lasting learning in your courses.

1. Adjustments – Most courses don't require a complete overhaul. Take a moment and write down a few of those common complaints or top frustrations you hear from your students year after year. Are there any small things that you could address that would make a big impact? If you've taught the course before, where do students tend to struggle? What can you do to support students through the most difficult spots? In most cases, it's not possible to remove every obstacle to learning—a key concept may be difficult and you can't learn it for them—but there are things you can do to better support their learning.

"Sometimes a particular unit is going to be a pain point for the students because it's just plain hard and takes a lot of effort," said Griffin. "Well, let them know that. Let them understand the significance of why this difficult unit is so essential to their overall education, especially in your course. And make them aware of the fact that you understand completely how difficult it is."

2. Audience – The first step to learning more about your students is getting a baseline read on who they are, their backgrounds, their struggles, and their successes. You also need to know why they are taking the course. Is it just to fulfill a graduation requirement, or do they have an interest in the topic?

As you learn more about your students, you'll

be better able to monitor their engagement and respond accordingly. Do they get sleepy if you dim the lights for too long? Are they easily distracted by technology or others around them? Are there times when they are not really following the lesson or when they simply go through the motions of being a live body in the classroom?

"We've all had this experience ... you're teaching, you look out at your class, and you get this moment of recognition that, uh-oh, this isn't going well," said Griffin. "They're dying on the vine. Or they're struggling. Or they're distracted. The knee jerk response is to do more ... to push the gas pedal down even more. But you'll find that if you actually do less and have them do more at those moments, you're far more likely to re-engage a greater percentage of them."

3. Applicability – The big question here is, so what? How is what you're teaching going to help students not only in your class, but in their life and careers? One way to help students see the relevance of a particular concept or a course as a whole is to explain it early and often. Don't keep your course's relevance a secret or save it for the "big reveal" at the end.

"The problem is that often we save our applicability for the end, thus wasting or losing a lot of the effectiveness of the instruction time," said Griffin. "So one simple thing you can do is to front load relevance to avoid this wasted instruction time."

With an individual assignment, this could be accomplished by providing some context to what they will be reading or doing and offering clues as to what they should look for and be ready to discuss, he said.

4. Adaptability – Many of you have probably heard that students start going into cognitive overload after seven to 15 minutes. More recently, some researchers have started saying that it's probably closer to three to five minutes. "We've got to find dynamic ways to stretch them without breaking them," said Griffin, "but at the same time not completely sell out what we're trying to do and what we have to cover in our courses."

Delivering bite-sized chunks of content interspersed with appropriate active learning

exercises and context builders is one way to keep students interested and engaged. Griffin is also a big fan of using what he calls the three Ex's of instruction: explanations, examples (including non-examples), and experiences.

5. Accentuation – Learning is deeper and lasts longer when students process critical information in multiple ways, over time. But how do most students study? They cram, which typically means reading or reviewing their notes over and over the night before the exam. On the day of the exam, everything they crammed into their brain spills out into the exam booklet and is promptly forgotten.

Rather than being frustrated with this process of forgetting, Griffin encourages faculty to change the frequency, recency, and potency of students' exposure to crucial information to make learning last.

"Begin by selecting the most crucial facts, theories, skills, or processes you expect students to remember the longest from your course," he said. "Make sure they are exposed to these critical items more than once or twice in your classes—increasing the recency and frequency factors. Also make sure they interact with these vital elements in a variety of engaging and relevant ways—increasing the potency factor."

6. Assessments – Too often students see course content as disjointed units, rather than building blocks to a deeper understanding of key concepts. As you design your course, think about the big-picture processes you want you students to be able to accomplish by the end of the term. Then create the relevant, increasingly complex assignments and assessments necessary to help build students' skills as they progress through the course.

"Students are going to learn a lot better and retain learning a lot longer if they're working on whole tasks," said Griffin. "Make them feel like there's purpose and meaning to the class, rather than just jumping through the hoops of learning what you want them to learn so they can regurgitate it on the test."

Mary Bart; "Six Things You Can Do to Deepen Student Learning;" *Faculty Focus*; April 11, 2016; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/six-things-you-can-do-to-deepen-student-learning/>]; April 27, 2016.