



# White Board



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## The Rhythms of the Semester: Implications for Practice, Persona

WE RECOGNIZE THAT in the march of the semester we begin on a different note than we end on. The early weeks hold promise and high hopes, both often curtailed when the first assignments are graded. The final weeks find us somewhere between being reluctant or relieved to see a class move on. There is an inexplicable but evident interaction between our teaching persona and the persona a class develops throughout a semester. Some structural factors influence both: among them—the type and level of a course, the discipline, the time of day, and whether the students are a cohort or a unique collection of individuals.

**Calling attention to the structure of the semester:** In research that tugs on the edges of something that we take for granted, Mann and colleagues (1970) describe how a structural arc in a semester influences the persona of a class and its faculty. Duffy & Jones (1995) built on Mann's work by addressing the predictable swings of attitudes and emotions during three phases of a semester. There are no discrete boundaries nor fixed lengths of time in the three phases, and their generalizations have differing degrees of influence depending on the personas of the teacher and class. However, once each phase is understood, planning for them can occur.

**Developing a community during the opening weeks:** Most faculty and students approach the opening weeks of a semester with beliefs about fresh beginnings; students will do better and teachers will be better. These views influence how the community for learning evolves and can be used in building that community.

*Implications for practice:* Pursuing questions like the following generates mutual respect and trust during the period when the persona of a class is developing: What does it mean to be a learner in this course? What will it take to be a teacher in this course? What is the starting place? What experiences with and views of the content are

students bringing with them? How do they want to be learners in the class? What expectations do they have of themselves? Of the teacher? What expectations does the teacher have of them? Of himself or herself?

The strength of the learning community built in the opening weeks can influence the inevitable impact of the midsemester doldrums.

**Revitalizing a class during the midsemester doldrums:** As the semester marches on, teachers and students realize that the optimism and expectations felt during the opening weeks will not all be realized. We have all experienced this period of the “doldrums” (Duffy & Jones) that challenges whatever sense of community was developed earlier. With both students and faculty feeling overworked and even a degree of “deflation and defensiveness,” Duffy and Jones acknowledge “students and faculty...rely on each other for the stimulation to move the course forward” (p. 162). This down period can impede learning. What can be done to mitigate its effects?

*Implications for practice:* Some faculty have found directly acknowledging the “rhythms of the semester” with a class conversation helps confront its challenges. Others revitalize the learning environment by interjecting an unexpected approach: inviting a guest speaker, using an unusual resource, giving an unexpected assignment—doing something that disrupts the routine. One physics colleague presents a “Gee Whiz” lecture that provides illustrations of unusual applications of theories within the field. A sociology colleague has students visit a local bookstore and survey books in the parenting section that present different views of “childhood” in titles and tables of contents.

**Achieving closure during the concluding weeks:** The final phase of a course features a general recommitment to course goals

and, as end-of-semester deadlines approach, a slowly building tension. Stress levels increase for faculty and students as time diminishes for teaching and learning content and for completing and grading assignments. On both sides of the desk procrastinators face a brick wall and perfectionists face inevitable disappointment.

*Implications for practice:* Acknowledging these challenges provides an opportunity to address them. Doing so enables conversations either online or in class about productive ways to study. A syllabus revisit can direct a conversation about key content points students now identify with each segment. Providing opportunities for students to recognize not just what they learned but how they learned it gets everyone focused on what was accomplished rather than what was left undone. Acknowledgment, joint pursuit of concrete evidence of progress, and identification of the best avenues for concluding the semester can help achieve positive closure.

**The personas of the teacher and the class are conduits for learning:** The arc of the

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Mid-Term Week - February 15-19

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## Five Ways to Improve Exam Review Sessions

HERE ARE TWO FREQUENTLY asked questions about exam review sessions: (1) Is it worth devoting class time to review, and (2) How do you get students, rather than the teacher, doing the reviewing? Instead of answering those questions directly, I decided a more helpful response might be a set of activities that can make exam review sessions more effective.

1. What's going to be on the test? Students take two or three minutes to look over their notes and maybe skim the text, and then they jot down five things (maybe a few more or less) they are confident will be on the exam. They then form groups of three to five students, and each group constructs an agreed-upon list to give to the teacher. The teacher combines the group submissions to create a list for the class, and the list is made available to students in advance of the exam. During the exam debrief, the list is retrieved so students can see the items on the list that were also on the test. The teacher can almost always make this point: with a bit of classmate collaboration, you can come up with a pretty good answer to the question of what's going to be on the test.
2. What will the test questions be like? Again in small groups, students are assigned a different section of the text, notes from a lecture, or specific topics, and they are charged with writing a designated number of test questions. Note: writing good test questions of any kind isn't easy, so don't expect perfection. Offering some guidelines for the type of questions that will be on the exam is helpful. Compile the student-generated questions, maybe add a few of your questions, and use them during the second half of the period. Let students work on the questions in their groups, which you can then score and maybe give members in the group with the highest score a few bonus points. Debrief the activity with some feedback on the student-generated questions. Too easy? Unclear? Unimportant content?
3. What content would be helpful in answering test questions? Individually or in groups, students review material (or you can assign groups a designated content chunk) and create a crib sheet. These crib sheets—whether a single sheet, half sheet, or index card—should contain material students would like to be able to use during the exam. This content does not answer potential questions but is the material needed to construct answers. Students could use the crib sheets during all or part of the exam; you decide. If you have them turn in their sheets, you can return them attached to the exam. An alternative review session could have you distributing group crib sheets for students to evaluate and in the process clarifying what answers they will need to know for the exam.
4. What makes an answer good? Use a short answer or essay question with relevant exam content, and then construct or use from a previous exam three answers at different quality levels. Avoid both awful and superstar answers. Students grade the answers individually first; then they evaluate them as a group, focusing on what differentiates them, both with the goal of concretely identifying features of a good answer. Follow up with a new question (maybe a different one for each group), and task them with identifying the content needed to construct a good answer. Share with the whole class what each group produces.
5. How should I be studying for the exam? Students tend to be pretty generic in their thinking about study strategies. "I'll go over my notes" and "I'll reread what I've highlighted in the text." If your students don't have stellar study skills, a list of possible study strategies might be helpful in guiding this discussion in small groups or with the whole class. Recommend what research in cognitive psychology has shown promotes learning and test performance: studying for shorter periods across several days, testing knowledge with questions (those in the book, provided by the teacher, or made up on their own), working on different types of problems, reviewing with a study buddy, and reworking (not recopying) class notes. Encourage students to develop a study plan and to try one or several study strategies they haven't used before. Later, during the exam debrief, have a follow-up discussion. What strategies did they try? What worked? What didn't? Let the class develop a set of recommended study strategies that could be shared in subsequent courses.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *Faculty Focus: Five Ways to Improve Exam Review Sessions*; January 27, 2016; [ <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/five-ways-to-improve-exam-review-sessions/> ] January 27, 2016

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semester often catches students off guard, and they're surprised that faculty not only notice the arc, but we experience it too. Using our understanding of the effects and predictability of the arc, we can help students effectively navigate through the highs and lows of a course.

### Persona series

This is the fourth in a series of five articles that explore teaching persona—what it is and what influences its evolution. Review the previous articles:

1. *How Do I Make Choices About Who I Am as a Teacher?* – Oct. 5, 2015
2. *Six Myths About a Teaching Persona* – Oct. 26, 2015
3. *A New Twist on End-of-Semester Evaluations* – Nov. 23, 2015

On February 15, the series concludes with a look at how the "signature pedagogy" of a discipline influences the persona of a class and its teacher. Stay tuned!

### References:

Duffy, D. K. & Jones, J. W. *Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Mann, R. D., Arnold, S. M., Binder, J., Cytrunbaum, S., Ringwald, J. & Rosenwein, R. *The College Classroom: Conflict, Change, and Learning*. New York: Wiley, 1970.

Linda Shadiow, PhD, and Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *Faculty Focus: The Rhythms of the Semester: Implications for Practice, Persona*; January 18, 2016; [ <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/the-rhythms-of-the-semester-implications-for-practice-persona/> ] January 27, 2016