

Notes on “The Midsemester Pivot”—Before Spring Break

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What follows is adapted from the second workshop of a two-part series I ran through the Center for Teaching and Learning this semester about issues related to engaging students in classes, which can be especially challenging after the first few weeks of a term. I wanted to provide a framework to think about how to make a major change in a course at midterms in order to salvage or revive a challenging class situation.

Inquire

First, **INQUIRE** honestly and without undue personal emotion on what’s working and not working in the class. This can include actually asking students with a midterm survey that can be as simple as “what should I keep doing, what should I do stop doing, what else do you want to tell me about how this class is going?” But it can also involve thinking of days where the class went better and worse and trying to abstract from that how the collection of personalities in the room might be interacting with one another.

We’ve all had classes that for whatever reason would only talk to each other, not to you — or that respond better to assessment than to free discussion, or vice versa.

In my own teaching history, I was thinking of a class where I got so sick at the beginning of the term, and cancelled so many sessions, that the class just never gelled—so at midterms I essentially started over with the sorts of getting-to-know-you exercises I usually do at the start of a term. I was also thinking a lot about classes that had a wide divide in student background or ability, or which had a handful of students whose enthusiasm for the material was drowning out the rest of the group, and ways that I intervened to make sure both types of students were getting what they needed.

Reflect

Next, **REFLECT** on what your nonnegotiable learning goals are. This is not the same as saying the solution is lowering standards, though sometimes the solution really is lowering standards

to some degree or another. As yourself: What is the thing that must come out of the experience, and what can be moved to the back burner? Prioritize your non-negotiables.

I thought here about a class where the material was too difficult and needed to be recentered, or a class that was meant to be at the end of a research sequence for which it turned out the students had received inadequate preparation. It also involved cases where I both raised standards—by focusing more on an independent research project those students were raring to go on—or lowered standards, by removing books or assignments to focus on the ones I felt were nonnegotiable, even if it meant “doing less” that semester than I had in previous years.

REFLECT ALSO on what the constraints are: your students’ actual ability, the constraints on their time, curricular requirements, the actual amount of time left, sunk costs like books they’ve already bought, your need to maintain authority in your teaching persona, etc. Knowing yourself, knowing your program, what you already know is true about our students, how big a swerve can you make?

Make a Change

Use the week away as a pivot point to try to **MAKE A CHANGE**, whether that change is about modifying assignments, modifying in-class activities, modifying assessment, modifying modality, etc. There’s actually quite a bit we can tweak if we are willing and if we know what we are trying to optimize towards and if we are giving up our idea that it has to be perfectly constructed course exactly like the best college classes we remember taking.

Sometimes teaching is about setting the high score; sometimes it’s about “landing the plane,” and that’s totally ok. Even if it’s not going well, what can you do from here to land the plane successfully?

Consider the role that metacognition can play: It can be good to discuss with students openly what’s working and what’s not, and why you’re making certain changes. You don’t have to be all-knowing and all-seeing, at least not all the time. Looping students in to the process and the tradeoffs you’re choosing to make can not only help forge community in the classroom but also provide them with a purpose in knowing how and why different pedagogical decisions are made.