Avoiding the Midterm Slump

As we rapidly reach mid-semester, we at CAT hope that your classes are all progressing well and that you are seeing encouraging signs of learning from your students. As the excitement of the return to classes begins to die down and midterm exams are nearly over, it is quite common for faculty and students alike to experience a “mid-semester” slump, where a sense of lethargy can creep into what was just weeks ago a vibrant and lively classroom. This can be a propitious moment to revisit the importance of employing active learning strategies in the classroom. In keeping with the theme of Active Learning that we inaugurated at this semester’s Faculty Development Day (FDD), we would like to offer a few suggestions on how you can reinvigorate your classroom. Try one or more of these techniques, which can be used anytime:

- **Be open and enthusiastic**: Acknowledge that this time of the semester can feel slow, but encourage your students to stay focused and engaged. Offer them an exciting “teaser” of upcoming (and exciting) topics, activities, or events that will be covered in class, or related activities that will take place at the College or in the city.

- **Get students involved**: Find a way to make the class more active. Ask students to bring in articles, pictures, or video clips that demonstrate the topic under discussion. Let students “run” the class for a day, as they explain their choices and relate it to the topic.

- **Bring in outside help**: This is a wonderful time to bring in a guest speaker who will energize the students. A colleague who can share exciting stories about the what working in your field might entail can be a wonderful way to energize a class.

- **Show a movie or a documentary**: A wisely chosen movie or documentary can be an excellent way to generate excitement and discussion in the classroom. Have students do some pre-viewing preparation to ensure that they get the most out of the learning experience. You can also introduce an interesting “real-world” problem for the students to grapple with individually and in groups.

- **Ask the students**: Midterm is an ideal moment to engage in formative assessment. You can take this opportunity to ask the students to briefly evaluate the direction of the course, their assessment of your teaching and their learning, and ways to improve as the semester moves forward. There are a variety of ways this can be done (see article on Midterm Evaluation) but showing the students that you care about their learning can have an enormous impact on the classroom experience.

These are only a few ways in which you might think about reinvigorating your classroom and avoid the midsemester slump. If you would like further assistance with this in your own classroom, please contact me at cat@jay.cuny.edu
Formative Assessments: Midterm Evaluations and Classroom Assessment Techniques

Mid-semester can be an excellent moment for reflection, as we have by now received feedback from the students via homework assignments, projects, and midterm evaluations. Are you seeing the type and the quality of learning you anticipated? If not, it may be useful to consider using a midterm evaluation or a classroom assessment technique.

Midterm Evaluations

With midterm evaluations, you are able to make “course corrections” to the direction of your class, without having to wait for the formal end-of-semester evaluations. Using mid-semester feedback allows you to learn how this particular classroom community views its experience, permitting you to devise strategies to improve learning for this community of students. You can use the evaluation itself as a reflective learning opportunity where students are asked to evaluate their own learning, their learning styles, and the progress they feel they are making.

These informal midterm evaluations essentially pose three questions: What works? What doesn’t work? And how can we change this? For this reason, these types of evaluations are sometimes called “stop-continue-change” evaluations, as students are asked to indicate practices that they feel have hindered or supported their learning, or could otherwise be improved.

Midterm assessments should generally be quite short and simple, and should be designed to elicit feedback about how their learning and overall experience. These evaluations can let you know what specific techniques help (and hinder) learning in the classroom. After letting students know that this evaluation is solely for you and is unrelated to the formal evaluation at the course’s end, it can be useful to explain to students that their feedback is valuable and that you want their input on how you can assist them best in the learning process. By including some open-ended questions, you can gain insight about specific pedagogical approaches and the classroom environment that standard end-of-semester evaluations may not reach.

Some questions you might consider asking include:

- What are the most important things you have learned in this class so far?
- What do you feel you don’t understand well in the material we have covered?
- What would you like to see more of between now and the end of the semester?
- What would you like to see less of between now and the end of the semester?
- What readings or materials have been particularly useful to you?
- What materials have been of little use to you?
- What can I do to improve the learning environment?
- What additional comments (if any) do you have about this class?

Depending on the particular character of the class, you might choose a few of these questions for an evaluation or use them to come up with your own.

Because these evaluations are meant to be short, you can devote 10-20 minutes at the end of class for this informal feedback exercise. One important aspect to keep in mind is that it is crucial to quickly evaluate the student responses, find the key themes, and report back quickly to the students (ideally in the next class session) about their responses and your ideas for addressing their feedback. With that in mind, schedule a midterm evaluation when you know that you will have time to give the students prompt yet thoughtful feedback.

After identifying the areas in which you can and wish to make changes, convey your thoughts to your students. It can help to thank the students for their feedback and demonstrate that you have taken their input seriously. Use
this opportunity to clarify your expectations and goals, and let students know what suggestions you will act upon. Explain what suggestions you will not act upon this semester and why. You can also use this opportunity to remind students of the ways in which they can participate actively in improving their own learning experience.

**Classroom Assessment Techniques**

These formative evaluations can be used at midterm or at any time during the semester to check in with students on what they have learned. These informal (and often ungraded) assessments allow you to quickly assess the level of student understanding and to address any misconceptions or confusion.

Depending on the type of technique you chose, you can evaluate your students recall, analysis, and critical thinking skills, as well as their reactions to instructional methods. There are a range of techniques to choose from depending on what you are seeking to evaluate and how much time and effort you wish to devote to the assessment process. Below are just a few techniques (grouped by goal) you might want to consider:

**Goal: To Assess Prior Knowledge, Recall and Understanding**

- **Minute Paper**: During the last few minutes of class, ask students to use a half-sheet of paper to identify the “most important thing I learned today and the thing I understood least.” Use the feedback to clarify, correct, or elaborate.
- **Muddiest Point**: Another very simple technique that works well in large, lower-division classes. Students respond to only one question about what they found unclear or did not understand.

**Goal: To Assess Skill in Analysis and Critical Thinking**

- **Pro/Con Grid**: Ask students to list pros/cons, costs/benefits, advantages/disadvantages of an issue, question or value of competing claims. Create a master list of student responses for discussion.
- **Analytic Memo**: Students write a brief (one– or two-page) analysis of a specific problem or issue to help inform a decision-maker.

**Goal: To Assess Skill in Synthesis and Creative Thinking**

- **Concept Maps**: Students draw or diagram mental connection they make between a major concept and other concepts they have learned.
- **Invented Dialogues**: Students can synthesize their knowledge of issues, personalities, and historical periods into a carefully structured illustrative conversation.

**Goal: To Assess Skill in Problem Solving**

- **What’s the Principle?**: Students identify principle or principles to solve problems of various types.
- **Documented Problem Solutions**: Students track in written format the steps they take in problem-solving and present as in "show and tell."

**Goal: To Assess Skill in Application and Performance**

- **Student-Generated Test Questions**: Students generate test questions and model answers for critical areas of learning.
- **Paper or Project Prospectus**: Students create a brief plan for a paper or project based on guiding questions.


Using one or more of these practices regularly can help you obtain a clear idea of what your students have learned and where they struggle. With the feedback from these practices, you can make timely and appropriate adjustments to the course on an on-going basis. Your students benefit as these techniques help them develop stronger self-assessment skills and can increase their ability to think critically about course content. Perhaps most importantly, these activities, when used frequently and intentionally, can also transmit a powerful message about your interest in your students’ success.
Faculty Focus

Reinvigorating today’s Youth and Veterans with Aquatic Programs
By Dr. Jane Katz

Passing it forward is an admirable educator’s mantra that motivates me every day. Memories of my father, mother, grandfather and grandmother serving as educators set a high standard for me but also gave me enthusiasm and eagerness to be successful. I see in the students I serve the same fears and challenges I faced growing up on the Lower East Side and am very sympathetic. My goal is to incorporate positive and healthy social activities into students and returning veterans’ lives. I do this in the water while teaching students how to swim.

I have developed several unique and innovative programs to aid those populations in learning social skills, civil behavior, and ways to engage in positive interactions. I developed a program for the NYC Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) to help prevent juveniles being held in detention facilities in NYC from becoming part of the ever-increasing jail population. The program I created is called the Kids Aquatic Re-Entry (KARE) Program. This program engages DJJ personnel during each session who monitor and escort the children to and from the sessions. During the lesson they are taught swimming and participate in other aquatic activities under my instruction. By using the “buddy system”, they learn life skills. Many of them were scared to even go in the water, but by the end of the program their pride in swimming is hard to hide. One young lady exclaimed, “Wow, I feel free in there (the water).”

At the conclusion of each program, a graduation ceremony took place to honor the youths’ accomplishments. Most felt they learned a new skill, developed friendships, had increased level of self-esteem, and were capable of doing things they previously felt were impossible. Further study and long-term follow-up is needed to see the actual impact of this program on participants’ behavior and motivation. The program has been featured in the New York Times, on CUNY TV’s Criminal Justice Matters and in John Jay Magazine, and presented at various conferences.

I have also developed a program called W.E.T.s® for Vets (Water Exercise Techniques for Veterans) that teaches W.E.T.s to provide holistic mind, body, and spiritual wellness to our veteran population returning to civilian life. This program is available to John Jay College students (and soon to their families as well) who have served our country. This program consists of formal swim instruction, aquatic exercise and fitness techniques, water safety and a series of competitions such as water volleyball.

I have found that everyone needs encouragement and some success in their lives. In an aquatic environment, with instruction, students find it in themselves to improve, trust their instructor, listen to their buddies, and take action. The programs are designed to give the students the opportunity for reflection and action. These unique and innovative programs share one goal: giving the student greater self-respect and self-confidence.
Upcoming Events

- **The Power of Seeing: Using Visuals to Teach Claims & Evidence**  
  Presenter: Victoria Bond (ENG)  
  Date: Monday, October 27th, 2014  
  Time: 1:40pm - 2:40pm  
  Location: New Building 3.76  
  If you would like to register for this workshop, please sign up at [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1kqTfy9p-7SDt7zRiG1Iz8t_AtnXl-6ghAD_BgomQXEc/viewform?usp=send_form](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1kqTfy9p-7SDt7zRiG1Iz8t_AtnXl-6ghAD_BgomQXEc/viewform?usp=send_form).

- **Speaking the Language of the Millennial Students**  
  Presenter: Nancy Velasquez-Torres (SEEK)  
  Thursday, November 6, 2014  
  Time: 1:40-2:40  
  Location: Rm. 3.76NB

- **Pedagogy and Technology Training (PATT) Faculty Development Program**  
  [https://johnjayonline.com/instructors/facultydev/patt](https://johnjayonline.com/instructors/facultydev/patt)

  **Introductory Workshops Fall 2014**  
  PATT Introductory Workshops are one of the four types of resources available through the PATT Program to all teaching faculty and adjuncts who aim to develop and teach online courses, or develop technology to be used in traditional classes.

  **Time Management in Online Teaching (Wed, Oct. 29th and Thurs, Oct. 30th)**  
  This workshop aims to provide good practice guides and tips on how to make the online teaching experience easy to manage whilst also providing a quality student learning and engagement experience.

  **Moving Student Engagement Activities Online (Wed, Nov. 5th and Thurs, Nov. 13th)**  
  This workshop aims to outline good practice and ideas for how to turn in-class activities into online student engagement activities that will enrich the learning and teaching experience. Participants are encouraged to bring activities with them that they use so that these can serve as discussion points in the workshop.

  **Assessment as Learning Activities (Wed, Dec. 3rd and Thurs, Dec. 11th)**  
  This workshop aims to show how assessment strategies can be used as actual teaching tools to more fully solidify the learning outcomes of a course, as well as providing another opportunity for using assessments as actual student activity and engagement tools. The workshop will also discuss how to ensure diversity on assessment methods to ensure that all learning styles are targeted.

  **Other PATT Program resources:** Peer Mentoring Sessions, Academic Technology Development, and Micro Grants.

  All workshop sessions will be held during community hour, 1.40-3pm in Room NB1.99