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Transforming Midterm Evaluations into a Metacognitive Pause

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Midterm evaluations often tip toward students' (unexamined) likes and dislikes. By leveraging the weight of the midterm pause and inviting students to reflect on their development, midterm evaluations can become more learning-centered. Cued by our language, students can become aware of a distinction—that we're not asking what they like, but what is helping them learn. This opportunity for students to learn about their learning yields valuable insights that not only inform instructors about the effects of our methods, but also ground students in their own learning processes, deepening their confidence in and commitment to their development in the second half of the course.

Last semester, I taught a research-based contemporary poetry course with a steep learning curve—due to our rather difficult, graduate-level texts and students' lack of prior experience. Many students in this evening course were returning learners, and so it felt beneficial to use the natural pause at midterm as an opportunity to grow their confidence by reflecting on the learning process and taking stock of their own development. I therefore tailored my midterm questions with a metacognitive slant that would prompt students to identify and articulate dimensions of and supports for their learning.

In promoting students' awareness and practice of "confronting themselves as learners," (Weimer, 2013) my questions employed a form of metacognitive awareness defined by Gregory Schraw as "declarative knowledge"—that is "knowledge about oneself as a learner and what factors influence one's performance" (1998, p. 114). In considering these performance factors, awareness of the "meta-emotional" and "environmental" aspects of their learning process felt crucial for my class of unconfident, novice writers (Nilson, 2016, p. 227).

When a Teaching Center colleague, Michelle Repice, lecturer in American Cultural Studies, saw the midterm questions, she asked to apply them in her history course on racial injustice and home ownership in America. She reported back that this evaluation provided the best feedback on her methods of instruction she had received in her 13 years of teaching. She observed that while the questions yielded detailed feedback on her teaching, they were truly student-centered, noting that the information on her instruction came through students' articulation of their own learning experiences with the course materials, assignments, and class sessions.

In designing the questions, I opened with components of the course—particular assignments and aspects—which provided the specificity needed for students to direct their thought to details of their learning experiences. This helped students avoid common vague answers ("I liked this" or "It was boring") in the more open-ended questions that followed. Repice attributed much of the success of this intervention to the wording, such as the introductory sentences, which "gave permission" to students to pause and reflect on their learning. She also noticed students interacting with the words in questions like "What has helped you develop most," by underlining "most," and offering thoughtful responses on how certain assignments helped them "develop" skills and understandings.

Repice observed that "This set of questions calls attention to the ways you are learning. So students start to see assignments not in a passive way, as requirements, but instead as opportunities to build different skills and on

different kinds of thinking."

This maturation from passive to active learners brought surprises for Repice regarding assignments that she was uncertain about. She notes that "The specificity of these midterm questions allowed me see some trends that were helpful for me in refining my course in the last half of the semester." For instance, students' body-language had sometimes made her worry how students were receiving her mini-lectures as well as certain key assignments. For one such assignment, she requires students to write summaries of primary sources as a disciplinary training tool. When prompted to reflect, students overwhelmingly noted that this assignment was "hard" but that it is a "helpful" way to build "useful skills." They also reported that the lectures integrated discussion well and helped them deepen their sense of historical context.

In addition to the information from these common trends, individual students made insightful suggestions, such as calling for more group work, explaining that it would be helpful to draw on many perspectives to "pull out" the "many themes and details" in their readings. In their comments, students even requested additional opportunities to write brief papers and asked if they might add discussion questions to the primary source summaries.

My own students' responses, like Repice's, not only eliminated my concerns and confirmed my plans for the second part of the semester, but gave students a chance to see and describe what they had already learned in this demanding course. This reflection boosted their confidence, which many of them needed in this process of building new skills and self-concepts as students and writers.

On this last point, given the difficulty of our course text, I was particularly interested in raising awareness of uncertainty and indeed, "disorientation" as part of the learning process. (See question #4.) Student responses to this question ranged from grappling with the challenging texts and writing assignments, to navigating class discussion on difficult subjects, and included awareness of what was supporting this messy learning process. (For an interesting essay on this topic of "messiness" in learning, please see Lee, 1998-1999.) I also was interested in helping students pause to further connect the course material to their own lives and other coursework, as a sense of relevance can promote learning. (See question #3 and Kember, Ho, Hong, 2008.)

Download the questions for midterm reflection »

Feel free to tailor them to your course and students' needs. Depending on course content and level, you might add questions that cultivate "procedural" and "conditional" metacognitive awareness in your students. (See Schraw, 1998.)

Tips for implementation

Stimulate student interest by introducing this activity with a few opening remarks on the power of metacognition and reflection in learning. It also helps to dedicate time in class to complete and discuss this learning-centered reflection.

An unexpected lesson in implementing this midterm reflection is that it can be valuable to pilot your teaching innovations not only in your own course but in courses taught by colleagues in another disciplines. After all, most readers of Faculty Focus are self-confessed teaching geeks who craft effective pedagogical innovations on instinct in the bleary-eyed midnight hours of busy semesters. Hence, conversations with other faculty members are invaluable as we step back to see the nuances of why our pedagogical interventions work and how they can be

improved. So don't be shy in involving colleagues the very first time you implement a new idea. Comparing notes on how it went in each course and across disciplines can evolve your innovation faster. Plus it makes for fun lunches.

References

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Midterm Reflection: *Let's pause at midterm to get a sense of what you are learning and what is supporting that process best for you. The questions below make this more of a self-reflection on your learning than a one-way communication with me. Cultivating this kind of metacognitive awareness will help you to articulate your learning processes, so that you start to own the skills you are developing. So please be thoughtful in your responses here.*

1) What aspects of the course are helping you develop most? Please check all that apply and please also offer comments on why these are useful for your development.

__Course texts

__Supplemental readings

__Interviews w/ authors and other guests

__Class discussions (includes whole-class and peer-discussions)

__Mini-lectures on [for example: poetic craft/historical context]

__Weekly reflective writing assignments

__Primary source summary assignments

__Analytical essays

2) Do you find the variety of things we do in class and for homework helpful? Why?/why not? What do wish we did more of and/or less of—and why?

3) Learning experts often talk about the necessary "difficulty" and "disorientation" that is part of learning. Can you share about what has been most challenging for you so far in this course? (Disorienting even?) What have you learned from this difficulty? What helped you in overcoming the challenge(s)?

4) Do you feel connected to the course material? Does it connect to your life or other coursework? How so? And how does this help your learning in this course?

5) Do you feel at ease in and stimulated by the learning community?

6) What am I doing that supports your learning most? What can I do better?

7) Please feel free to share any ideas, comments, or concerns as we enter the second half of the semester.