

Parting Ways: Ending Your Course

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Much emphasis has been placed on the use of activities at the beginning of a course to provide opportunities for introductions, begin to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere to encourage discussion and learning, or develop a sense of community and group identity. In many teaching books (e.g., McKeachie, 1999) there is an entire chapter devoted to getting started and what to do on the first day of a course such as breaking the ice, introducing the teacher and textbook, and allowing time for questions. Much less attention has been given to the equally important task of providing closure at the end of a course or seminar.

After a great deal of time developing a sense of comfort and community in the classroom, ignoring class endings seems awkward and abrupt to both students and faculty. Use of “parting-ways” techniques:

- Provides emotional and psychological closure to the classroom thereby reducing awkwardness.
- Acts as an opportune time to summarize central ideas and review content.
- Wraps up the class in ways that add to students’ entire semester-long experience and sense of accomplishment.
- Stimulates interest in the topic area and possibly major.
- Increases the connection between faculty and students by recognizing the importance of taking time to say good-bye.

Many faculty members do not typically use parting-ways (Eggleston & Smith, 2001). Our recent survey of college faculty from a variety of disciplines at two different institutions demonstrated that faculty members typically end their courses with final projects, papers, and review sessions. Some faculty did more: approximately 42 percent reported that they took the time to say good-bye to their students, and 30 percent responded that they tried to leave their students with some final “words of wisdom”. We also surveyed students at the same institutions: 90 percent reported that they would appreciate more closure on their courses.

The lack of class-ending activities is due to a number of factors including time constraints, attempts to complete as much course material as possible (Pescosolido & Aminzade, 1999), being unaware of useful techniques, or feeling uncomfortable saying good-bye (Wagenheim, 1994). But faculty can overcome these obstacles, and we hope to provide a least one way to end the class that is useful for each reader.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO PROVIDE CLOSURE ACADEMICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY

Parting-ways can serve many purposes depending on the specific dynamics of the course, the goals of the instructor, and time available. End of the class activities may:

- Summarize the course material or act as a review of the course goals and objectives and what

students have learned, or the course's most important ideas. Most textbook chapters provide a summary at the end of each chapter, instructors should think of a way to provide a summary to the class.

- Give students some memento from the course experience. Just as with a memorable trip, people enjoy having something to remember important events in their life.
- Provide an opportunity for faculty and students to say good-bye. After all, you have spent a lot of time together. If a classroom community has been established, then time needs to be dedicated to end the class.
- Contribute to a sense of accomplishment. In one sense an activity can put closure on the class from an academic or learning based perspective. Completing your class should be seen as something worthwhile and important.
- Create the feeling that the class has come to a culmination and it is time to move on.

Clinical practitioners, i.e., counselors and therapists, understand the importance of closure from an emotional and psychological standpoint. Before students truly feel ready to leave the class and move on to other classes or graduation, they should feel like the course has been completed.

When we presented this topic at the 2001 National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP), many professors indicated they thought that these were wonderful ideas, but they were not using them. Most often it was faculty teaching group dynamics or group psychology who used closure techniques. However, all classes are a special form of a group, and emphasizing, even if for a few minutes, the task of adjourning needs attention.

ACADEMIC PARTING WAYS

Most faculty who use a parting-way report that the few minutes of new course content they “lose” is more than made up for by the summary over the lifespan of the course or by the good feelings engendered by thanking the class for their hard work and in some way winding down a semester long experience. Here are some ideas:

Projects, Letters, Brochures

These techniques allow you to focus on what was learned throughout the course. In addition to a final paper or presentation and comprehensive exam items, students can:

- Write a letter detailing their own development in the course and what they have learned.
- Write “letters to successors” to students enrolled in the course in the future, detailing what can be gained from the course as well as broader advice on being a successful student.
- Review the course concepts through completion of a project, such as developing an informational brochure for incoming students. This activity has been used effectively in several Psychology courses, including Health Psychology and Drugs and Behavior.

Pre-Post Tests and Video Summaries

Knowledge pre-tests and post-tests also can be used as a review for students and emphasize accomplishments at the end of the semester.

- We administer “intuition” tests at the beginning of the semester that consist of true-false items to assess students’ initial ideas, myths, and common sense beliefs about psychology.
- Saul Kassin delivered the opening session at the 2001 NITOP and discussed having students make predictions about the results of famous psychological studies before providing them with the “answers.” Kassin believes this activity will help to dispel the “I knew it all along belief” or the “hindsight bias.” Not only does a pre-test of intuitions or predictions illustrate incorrect ideas, but also using it as the course ends provides some closure. Have your students complete the same set of questions during the first and last weeks of a course. Students receive their pre-tests back and can be asked to write a reflection paper on how their perceptions of the topic area have changed over the semester. Students often make such comments as “Wow, I didn’t realize how much I learned this semester,” “I can’t believe that I thought that.”
- Distribute a 2-5 page essay at the beginning of class discussing a variety of psychological topics (e.g., classical conditioning). Tell the students to highlight in yellow everything that they do not fully understand. Chances are most of the page will be highlighted. At the end of the semester, redistribute the essay and ask them to highlight all that they do not fully understand with a different colored highlighter. Students will be impressed with this visual demonstration of how much they have learned.
- What is Psychology? E. R. Klein, a philosophy professor, (Pescolido & Aminzade, 1999) suggests an end of the year activity asking one question, “What is philosophy?” It would be fascinating to see the answers to the question, “What is Psychology?” It would further be interesting to compare these answers depending on the specific course being taught (e.g., physiological, abnormal, development.)
- Show one of the videos in Zimbardo’s (1989) *Discovering Psychology* series on the future of psychology or applications of psychology as a way to review and wrap up the class.

Lists, Games, and Objectives

Changing the tone of the course and introducing something that can be fun and different sustains students, and can help them remain focused on the course. This can be a favorite for faculty members and students alike at the end of a tiring semester.

- Lists of names and research studies. In many courses professors provide students with numerous names and/or research studies throughout the semester. A fun and educational way to review these lists is to have students, meeting in small groups, compile their own “Top 10” lists of the most important or significant studies or theories discussed. Allow the students to share their lists and argue with other groups about the rankings. It is interesting to hear students debate the merits of Milgram and Festinger in a Social Psychology Class.
- Review session as a game. Review sessions for the final exam are a common activity during the last week of classes. James Wangberg developed a way to bring academic closure and also have a sense of celebration by having the review session in the form of a game of charades (Pescosolido & Aminzade, 1999). Other game style activities such as *Jeopardy* or *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* also could be adapted as a fun way to review for the final exam.
- Revisit course goals and objectives. Many professors start a course introducing students to the course’s objectives and goals. Fewer professors revisit them at the end of the semester. Specifically, a professor could show how each objective was met using the assigned readings and specific activities. This may allow students to reflect on what and how much they have learned.

Students may provide other examples of which the teacher was unaware.

Meaningful Projects

Many professors have a final paper or project that they think of as integrating the course, and very important and meaningful to what the students learn. Students often view these traditional papers or projects as simply more work. Certainly, some courses seem linked to the traditional paper, but some minor changes to the assignment can make it more meaningful for the students.

- Invite an outside group for comprehensive project presentations. Final group presentations to the class and to relevant others in the university community communicate to students that their work is real and interesting to others. For example, invite residence life groups to presentations on such topics as STD's, drugs, health, or study skills.
- Integrate service learning and helping into course endings. Group service learning projects can be a meaningful activity for classes. For example, a faculty who teaches adult development may consider holding the last class at a local group home or facility, leading bingo or another activity. This allows students to have fun, say good-bye to each other, and do something worthwhile in the community at the same time.

Emotional Parting Ways

Parting-ways can be elaborate but the simple can have great power. Taking the time to say “good bye” and “thank you” to students can be very effective. One professor discussed standing at the front of the room and after thanking students for their contributions and hard work, applauding, literally, the students for their participation in the class. Kevin Shannon suggested taking time to shake hands with each student as he or she leaves the final day as an effective way to formally say good-bye (Pescosolido & Aminzade, 1999).

Something To Take With Them: Reflections, Certificates, Quotes, & Fortunes

When a person goes on an important trip or vacation, most of us bring home some memento of the experience to help us remember this important time in our life (e.g., a seashell, a postcard). A course could be considered such an important trip.

- Wagenheim (1994) suggests having students complete sentence stems such as, “Something I have learned about myself _____,” or “Something I have learned about groups _____.” These sentence stems could then be shared with other students and kept as a written reflection of the course.
- The faculty may want to consider raffling off flowers, t-shirts, or other items. The t-shirts could be creative with examples of related topics such as “I passed Human Sexuality class,” “Ask me about my ID”, or other course topics.
- Use of certificates of achievement or completion as mementos is often times very appropriate. Certificates can include a quote for each student or recognition of a personal achievement (“To Bob Smith for completing SPSS and finally learning what a negative correlation means”). In addition, certificates can provide a humorous ending to the class. Other students can take part in making class certificates by having each student write a positive comment on each other's

certificates.

- Particularly meaningful quotes can be distributed to students, or put on an overhead at the end of the last day of the course or during the final as a way of ending the class. For example, one of the authors has placed the following quote from the movie “Awakenings” which the class watched on an overhead at the conclusion of a course, “The human spirit is more powerful than any drug. It needs to be nourished with work, play, friendship, love. The simplest things. The things we have forgotten.” H. Goldstein (personal communication, May, 1999) has posted several suggestions for closing words of wisdom on the electronic discussion group in Teaching in Psychological Sciences (www.frostburg.edu/dept/psyc/southerly/tips).
- In larger classes, fortunes can be distributed to students, rather than individual certificates. The fortunes are slips of paper containing either a brief summary of an important lesson from the course or a quote selected by the faculty member that reflects something about the course content or the class dynamics. Students are given the opportunity at the end of the last class or the final exam to draw a fortune from a container. To personalize the fortunes, faculty members can print them on mailing labels and then attach labels on the back of their business cards, and distribute them to students. Students often appreciate receiving the business card of a faculty member, even without the fortune. Quotes related to specific topics can easily be obtained via a variety of quote web sites such as www.quoteland.com.
- Paul Berghoof reported reading a story or a parable as a way to end the course (Pescosolido & Aminzade, 1999). Because of student stress during finals week, this parable may have a greater impact if it is relatively short and read the week before finals.

Keep in Mind the Following

This column had as one of its goals to inspire teachers to consider how they and the students part ways as a course ends. The following considerations are important to keep in mind when making decisions about ending the class.

- **Relevance to the course.** The activity will be viewed as more meaningful if it linked and related to your course content. Service learning at a nursing home, for example, seems much more appropriate for an Adult Development or Gerontology course than for a Tests and Measurement class.
- **Your own style.** Certain activities are not for all instructors. Just as we all have our preferences for lecture styles, group discussions, and other pedagogical activities, find activities that fit your unique teaching style.
- **Type of Closure (academic or psychological and emotional).** At the end of the semester, many instructors are busy and may not take the time to explore how they would like to end their classes. Faculty members will need to decide if they are more interested in an academic review of the material and course objectives or psychological and emotional parting-ways. Some may desire both types of closures and need to do two activities.
- **If no community, no need for closure.** In some classes due to time constraints, meeting times, the course content or class size, students may not have developed a sense of community. In that case there is less need for psychological or emotional closure. An academic activity will probably be the most applicable. Distance learning and virtual computer classes may require less closure and a different type of activity would be appropriate (for example, an electronic thank you card sent to students in a virtual class would seem very appropriate).

- Time investment. Some activities take more time to develop and carry out in class. Some will need to be included in your syllabus to allow for students to complete them and understand how they contribute to a final grade. It may be beneficial to start with the small, easy, and time efficient techniques before moving to more elaborate activities.
- Small versus large classes. It is important to modify your ending activity based on the size of your class. Individual certificates and top 10 lists may work better in a smaller class whereas fortunes seem suitable for larger classes.
- Course and campus climate. Courses that are personal in nature and where a great deal of sharing has taken place (for example, many clinical and counseling or human sexuality classes) may need a more complex activity than less personal classes that tend to have less sharing (for example, a physiological psychology class). In addition, some college campuses portray themselves as “caring” and “student centered” and parting-ways activities seem especially useful on such campuses or for such faculty.

Good Luck as you integrate parting-ways into your classroom. Here is a quote for you, our reader:

“Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.”

– B. F. Skinner

TAMI EGGLESTON is an assistant professor of psychology at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois. She teaches introduction to psychology, social psychology, biopsychology, human sexuality, tests and measurement, and SPSS.

GABIE SMITH is an assistant professor at Elon University in Elon, North Carolina. She teaches health psychology, research methods, general psychology, and human sexuality.

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