

CULTIVATING REFLECTIVE LEARNERS

7 Ways to Facilitate Motivation, Metacognition, and Learning Community

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Universities are mandated to be the ultimate “learning culture,” powered by faculty who embody lifelong learning. We know that reflection is essential to learning; it’s the foundation of “continuous improvement,” that ceaseless cultivation of our skills and spirits as we work in the world. We are entering that rather magical bright, cold, clear time of year that provides us with a chance to pause and reflect on our lives and on our work as teachers. And this year, our reflection comes in time of global crisis—all the more reason to reflect on what matters most in our and our students’ lives, in our communities, and in our teaching and learning within our courses.

FOR TEACHING GEEKS WHO WANT TO NOODLE WITH YOUR COURSES IN JANUARY AS WE ENTER ANOTHER ODD SEMESTER OF HYBRID TEACHING, CLICK [HERE](#) FOR A DELIGHTFUL SHORT CHAPTER FROM TILESTON’S *10 BEST TEACHING PRACTICES* THAT REMINDS US OF SOME ESSENTIAL ASPECTS OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ROOTED IN BRAIN-WISE TEACHING.

For some years now, higher education has acknowledged that part of our work is to prepare students for a world marked by increasing uncertainty. We understand that part of our teaching must include helping students develop essential, transferable career skills such as navigating change, communicating and collaborating, creating/innovating and “learning how to learn.” And certainly, the Covid-19 pandemic gave faculty a chance to model flexibility and responsiveness to uncertain, changing conditions, as well as the chance to model learning, as we crafted innovative approaches in our shift from classroom teaching to teaching online.

THE LINDENWOOD LEARNING ACADEMY

Faculty are expert learners. Learning is second nature to us. Many of us were kids who took notes when we watched nature shows or who scanned Tolkien poems in the privacy of our tweenage bedrooms. So we might need a reminder--or in our shift to BBB/Zoom this Fall maybe not, LOL--that learning is in Mezirow's words "disorienting" and uncomfortable. The very nature of learning is to stretch us, to move us "beyond the fields we know," to quote that wild old Irish writer Lord Dunsany.

So, we might remind ourselves—and more importantly, share with our students—something that sounds obvious, but that we all often forget when we struggle with newness and change: Learning is encountering new material, new perspectives, new ideas and new ways of doing things, all of which open up possibilities in our lives. Sometimes this newness and change is a bit disorienting, which can be uncomfortable, but in time—and with disciplined reflection—we find we have integrated the new experiences and they have expanded our knowledge and skills.

(Note that this previous statement was road-tested with students, and that it tends to increase student interest and engagement. And, colleagues, I swear to remind myself of this cheery little message when grappling with the new Workday system.)

We might think of our course material, our textbooks and our tests and discipline-specific learning tasks, as the branches of the tree of a student's time at Lindenwood. We might then think of the roots as the deeper curriculum: The cultivation of those key habits

of mind discussed above, habits such as learning and creating—which entail a host of other habits of mind such as comfort with risk, uncertainty, and failed attempts, as well as facility in reflection, curiosity and persistence.

While it may seem counterintuitive, the pressures of the pandemic and the shift this year to online/hybrid courses can open up opportunities for this deeper learning. Through brief activities that boost student engagement and community rapport, we can integrate course content with students' daily lives (including work and their other coursework). We can assist students in becoming more self-directed learners by spurring them to thinking about their study habits and course assignments. Leveraging our current context, we can practice more whole-person teaching that cultivates crucial capacities—such as reflection and resilience—for a world of work that requires lifelong learning.

All of that sounds swell, but let's pause here for a moment to reflect on student feedback on their learning experiences at Lindenwood this autumn.



THE LINDENWOOD LEARNING ACADEMY

A recent survey about teaching and learning at Lindenwood highlighted a few key themes we might keep in mind: boosting student motivation, providing chances for metacognition (to cultivate self-directed learning), and uniting these: meaning.

A frequent remark on the survey showed that students have been struggling in their motivation to fulfill their course obligations.

A related frequent remark was that students felt that their courses had too much “busywork.” Students also shared that they felt that they were “teaching themselves” and “not fully absorbing the material.”



We have an opportunity there to do what we should always do in our teaching—refashion anything resembling busywork into more compelling forms, ensure our assignments are purposeful and that our course materials are meaningful, and provide opportunities for students to cultivate awareness and skill as learners. After all, pandemic year or not, it is always our job to articulate *why* our students are being asked to read this or that, or to perform this or that learning activity. It is always our job to communicate, compellingly and truthfully, why our disciplines matter—and that also means evolving how we teach and what we teach in light of how our disciplines connect to the needs of the world now.

It is always our job to generate interest. Motivation, like assessment, like learning, like anything alive, is an ongoing process.

Outlined on the following pages are some brief yet potent areas of focus, and clusters of questions to make your own. The questions offered here are very general; consider the nitty gritty of students' lives—*their* pressures, problems, and plans—when you design questions.

These may seem rudimentary, but we just need to remember to integrate them, and trust that the two-five minutes of class-time/homework time that these activities take makes a real difference in the quality of student engagement and learning.

How to plan this? Just choose two or three areas that you then rotate through over the semester, tailoring to your course concerns/material of that week. You only need throw out one question at a time, after all.

And be creative in how to elicit answers—perhaps first the “Journal” function in Canvas, priming more quiet students to then share aloud in class on Zoom or in person.

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7 Ways to Facilitate Motivation, Metacognition, and Learning Community

There are three wins with these brief activities: 1) We keep motivation high because we keep the focus on why our coursework is meaningful for students' lives; 2) We cultivate metacognition and self-directed learning, encouraging our students to be partners in learning; 3) We build strong learning community as students share their reflections aloud in class or in our discussion boards.

1 Weekly Challenges & Supports in Learning

Rather than just a general "How was your week?" ask a question each week in which students identify challenges and supports to their lives (if applicable to your course) and/or learning/homework projects over the past week. What supported their study time? What obstacles arose in life or learning? What did they learn from this challenge? Did they have any ah-ha moments? If so, ask the student to articulate them, so the class learns with them and so they own what they learned all the more. How did they happen? Where did they get stuck? What support did they need for their learning and did they find a way to get it? How might they better approach their work next week?

2 Contemplative Course-Focused Questions

Design questions that draw on key content of your course that week—but be sure to connect it to students' lives. You have an opportunity to connect your course material with their current lives as students, sports team members, workers, as well as with their possible future work, as well as with social issues, and with their other courses in other disciplines. In this way you are also modeling higher-order integrative thinking while making your course material more connected and meaningful. (A broad example: "How do you see [this week's course content] connect with [global news/knowledge or skills you are building in your other courses]? A more specific example from collaboration with Dr. Shelly Daly's leadership classes in the B-School during a unit on communication skills: "Are there relationships where you could strengthen your listening skills to help transform a relationship?")

3 Course-focused Weekly Check-In, Assignment Reflections, Exam Wrappers

Incorporating a metacognitive component 1) at the start of class or 2) as an integral part of an assignment, such as an [exam wrapper](#), helps our students learn our course material and more broadly, “learn how to learn.” You might ask students: What was interesting/exciting or usable/valuable about this chapter/assignment for you? Where did you struggle? What helped you overcome that challenge? Are there aspects of your studying this week or work on this kind of assignment that might need improvement/new approaches? How can you make those changes?

4 Intentions/Goals

This focus on interests, intentions, and goals supports student motivation. Note that for some students goal-setting is intimidating; it’s another part of a hidden curriculum for many, so we can help support them in learning this skill too. But interests are something that can engage everyone. This focus on these areas of motivation helps guard against our assignments being seen as busywork. (And in our own fearless, Covid-driven reflection as teachers, let’s be sure it isn’t busywork.) Here you have a chance to share yourself and/or to ask students questions like: Why is this course/this unit of the course/this particular learning activity meaningful? How will it help you [students] in your [their] future career? How will it help them in their current life—say in other courses, projects they are keen to try, even in their current jobs?

5 Pauses: (Beginning, Middle, End of Class)

This is a chance to pause and ask reflective questions on key concepts or learning processes. (Pauses can also be paired with the Mindfulness section below.) Note that this need not be in real-time in the classroom alone; it can be valuable part of a Discussion Board too—times to stop and reflect and consolidate learning. See ["Hitting Pause"](#) for a few exercise ideas.

6 Metacognitive Midterm/End of Term Pause

This has proven to be a powerful tool for students to reflect on learning at midterms or as a recollection at the end of the term. Ask students to review their course calendar and articulate key insights from each week and how they can use what they learned in the future. When Canvas is central to the course, as it is for all faculty at the moment, students can then share their responses, crowd-sourcing a list of key insights and lessons learned in the course. For more information on this idea, see [this Faculty Focus article](#).

7 Mindfulness

Is a big tent of techniques that range from gratitude lists that keep our mindset positive to breath work that resets attention for learning. Mindfulness activities at the start of class work well to help students refocus towards learning. This is not well-meaning yet often educationally weak bonding icebreakers like “How was your weekend?” Rather, this is purposeful activity to refresh harried students and reset their attention towards learning. During the initial shock of the pandemic, taking 2-3 minutes to ask students to share a gratitude or a vicarious joy (an underdeveloped capacity of happiness at others happiness) helped students reduce their distractions, refocus and gather themselves individually and as a group. Student feedback was strongly favorable citing improvements to their mood at the end of long day, increased ability to focus, and a stronger sense of learning community, which improves the quality of class discussions.

For all of the above:

Change your focus areas and questions over the semester to keep student interest alive. They love sharing this stuff, and they all benefit from the chance to reflect on studying and learning, gaining insights from the instructor and from each other. These kinds of brief moments in class discussion (online or in-person) do great work in making a thriving learning community and cultivating more motivated and self-directed learners. (For teaching geeks who want to dive into more granular thinking about how to help develop more self-directed learners, [here](#) is a good chapter from Ambrose et al’s How Learning Works.)

For this “mindfulness” category: I have made some [contemplative audio recordings](#) that can be integrated in your courses in Canvas. Our students are stressed and feeling disconnected much of the time and more so in the pandemic. They do not need to be coddled, but they could use some smart supports. These contemplative recordings is one such smart support. You can encourage students to do them before starting homework. You can use them in your classes. Please be sure to first read the document [“Cultivating Attention & Resilience w/ Contemplative Pedagogy”](#) (with the honking, big suffix “READ BEFORE AUDIO”). I would be glad to brainstorm with you about how to best integrate this in your courses in ways specific to your learning goals:
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