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The Mid-semester Challenge: Filtering the Flow of Student Feedback

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The following exchange represents the planning, execution, and assessment of a mid-semester evaluation that I undertook in collaboration with TLI student consultant Ivana Evans, for a 200-level (i.e., advanced lecture) course on medieval art and architecture in the fall 2011. The twenty-seven students enrolled in the class possessed significantly different academic backgrounds as well as divergent levels of interest in and commitment to the course. At one extreme they included students who had no previous experience in the discipline of art history and were taking the course to fulfill general credits in the humanities, while at the other extreme they included senior majors in art history who had already completed several semesters of intermediate and/or advanced coursework in the discipline, although typically not in the subfield of medieval art history.

During the first half of the semester Ivana and I had focused our efforts on devising ways to make the course better serve students who possessed diverse needs and wide-ranging abilities. By mid-semester, a vocal group of students were becoming increasingly anxious about the demanding nature of some of the readings, the number of assignments, and the rigor of my expectations. I was in turn beginning to feel frustrated by their focusing on the evaluation of their work (i.e., grades) rather than mastering the content and skills that the course was designed to introduce.

In the seven years I had been teaching up to this point, I had never undertaken a mid-semester student survey. Previously I had decided against the midterm evaluation because I was skeptical that students would provide honest, constructive feedback at a point in the semester when their final grades were not yet determined and in a situation in which it would be difficult to preserve their anonymity. My enthusiasm for the process at this moment came largely from the role that a TLI student consultant could play as an interlocutor with students, explaining the purpose of the exercise as well as helping to generate honest, useful feedback. Ivana and I agreed that she would collaborate in composing the questionnaire as well as introduce it to the students and facilitate a follow-up discussion. These arrangements were essential for creating an environment in which students' comments could be frankly expressed as well as effectively distilled into specific, constructive suggestions.

As Ivana and I formulated the questions to be posed to students, I was particularly interested in trying to identify specific challenges that students were facing and concrete changes that I could introduce in order to make the course more meaningful and satisfying for them. I also took to heart a caveat raised in discussions with other faculty prior to the midterm evaluation in which we were cautioned against mounting a mid-semester survey if we were unwilling to respond directly to student feedback by either making substantive adjustments to the course or explaining in specific terms the reason why changes weren't being introduced.

A lingering challenge for me across the semester was confronting my own preconceptions of what it means to establish and maintain authority in the classroom. As I approached the midterm

evaluation, I felt some apprehension about how I could address student concerns and adopt student suggestions without jeopardizing my control of the course. At the same time, this process also prompted me to rethink what constitutes pedagogic authority and whether the midterm evaluation might offer some opportunities to share this authority with students in a way that could be more productive for us all.

Below I present excerpts from email exchanges with Ivana about the mid-semester feedback, using comment boxes to provide both context and further explanation.

Dear Ivana,

I'm sorry, but I won't be able to meet Monday Oct 3 or 24 as I am hosting speakers on those two days. Please feel free to come to the lectures, if you are available (I passed out a handout about them today; I can send details if you need them). They should be interesting!

All the best,
Prof Walker

Dear Professor Walker,

I'll probably come to the lecture on October 24. They sound very interesting. I also love the idea of using them as a way for students to learn more and earn extra credit.

Please email me if you have any questions or comments about my notes or issues you would like me to bring to my student consultant meetings. Also, for the midcourse evaluations, would you like to use the 4 questions in the TLI handbook? Let me know what you think.

All my best,
Ivana

Dear Ivana,

I know I won't see you Thursday since we have the exam. Let me know if you think we should meet Monday to discuss the course feedback session or if you think we can make our decisions about that by email. If we don't meet that Monday, I'll see you in class the Tues after break.

The questions from the TLI Moodle page are fine. I've tweaked them just slightly as follows:

(a) Which of the following aspects of this course do you enjoy most and why? Lectures, textbook readings, additional articles, quizzes, reading responses, additional resources offered as links on Moodle

(b) Which of the following aspects of this course do you find most helpful for your learning process and why? Lectures, textbook readings, additional articles, quizzes, reading responses, additional resources offered as links on Moodle

(c) Which of the following aspects of this course do you find least enjoyable and why? Lectures, textbook readings, additional articles, quizzes, reading responses, additional resources offered as links on Moodle

(d) Which of the following aspects of this course do you find least helpful for your learning process and why? Lectures, textbook readings, additional articles, quizzes, reading responses, additional resources offered as links on Moodle

(e) What is the professor doing well? What would you like to keep the same about the class?

(f) What could the professor change to improve your learning experience in this class?

(g) What do you feel you are doing well in this class? Where have you seen your own

Comment [1]: Ordinarily the student consultant and I discussed all matters relating to the course in person, but with the mid-semester crunch upon us and the complicating factor of my hosting a lecture series on campus, finding a time to meet was a challenge.

Comment [2]: In order to encourage students to attend special lectures on campus relating to medieval studies and to give their attendance at these events a purpose, I offered extra credit to anyone who listened to a scholarly talk, but I required that they submit a one page response to the lecture within one week. In this short essay, they were asked to summarize the point of the talk, note the strengths of the speaker's presentation, and also to mention any areas in which they thought the talk could have been improved.

Comment [3]: I liked this suggestion from the student consultant as it provided us a neutral departure point from which to craft our questions for the class. Had either she or I been responsible for establishing this starting point, I think we would have felt less comfortable critiquing and revising the other's suggestion.

Comment [4]: I had added these specific course resources and activities because I wanted students to think about what aspects of the course they found most useful. I thought this might help me to determine what components were working well for them and which they were not using to their full advantage.

improvement over the course of the semester?

(h) What could you do differently to improve your learning experience in this class?

(i) What is your greatest concern about this course at present?

(j) If you could change one thing about this course in the second half of the semester, what would it be?

Please let me know if you think we should make any additional changes to the questions.

Should I produce the Xeroxes with the above questions for the students? Just let me know. I'm happy to do so.

Many thanks.

All the best,

Professor Walker

Hi Prof. Walker,

The responses to your questions would be very useful for the students, the class in general, and our partnership. But I'm a little concerned about the amount of questions you have here. I have a feeling (from my personal experience) that students are going to look at these, feel overwhelmed, and not take the time to answer them in a way that would be helpful to us. But I also understand why you would want all these questions addressed. So perhaps I could ask about half of these in the oral evaluation/discussion after they have written down their responses to the other questions.

My suggestion would be to have the students write their responses to questions (e), (f), (g), (h), and (i) because they generally and implicitly address all the topics that interest you. After students answer those more general questions, I could facilitate a discussion about the more specific topics that you want addressed. And I would take notes during that discussion as well so you still receive the feedback. Let me know what you think of this. I am happy to do whatever you feel comfortable with.

My best,

Ivana

Dear Ivana,

Good suggestion! I see your point about overwhelming them. How about this compromise:

Please answer the following questions, keeping in mind the various facets of the course, including class lectures, class discussion, textbook readings, additional articles, quizzes, reading responses, additional resources offered as links on Moodle:

(a) What is the professor doing well? What would you like to keep the same about the class?

(b) What could the professor change to improve your learning experience in this class?

(c) What do you feel you are doing well in this class? Where have you seen your own improvement over the course of the semester?

(d) What could you do differently to improve your learning experience in this class?

(e) What is your greatest concern about this course at present?

I'm very open to any further suggestions, so just let me know if anything else comes to mind.

Once we agree on the final format of the questionnaire, I'll print them and Xerox them. I'll bring them to class on the Tues after break.

It looks like we'll be able to wrap this up by email, so I think we probably won't need to meet the Monday after break. But let me know if you think it would be useful.

Comment [5]: Of course she is absolutely right. In my effort to be thorough, I had produced a list that would have been very overwhelming for the students, which would have resulted in their providing less useful feedback.

Comment [6]: This is a great suggestion, and is something that would be much harder for me to do effectively as I imagine students wouldn't feel as comfortable answering the question candidly.

Comment [7]: Ivana's concern about overwhelming students prompted me to think about how the questions could be structured differently so as to avoid repetition and unnecessary bulk. Having a more visually manageable and concise questionnaire seemed like a great way to encourage active student feedback.

Comment [8]: One of the things I really like about these questions is that they ask students to share in the responsibility for making the course effective.

Many thanks,
Prof Walker

Dear Professor Walker,
That's a great compromise. I'll send you my notes from today's class later this afternoon. If you have any questions or comments, let me know.
My best,
Ivana

Hi Prof. Walker,
Hope you're enjoying you weekend. Attached are the typed responses to the midterm evaluations, which I'm sure you're eager to read. I urge you to first focus on what is working well in the class. As you probably already know, it's easy for teachers to overlook what's going well because they're bothered by what is not working so well. I highlighted the comments that we may want to discuss (because they were mentioned several times, they were discussed in the "oral evaluation," or I'm merely interested in what you think about it). I have also added a couple tables at the end with some of my reflections. I thought the tables would make all the information more manageable and useful. I hope all this is helpful. Please email me if you have any questions or comments. Actually, because we're not meeting on Monday, could you email me with some of your reactions/thoughts/questions if you have time? I'd like to hear/read them before class on Tuesday if that is OK with you.
My best,
Ivana
P.S.--I enjoyed reading the evaluations because they demonstrate that the students are seeing all the great things that I see every week in your class!

Dear Ivana,
Thanks for these and for all the time you clearly put into the effort. I will not have time to look through the responses in detail until later today, but I quickly looked through the sections about what students would like to see changed or where they have concerns, and I can say the following:

- I am happy to choose the slides that they need to memorize after every class session. This means they will end up with more slides than they would likely have otherwise. I usually select slides as we go along and then cut the list down for the actual exam. Choosing in advance means that I will need to err on having more than we will ultimately need. But if this is what they want, I can certainly do it. I am a bit skeptical that the average student in the class will actually memorize them in advance, but if they at least want the option, I'm happy to do it.
- Posting readings earlier. No problem at all. I will try to get them all up tonight.
- Student grades. Is there any course in which students aren't somewhat concerned about their grades? As far as I can tell, the students who are below a B+ on the midterm didn't study effectively. The ones I have spoken to so far have told me that they didn't give themselves enough time to study, that they had other courses that are a priority for them, etc. This is totally fine, as I understand my course will not be everyone's priority. Students who are concerned about their grades should come in to see me. I think I have made that plainly clear. But over 2/3 of the course is currently getting a B+ or higher, which seems just fine to me. You and I can discuss this more next time we meet.

Comment [9]: It was very helpful to have an outside eye distill these varied comments into overarching themes. It allowed me to target my revisions to the course syllabus in a way that I felt students might recognize as a direct response to their concerns.

Comment [10]: I was initially overwhelmed by the length of the write up. After first glancing through them, I knew it would take time as well as emotional and mental energy to process them.

Comment [11]: In this instance, I think students didn't realize the way in which they benefitted from how I approached identifying slides for the exams. But I was also willing to believe that having the images earlier made them feel less anxious about studying.

Comment [12]: One of my greatest frustrations in this process was that many of the students who were expressing anxiety about doing well in the class were doing just fine. I was starting to feel in some instances that their criticism of the course had less to do with the design of the course or my teaching and more with their perennial performance anxieties. The challenge for me was to decide what I was not willing to alter from the original syllabus, while also recognizing that I absolutely held the power to make students relax about their grades so that they can focus on learning.

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- Giving them slides for the exams sooner. I wanted until the point that I did because I wasn't sure how much material we would get through and didn't want to give them anything to memorize or study that I hadn't covered at least somewhat in class. But for the final, I can give the slides sooner and then tell them after the fact if there are any they can drop. So I will do my best to accommodate their requests. Thanks for cluing me in to some of the issues. Feel free to let me know if there is anything I missed above that you would like to emphasize. I look forward to speaking with you about the reviews the next time we meet (next week).

Best,
Prof Walker

In response to the midterm evaluations, I decided to make a number of significant changes to the syllabus and course requirements. My overall goal was to reduce the quantity of assignments and activities so that the students and I could focus on how specific activities could develop their skills and knowledge.

These changes included my making optional the remaining three short (2-3 page) essays (out of the six originally assigned for the semester). Students who had not done well on these assignments earlier in the semester could submit the remaining ones as a means to raise their grades. Students who had done well previously but wanted more opportunities to submit work because they had enjoyed the earlier assignments or were interested in receiving additional practice and feedback still had the opportunity for that interaction. Furthermore I made optional the in-class discussions of advanced, scholarly articles originally scheduled for the second half of the semester. Instead these sessions were held outside of regular class hours and students could participate in them for significant extra credit. These discussions had not been working well in class because the group was too large and because students felt that the level of discourse was either too high or too low. I thought that making this component of the course an extra credit option could also generate a self-selected subgroup of students who were genuinely interested in the material and who were eager for the opportunity to participate in a more intimate and demanding analysis and discussion of scholarly readings.

Finally, in addition to posting slides and readings for the final exam more promptly, I also introduced an extra credit essay on the final which would ask students to account for what they learned over the semester. This option was a response to concerns expressed by some students that they were making progress and learning important things that my tests and writing assignments might not reveal nor be designed to credit. Of course I also took the opportunity to invite students to come to my office hours to discuss their individual interests in or challenges with the course.

My goal in all these changes was to make clear that my priority was not the syllabus and what it claimed to cover, but rather their learning and their mastery of the material that the course introduced. By making many of the original requirements optional, I also hoped to relieve anxiety for students who felt the course was too challenging, while still preserving an outlet for students who wanted a higher level of rigor and additional opportunities for serious intellectual exchange. It was very difficult to abandon some of my own aspirations for the course and the

notions of rigor that had informed the original design, but I forced myself to reflect on how my conception of the course had not been effective for all students and to be open to changing anything that wasn't contributing positively to the majority of students' learning.

Ivana reported that the students in the class had been extremely surprised by my willingness to make extensive and seemingly radical changes in the syllabus. For me, however, the changes didn't feel so drastic because my commitment to designing a course that was effective and engaging for students remained the essential priority in both the original and revised versions. Some students expressed deep relief at having the requirements for the course lessened and even commented in the end of the semester evaluations that the effort I had made to be understanding of their needs and responsive to their concerns had renewed their commitment to the course, which they now enjoyed more because it seemed less daunting. In these instances, the midterm evaluation and my response to it led some students to reconsider and affirm their own accountability for their learning process.

I also found remarkable students' answers to the optional question on the final exam that asked what they had learned during the semester. They were, in fact, correct that I had not appreciated how significant and diverse their learning was. In many cases they were realizing and absorbing very important concepts and bodies of information that I had either taken for granted or hadn't realized the course could convey. The originality and genuineness of their answers was in many cases humbling and inspiring.

On the other hand, I also learned from end of semester evaluations that other students felt the changes to the course made it less challenging and therefore less satisfying. While I would have expected that these students would have simply redirected their efforts toward the optional discussion sessions and essays, several of them explained that when these activities and assignments became optional, they felt they could no longer prioritize them in their work load. I was surprised to learn that these students actually wanted to be required to do this additional work and felt their experience in the course had not been enhanced by the changes I introduced. Those students who did complete the extra assignments and attended the discussion sessions were satisfied, however, with the more focused attention and higher level of discourse that the reorganization of the syllabus afforded them.

The number of comments I received that disapproved of the changes in the syllabus made me realize that the criticism to which I had responded, and which I had perceived to reflect the position of a significant majority of students, had not been unanimous. It is difficult to quantify the qualitative nature of the feedback generated from the midterm survey and discussion, but I recognize in retrospect that the questions I employed did not generate an entirely balanced reflection of student opinion. It is possible that I allowed a vocal minority to sway my decision in making changes to the course that were neither desirable nor well received by all students.

As a result of this experience I have learned in subsequent mid-semester evaluations to refrain from making unilateral decisions regarding changes to the course and syllabus. Instead I involve students in this process so that we adopt modifications that we have devised together. This usually results in less radical alterations and stronger consensus around those that are introduced.

It also serves to build a sense of shared purpose and commitment between the students and me as well as among the students themselves.

I think when most faculty hear of pedagogical approaches in which students are involved as commentators and collaborators, they assume that in these situations students hold unfettered authority or excessive influence in the teaching process. On some level, I was also approaching the student consultant relationship and mid-semester course evaluation with this subconscious assumption. I was apprehensive about what I perceived to be an obligation to follow what they said or to grant them some kind of veto power in managing my course.

I have come to realize, however, that this is a very limited, either/or conception of these relationships — either students have equality and authority or they don't; either they are right or they are wrong; either I have to listen to them or I have to ignore them. Through my experience with the mid-semester course evaluation, I came to appreciate that the TLI presents a very different conception of the role students can play in the evolution of a course: it doesn't advocate simply following student advice, but rather taking students seriously as collaborators in the teaching-learning exchange.

I need to listen to my consultant (and my students more broadly) with a neutral ear, hearing everything they say, generously filtering out the more naïve and unreasonable requests or analyses, and then resist the temptation to be defensive against or dismissive of this feedback and instead absorb this constructive criticism in order to reach the core of truth and productive commentary underlying their comments. For some teachers this filtering the flow of student feedback comes naturally, but for me it was a very conscious process and one to which I had to hold myself accountable.

When I took the time to do this around the midterm, it made me see myself and my course in very different terms and it led to significant changes in the way I was approaching the teaching process. Ultimately this improved and simplified my course in good ways. I realize now that taking student contributions seriously does not require blindly following their opinions and suggestions, but rather carefully reflecting on and analyzing their feedback, and then addressing the core concerns behind this commentary in a way that is consistent with my pedagogic goals and values.

Overall I found this process immensely useful. I have continued the practice of a midterm evaluation in subsequent courses and now see it as an essential part of my pedagogical practice. I have come to believe that the key element in a successful mid-semester survey is the willingness of the professor to be respectful of students' feedback, committed to responding explicitly to these constructive criticisms, and open to the possible need for substantive change in the course, whether in terms of the mechanics, content, or evaluation processes originally in place. I have also become more tempered in the depth and range of changes that I introduce and make an effort to involve students more formally in identifying and adopting these modifications.