

Rider University Online E-coaching Tips

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Teaching Online Tip #6: Creating Course Closing Experiences — Wrapping up a Course with Style

The closing weeks of a course are often busy and can be quite stressful. In such times, planning and list-making, along with deep-breathing exercises, can be more helpful than ever for reducing stress and calming ourselves and our learners. A favorite image of mine is from productivity consultant David Allen's book (2002), "Getting Things Done." Allen notes that making a list helps us to clear the "psychic ram" of our brains and we feel more relaxed and more in control. Once we have made our list and schedule, we don't have to continually remind ourselves of what needs to be done and when.

Here are a few hints for closing out a course experience with style, panache and pleasure.

1. Take Time to Remind Students of What's Next and When Assignments, Reviews and Postings are Due

This hint actually places the burden of creating a master "Things to Do to Complete a Course" list on the instructor. Some faculty may think this falls under the category of helping students too much and it may be. But at this time of the course faculty often need to update their own list anyway. So a master list benefits the instructor as much as the student as it is a chance to ensure that the deadlines and assessment tasks that an instructor must do is in synch with learner deadlines. Preparing this list is similar to updating a project plan. Courses and projects never go exactly according to plan and updating refreshes and prepares our brains for the final course experiences. Reviewing the list of planned course experiences can also bring into stark relief all the tasks that you have planned for your learners during these final weeks. If need be, you can choose to modify the requirements. A refreshed list helps to keep learners focused on the learning of the core course knowledge and completing their projects.

As always, it is good to post such teaching directions in a very prominent place on the course site, such as the course announcement with a link to other teaching directions. Another approach is to set up a community forum and have a community to do list with room for hints, suggestions and reminders.

2. Plan the Ending of the Course Experience – Cognitive Hugging

A course can be described as a series of structured learning experiences. After a series of experiences it is good to design the ending of the experience. A well-designed course ending provides opportunities for reflection and integration of useful knowledge. It is also an opportunity to wrap up positive social and cognitive experiences.

When we get together for family and holiday time, we often do a lot of hugging as we disperse and return to our usual daily responsibilities. The end of a course can be closed

with cognitive hugging and concept pruning, reflecting very explicitly on the knowledge and skills we look forward to using in the future.

End-of-course experiences can focus on one or all of these three areas: (1) content, (2) interaction and community, and (3) the full course experience. More on each of these kinds of experiences follows next.

2a. End-of-Course *Content* Experiences

Both faculty and learners benefit from end-of-course *content* experiences. For faculty it is an opportunity to summarize and affirm the core concepts of a course. One way of doing this is to state somewhere, "If you remember nothing else, remember "THIS" (Fill in your favorite mantra for what you consider the most foundational core concepts.) Many faculty like to prepare or use a course summary that includes future trends, and encourages the development of life-long discipline habits, particularly for graduate students. For example, an obvious goal for many graduate students is to develop the habit of reading a specific discipline journal or publication or tracking a particular trend or expert as a way of further integrating the course content over time.

For learners, the end of the course is a time to "tie up loose ends" and put the finishing touches on new perspectives. Recall that as we develop concepts, it is often necessary to identify and build relationships among ideas and concepts within our existing body of knowledge. This also requires the "pruning" of what we have learned so that we can readily access and use essential and useful concepts.

A strategy that promotes end-of-course reflection is to ask the learners to identify and share one of their most meaningful insights from the course. Another strategy is to have the learners identify an object that symbolizes one of their meaningful learning experiences that they are taking away from the class and talk about their symbolic object and their experiences. (Schmier, 2006). The end of course is also a time for discussing what learners will be doing next. What courses are next on their schedule? Or what learning tasks are they going to focus on next?

2b. End-of-Course Interaction Experiences

Learners often create a helpful, supportive and dynamic learning community over eight to thirteen weeks. Closing out such an experience can sometimes be wrenching; at other times it is much easier and even welcome. Providing a time and "place" for saying good-bye, just as we provide a time and place for learners to introduce themselves at the beginning of a course is a good thing to do. How might you do this? A simple way to do it is to provide a "Closing Forum" where students share a closing comment, such as the end-of-course content insight they had gleaned from an individual or collaborative experience.

One of the most valuable parts of a successful learning experience is expanding our network of colleagues; so providing a way for students to stay in touch is also helpful. This can happen naturally in a cohort-based program. Another technique might be to encourage them to share where/when they might meet again, such as which other courses they might be in together again. Other times, "until we meet again" works just fine. One faculty shared that one of the most heart-warming comments that he remembers is a student saying that he disliked "seeing the class come to an end!"

When is a good time to hold this wrap-up forum? This can be a good activity at the end of the last week. It might be combined with a debriefing on the projects. If you are using an online classroom or other synchronous virtual space, the last meeting can be combined with a discussion of a few closing thoughts.

2c. End-of-Course Full Course Experience

The end-of-course also brings the time for students to complete course evaluations. This is an important feedback mechanism for the institution; but is often less useful for faculty. So, it is good to ask the learners for feedback about particular elements of the course experience while it is fresh in their minds.

Some questions for learners in the area of course experience might include:

- What was the most useful resource/assignment for the course and why?
- What problems, if any, did they have with the use of the online learning tools? Either “operator error” or “designer-error?”
- What did they notice about the course that you think might be changed in some way? You can add your own comment here to get them started, saying. Here is one thing I noticed....
- Were they ready for the course content? What might have helped if they were not?
- Open question — other suggestions or recommendations

This informal feedback can be in a separate place on the course site, and again be quite unstructured. The goal is for ongoing updating and quality enhancement of the course experiences for faculty and learners.

Closing Thought

The last few weeks of a course can be some of the most stimulating and creative learning time as learners are putting it all together. So prepare a special coffee or other favorite beverage or music and enjoy your students and their dialogue at this time.

Notes and References

Allen, D. (2002). *Getting things done: The art of stress-free productivity*. New York, New York. Penguin.

Schmier, L. (2006) Ending the semester. Posting to Professional & Organization Development Network in Higher Education (POD) Listserv on October 31, 2006. Retrieved June 15 2009 from <https://listserv.nd.edu>.

Note: These Online Teaching tips are for faculty who are teaching online in Rider University's College of Continuing Studies [CCS]. These tips are part of an ecoaching service from Judith V. Boettcher at ecoach@designingforlearning.org. More tips are at <http://www.designingforlearning.info/>. Contact Judith with questions, requests to review your courses, and any other requests focused on providing the best teaching and learning experiences possible for Rider faculty and students.