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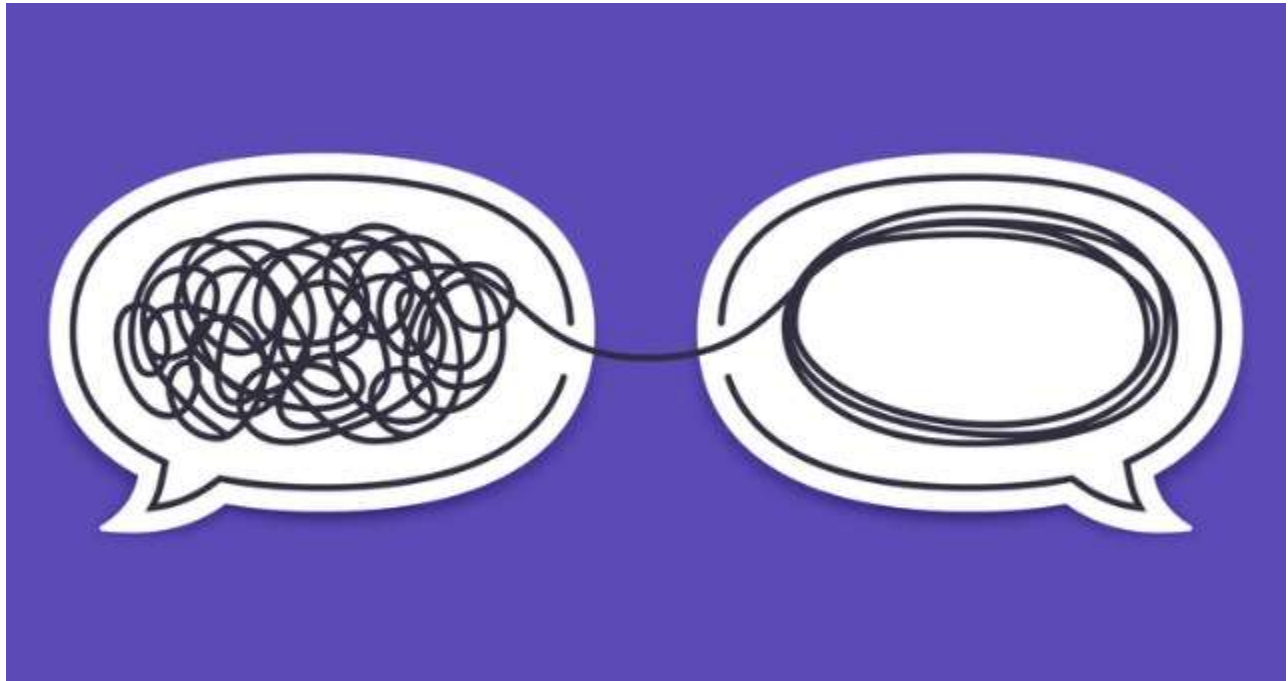
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Boosting Student Motivation Through Connected Reflection

- February 15, 2021
- [Gillian Parrish, MFA](#)



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. And this year, our reflection comes in time of global crisis—all the more reason to reflect on what matters most in our lives and our students’ lives, in our communities, and in our teaching and learning within our courses.

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 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.

Let’s pause here for a moment to reflect on student feedback on their learning experiences this past year. A recent survey about teaching and learning at my small, midwestern liberal arts university highlighted a few key themes we might keep in mind: the need to boost student motivation to provide chances for metacognition in order to cultivate self-directed learning, **and students’ need for meaningful learning.**

We might think of meaningful learning as a tree. Our course material, our textbooks, our tests, and discipline-**specific learning tasks are branches of the tree of our students’ time at our** university. We might then think of the roots as the deeper curriculum. The cultivation of those key habits—habits such as learning and creating—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 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.

Outlined in this article 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 need to remember to integrate them. The two to five minutes of class/homework time these activities take makes a real difference in the quality of student engagement and learning.

A frequent remark on the survey showed that students have been struggling in their motivation to fulfill their course obligations. It is always our job to generate interest. Motivation, like assessment, like learning, like anything alive, is an ongoing process. We have an opportunity 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. 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.

Seven ways to facilitate motivation, metacognition, and a learning community

There are three benefits to using 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 a strong learning community as students share their reflections aloud in class or in our discussion boards.

1. Weekly challenges and support in learning

Rather than just a general, “How was your week?” ask a question each week in which students identify challenges and different 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, this way the class learns with them and they own what they learned all the more. 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 topics 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, and with their possible future work, as well as with social issues and 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 question from a global leadership class during a unit on communication skills: Are there relationships where you could strengthen your listening skills to help transform your teamwork?

3. Course-focused, weekly, check-in assignment reflections and 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 or a new approach? How can you make those changes?

4. Intentions and goals

The 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. The focus on areas of motivation helps guard against our assignments being seen as busywork. (And in our own fearless, pandemic-**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/unit of the course, or this particular learning activity, meaningful? How will it help you (the student) in your future career? How will it help you in your current life—say in other courses, projects you are keen to try, even in your current jobs?

5. Metacognitive midterm and 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 LMS is central to the course, as it is for most 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 a previous Faculty Focus article, “[Transforming Midterm Evaluations into a Metacognitive Pause.](#)”**

6. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a big tent of techniques ranging from gratitude lists that keep our mindset positive to breath work that resets attention for learning. Mindfulness activities at the beginning of class work well to help students refocus their learning. This does not include **icebreakers such as, “How was your weekend?” Rather, this is a purposeful activity to refresh** harried students and reset their attention towards learning. During the initial shock of the pandemic, taking two to three minutes to ask students to share a gratitude or a vicarious joy **(an underdeveloped capacity of happiness at others' happiness) helped my students reduce** their distractions, and refocus and gather themselves individually and as a group. Student feedback was strongly favorable citing improvements to their mood at the end of a long day, increased ability to focus, and a stronger sense of learning community, which improved the overall quality of class discussions. You can find support for integrating mindfulness at the [Center for Contemplative Mind in Society](#).

For all of the above:

How to plan this? Just choose two or three areas that you rotate throughout the semester and tailor to your course material each week. You only need to throw out one question at a time, after all. Students love sharing this stuff, and they all benefit from the chance to reflect on their studying and learning processes, gaining insights from the instructor and from each other. These kinds of brief moments in class discussion (online or in-person) build a thriving learning community and cultivate more motivated and self-directed learners.

Gillian Parrish, MFA, is an inveterate teaching-geek and an assistant professor and program director in the MFA Writing Program at Lindenwood University.