



Class Adjourned: The Importance of Ending Well

SPEAKERS

Julia Metzker, Tierney King, Karynne Kleine, Cynthia Alby, Stephanie Delaney

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. We always talk about the beginning of the course and setting the tone. But what about the end of the course? How do you make your course memorable? How can you make an end of project meaningful? So today, we'll look at it from multiple perspectives. First, we'll look inward and outward and ask ourselves pertinent closing questions. Next, we'll look at how an end-of-semester service learning project can make students feel empowered and feel as if the classwork they're doing is meaningful. And then last, I'll read an article from Maryellen Weimer about a learning moment and how it impacted her students from the first day until the last day. You may think the first day is the most important day, but that last day and how students feel walking out your classroom is just as important. To start, Carolyn Zehnder, Karynne Kleine, Cynthia Alby, and Julia Metzker will talk about how you can create a memorable course finale.

Julia Metzker 01:13

Have you had a great semester with a group of students only to have that semester end with everybody sitting in a large, quiet room frantically writing out answers on a final exam? Or have you ever had a great semester with a group of students only to have that semester end with students submitting a project on an LMS link or silently sliding a paper underneath their office door? Or have you ever had a great semester with a group of students and feeling exhausted, underappreciated, and even antagonistic towards students? Any of these options is a poor way to enter course that you've spent so much time and energy on. We are big fans of Priya Parker's excellent book, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. In this book, Priya puts forth seven guidelines for intentionally constructing a wonderful gathering. We think that these seven guidelines can be applied to courses in a variety of ways. But here we're going to focus on the last one ending well, because how we end shapes people's memories and sense of meaning.

Karynne Kleine 02:25

Parker informs us that ending well has two phases. In the first phase, looking inward, you focus on what has just transpired. In the complimentary second phase, the focus is on is outward, turning your gaze outward. As we separate and retake our places in the world, applying Parker's notion of inward

outward, here are some simple tips to help you make that in out shift at the end of a course. More generally, probably all of us have used written reflections before in order to encourage looking inward. You might have prompts such as who were we together? What mattered? What learning are we most proud of? Or what events, values, and emotions do we want to remember where we changed, and if so, how? After students spend time writing, then they would share their responses aloud. Of course, you might also use the written reflection for looking outward. Here, students might respond to, what in this world do I want to bring into my other worlds? The written reflection is an easy thing to do. It's also easy to take a baby step with your final exam. If you're using a traditional final exam, you might tweak it to include some encouraging words in the directions. Such as, this is an opportunity to show what you've learned, or as I've written at times, encouraging students to remember that you are well prepared, so be confident. Those small minor changes take the focus off of failure and help students become more confident in what they are doing.

Cynthia Alby 04:23

One thing you might want to do is simply have a celebration. You could have a playlist related to the course theme, maybe some snacks, decorations. Even just party hats is enough to lend that air of celebration. Collages also are just really wonderful ways to end anything because it allows people to contribute and think about visually, how to represent what they've learned. So it's possible to have a collage that's created, real or virtual, where each student contribute one piece. And so they each have their piece, they are assembled into this lovely whole. And then what's great is that you can take a photo of that and send it to everyone so that they have that memory and they feel like their contributions are acknowledged. But it's also possible to have each student create their own collage. And when I've done that, I simply asked students to create one slide on their laptop, that is this collage of maybe words, quotations, photos, images, and they assemble them. And then everyone's laptop is just open throughout the room, and we do a walk through and people admire one another's work, I usually hand out some post it notes so that students can write little notes to one another. It's just a lovely way to end the semester.

Julia Metzker 05:59

I am going to quote Priya Parker's words about ending a gathering. And as I read this, quote, consider how these words might help you understand those last moments. "So you've issued your last call, people have been primed to think about the end and the event is winding down. How do you actually close? A strong closing has two phases corresponding to the two distinct needs among your guests looking inward, and turning outward. Looking inward is about having a moment to understand, remember, acknowledge, and reflect on what just transpired, and to bond as a group one last time. Turning outward is about preparing to depart from one another and retake your place in the world.

Tierney King 06:44

In addition to inward and outward reflection, you may also execute a final project for your class. But how do you relate it to your students? How do you create a final project that makes your students feel empowered, and has them walk away from your course feeling as if they made a difference with their work? In this program, Stephanie Delaney explains how you can create a meaningful service learning project for your online course.

Stephanie Delaney 07:08

So let me talk a little bit about those different elements of a Call to Action Project. So students can pick any topic that's related to the class. For example, I used to teach a comparative environmental studies class, and students could pick any environmental topic. Students might pick recycling or global climate change, and then they would choose a call to action. For example, if they picked recycling, their call to action might get be to get people who don't typically recycle to start recycling, just something super simple like that. Or maybe they do it in their workplace, which makes it super easy because they're already at work, they have a captive audience. So maybe the call to action is to get people to recycle at work. And then the instructor sets the timelines and other parameters. So you might have a deadline for when they need to make a proposal, a deadline for when they need to have people made the call to or answered the call to action, and a deadline for turning in their results. And we'll talk about all of these different pieces as we go along. And my favorite part about the Call to Action Project is that any outcome is a success. If people heed the call of action, yay, you know, more people are recycling. If people don't keep the call to action, it's really a learning experience for the student and how hard it is to get people to do things, even if those things are good things. So either way, it's a learning experience for the student, and any outcome is a success. Let's talk about each of those elements in turn. So the first thing you do is have the students pick a project. And you can give any sorts of guidelines you want for the project. You could have it as I always do have it have something at least remotely related to the course. But you could also have it be completely wide open and just be pleasantly or interestingly surprised with what your students present to you. But I generally give a guideline like it needs to, to be related to the class that helps sometimes when you have too much space for thinking it makes it even harder to make a decision. So providing a little bit of boundaries and barriers can be helpful for the students in selecting an example or in selecting a project. But you also want to give some examples that would work. So when I do the service learning project in the comparative environmental studies class, I always give at least three examples of projects that students have successfully done in the past. One of them is recycling. And you shouldn't be surprised when many students choose projects that are quite similar to your examples. So make sure your examples are things that you're perfectly happy to read projects about. You want to give the students examples, though, because most of them haven't done a service learning project before, it's difficult for them to wrap their heads around it. It's also hard for them to know what sort of ask is a realistic ask, you know, when they're doing that call to action, what makes sense to people, as far as as far as what, what people can get done during the time of the project, the next step in the process is choosing the audience. Now, when they've selected their topic, who are they going to do it for? So continuing with our example of recycling, if the call to action is going to be I want to get more people to recycle, who are the people? I always require that the the audience be a community audience. Now, what does community mean? I've defined community for the students to be out people outside of their intimate circle outside of their family, their immediate friends, and include at least 15 people. And so that sort of requires students to go out a little further than their immediate household. The next step is to choose a call to action. And I define a call to action to my students is asking someone to do something, it's that simple. Ask someone to do something. So again, going back to our example of recycling, you're asking your audience and let's let's just pick our, our work companions, the people in our workplace, we're going to try to get the folks in our workplace to recycle more. So our ask might be to stop throwing away all of your garbage, but instead separate out the recyclables and put them in the recycle bin that we will provide. Or it may be even more targeted, please put your recyclable bottles in this bin, instead of throwing them away. So those that's asking

someone to do something, now they need to be able to follow up. And in a workplace, that's usually pretty simple. Maybe the follow up is just looking and seeing, you know, is the recycle bin filling up with bottles or not, or, or other recyclables. And or they may have and or they may have a little survey that they asked people at the end of the term of the project.

Tierney King 12:37

Whether you decide to do a service learning project, a reflection or something else to bring your course to an end, just know that students remember the learning that happens throughout your course. And they bring that with them to the very last day. As a podcast host, I always enjoy hearing the techniques and stories that others have to share. I'm definitely not a huge fan of taking over the podcast with my narration, but today, I want to share a story on how learning moments can impact both the beginning of a class and the end of a class. Something as simple as throwing out a chair may live in your students memories for the rest of their lives. And give them that inward thinking of what do we want to remember? What changed us? Maybe it's as simple as a chair. So the following story I'm about to read was written by Maryellen Weimer who wrote for the teaching professor from 1987 until 2022. She's an absolutely amazing professor, scholar and author. She writes: In the late '90s my institution decided to save money by putting classrooms on a reduced maintenance schedule. My classroom quickly become a mess—garbage can overflowing; bottles, wrappers, and (yes) paper cups scattered about; forgotten books, notebooks, and stray handouts here and there; chairs in disarray; chalkboards dirty; and a stuffy staleness that settled over everything. I started coming to class early so I could pick things up. One morning a student asked me why I cared. "Something important happens here. We learn in this space. It needs to look like a space worthy of the activities we do in it." I carried on about a piece a math teacher had written for The Teaching Professor and how he called classrooms "sacred spaces" because sometimes what's learned in a classroom changes a person for life. The class listened politely but with doubtful faces. One morning after the cleanup I noticed a broken desk in the back row. The tablet top was half off, twisted downward; one leg dangled off the floor. "What is that broken chair doing in here?" I asked to no response. "Will someone please put it out in the hall?" Next class session a student pointed out, "The chair's back." "I see. Please take it out. Learning isn't broken; it's a solid place to sit." But again the chair came back. I left a note for maintenance to no avail, and when I asked the building's custodian to throw it out, he told me he couldn't dispose of school property. Finally, I made the students a proposal: "Anybody want to go with me to the dumpster?" "Sure, sure." And so the whole class followed me out the front door and around to the back of the building. As it landed in the dumpster a hearty cheer erupted. Back in the classroom, there was another discussion about space and how it influences behavior and shapes interaction. "Do you swear in a church?" a student asked. "Or sing hymns in a bar?" added another. Several days later I received a letter from the dean reporting that I'd been seen throwing university property in a dumpster and had been accompanied by students. The letter served notice of that impropriety and forbade further destruction of university property. A copy of the letter was now in my personnel file, where it would stay permanently. I read the letter to the class, partly out of anger but also because I wondered whether something might be learned here. "So, what should I do about it?" Students straightened up in their chairs, hushed but attentive. Then a student answered. "Nothing. We'll take care of it." After class a group of students gathered around him, talking animatedly. There was more activity and discussion before and after the next class. Something was up. A few days later they gave me a copy of the letter they'd written to the dean. "We endorse Dr. Weimer's decision to throw out the chair. It was broken. Her concern about how our classroom looks comes from

how important she thinks learning is and how she wants the learning space to look like important things happen in it. She has changed how we feel about classrooms.” From there it went on to discuss their objections to not having clean classrooms. The letter was signed by everyone in the class. That chair became a learning moment that stretched across that course. It was discussed at length, sometimes in jest; they thought they might learn better in more comfortable chairs. They started seeing its many relationships to learning—boring courses where students carved in the chairs, rows of chairs that make the teacher the most important person in the class. “I don’t sit in classroom chairs the way I used to,” a student observed on the last day of class, and heads around the room nodded, including mine. Whether you’re driving to work, or you just need 15 minute-think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.