CHAPTER SIX

KEEPING THE BALL ROLLING TO A FRUITFUL CONCLUSION

Motivating Your Students to Complete the Semester

Even though this book is intended to focus mostly on how you can successfully *begin* your courses, there is one "post-beginning" challenge you'll almost certainly face with every class you teach — and I would be remiss not to acknowledge and discuss it.

About mid-semester, many students (and sometimes we faculty too!) experience what I call the "mid-semester blahs." If you teach at an institution with the traditional fourteen- or fifteen-week semester, the mid-semester blahs usually hit about the eighth or ninth week. It's the time when many students start to feel tired and unmotivated. A lot of our students are carrying heavy course loads. Additionally, many of them — particularly those at commuter institutions and community colleges — are juggling their work schedules and other family responsibilities. Is it any wonder that they start to get tired before the semester is even close to over? Furthermore, some students may be struggling with the course material, and they may be starting to lose hope.

So I think it's important for us as teachers to see ourselves not only as teachers, but also as *coaches.*

In my "coach" role, I start to give mini "pep rallies" in my classes around mid-semester. I tell the students where we are in the course and how much they've already completed and accomplished. I remind them how many weeks are left in the term and what we still need to accomplish in that time. I offer my services to students who believe they need addi-

tional guidance in meeting the course requirements. I look over students' work, what they've completed, deadlines they may have missed, and grades they've earned. I try to speak with students privately if they've missed some assignments, or if they're not demonstrating mastery of the material. I ask these students to tell me how they prepare for exams, and to share with me where they see problems. I often make suggestions concerning study tips and test preparation to help these students persist and succeed. Very often, a simple suggestion — such as, "Why don't you try studying with a partner who is doing well in the course?" — will turn things around.

Mid-semester is a good time to try using a CAT — a *classroom assessment technique*, which I described in Chapter 1. You can ask students to respond anonymously to one or two questions concerning how they're doing in your course so far. Some examples:

- So far, what teaching strategies are working best for you?
- What would you like to see more of in this course? less of?
- What do you like best about the course so far? least?
- Is there anything you're struggling with in this course?
- Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the course?

Although it would be understandable for you to feel a little threatened by an exercise like this one, my colleagues and I have found that when we try it, the results often energize the students and the course. Students are very interested in the overall class results whenever we use classroom assessment techniques. You can briefly summarize and present those results, using an overhead projector, in the class following the one in which you've collected the data. Students listen very carefully for their own words, and they're intrigued to learn what their classmates have said. This kind of exercise will give you important information about what is and is not working in your class, allowing you to modify, shift, or tweak what you're doing. Additionally and equally importantly, the activity will empower your students. You'll send the message that you care about how they're doing in the course, and that you're open to making changes for their benefit.

The Role of Writing Exercises in Keeping Students Engaged, Promoting Critical Thinking Skills, and Fostering Learning

What pedagogical strategies will help us sustain our students' interest in the course, and at the same time help them become more critical thinkers? In Chapter 4 I discussed the *interactive* classroom. I suggested ways to make

lectures more interactive, strategies to make discussions more participatory, and group techniques to get students working collaboratively. Here, I expand on those strategies to explore the role of writing exercises in teaching your students to become more critical thinkers, and in keeping them engaged in your course.

Richard Light's (1992) *Harvard Assessment Seminars* report found that the relationship between the amount of writing for a course and a student's level of engagement with that course is stronger than the relationship between student engagement and any other course characteristic! Writing and student engagement are more strongly correlated than, for example, class size and student engagement, or student engagement and the reason(s) *why* a student has chosen a particular course. Clearly this relationship among writing, student engagement, and commitment to a course tells us how important writing is in keeping students "connected." If writing served no other purpose than to keep our students engaged, I'd still be motivated to use writing strategies. As it turns out, though, writing does far more.

Cognitive psychologists discuss the intimate relationship between thinking and writing. Their research tells us that language and writing not only reflect thinking, but also help to shape and influence thinking as well. The relationship between thinking and writing is circular in that, as our writing becomes clearer, so does our thinking — and as our thinking becomes clearer, so does our writing. Goodkin (1982, 1) says:

> Writing acts as an intermediary in *all* facets of learning by means of a variety of operations to accommodate diverse learning styles. ... Writing in content areas can help assimilate new material into a network of existing knowledge.

The results of Goodkin's extensive research — research in which she studied the uses of writing for both students and faculty, and for both personal and instructional purposes — are quite illuminating. She found that the range of the uses of writing for thinking and learning is even more expansive than previous literature had suggested. She noted that teachers assign writing tasks to help their students summarize, paraphrase, comment, focus, think through, clarify, analyze, solve, synthesize, speculate, infer, and abstract. The students in Goodkin's studies, meanwhile, said they wrote to improve their intellectual skills, to remember, to review, to outline, to take notes, to translate ideas into their own language, to understand, to reflect, to create word pictures, to clarify, to ask questions, to organize thoughts and material, to classify, to differentiate, to document, to think analytically, to interpret, to integrate, to synthesize, to test themselves, and to take examinations.

Goodkin's research demonstrated that writing forces both us as faculty and our students to think, and that it intensifies our concentration. Writing, she concluded, can stimulate further thought, sharpen the writer's powers of observation and awareness, and serve as a tool for making intellectual connections. Additionally, she showed that writing represents a personal search for meaning.

As college faculty, we seem to be universally committed to teaching our students to sharpen their critical thinking skills as they're learning the content of our particular disciplines. Writing is obviously a necessary skill in and of itself when it comes to successfully navigating the world. But writing is also so interwoven with the development of critical thinking skills that effective teaching must include writing components. If you're burdened with very large classes and heavy teaching loads, and perhaps research responsibilities as well, you may be reluctant to add writing components to your classes. If that's the case, you can still assign your students tasks that involve writing but that don't necessarily have to be graded. You *can* get your students writing more, in and out of your classes, to help them improve their writing skills, sharpen their critical thinking abilities, and engage in your course — all without substantially increasing your workload.

How? Here are several "rules of thumb" for building some *brief* writing exercises into your courses:

- Identify and clarify a writing task for your students.
- Make the task concrete and challenging.
- Add a persona or an audience for the assigned task. (Example: "Pretend you were a woman activist in 1919, and write a treatise on the right of women to vote for a male Congress.")
- Review cue words and phrases (see below) and define terms for your students.
- Produce, in writing, a clear, precise, and concise statement of the task you're assigning.

In your written statement for the assignment, use cue words and phrases and define what they mean. Some examples:

- *Analyze* Examine the parts of...
- *Compare and contrast* Discuss the similarities and differences...
- *Illustrate: Give* examples...
- *Paraphrase* State in your own words...
- *Explain* Give reasons for...; account for...

- *Describe* Give details using visual words... (e.g., "the sun was unusually *bright*")
- *List* Give a series of...
- *Identify* Point out...
- *Define* State the meaning of...

Here's an example of a writing assignment for an introductory psychology course; it uses some of the rules of thumb described above. In this case, the assignment could be for an exam or a paper:

> Compare and contrast — that is, point out the similarities and the differences between — *classical* and *instrumental* conditioning. In the first paragraph, state the general similarities and differences; the rest of your paper should deal with the specifics about each type of conditioning. Your paper should be four to five paragraphs. In your last paragraph, please sum up the most important aspects of both types of conditioning. Keep your classmates in mind as your audience as you write. You may find it useful to first outline your answer by making two columns — one for classical conditioning and one for instrumental conditioning — and listing important features of each type of conditioning under the appropriate heading.

If this is a paper you're assigning students to write at home, you could add:

> Your paper must be typewritten and double-spaced. Since your answer should be four or five paragraphs, your paper should not exceed two pages. After writing your first draft, please read it aloud; proofread for spelling, grammar, and accuracy, and then rewrite as many drafts as you need. Please hand in a carefully proofread final copy.

The following are some suggestions for other writing exercises you may want to consider. Some are grade producing and some are not. Some can be used in class, while others are best used as out-of-class assignments. Some are brief, "one-shot" exercises, while others are ongoing. (Note: The ideas come from the work of Goodkin [1982] and Parker and Goodkin [1987]; suggestions from faculty on our Writing Across the Disciplines committee here at Mercer County Community College; Valde [1997]; and the work of participants in Parry's [1990] project.):

Journals — Journals can be used in many disciplines, and in a variety of ways. Keeping a journal can help students learn more about themselves, since journal writing encourages self- reflection and introspection. Journals can help students solve problems and articulate their points of

view. They can be private (for the student's eyes only), shared only with you, or shared with other students.

Notetaking — Convince your students to become effective notetakers, since taking notes helps them stay focused on the class and the act of writing helps them learn and retain material. Encourage your students to update, outline, revise, reorganize, and paraphrase their notes after each class as part of their overall learning process. (One brief, in-class writing exercise that works well is to have your students summarize, in writing, their own notes from the last class meeting.) It might also be helpful for you to spend a few minutes early in the semester teaching students how to take notes. (At the end of this chapter you'll find a "Taking Effective Notes" handout that you can adapt or use as is with your students.)

Reaction papers — *Reaction papers* allow students to first summarize factual information, and then make personal, evaluative comments about that information. Students must go through a process whereby they first learn the "facts," then do some reasoning, and, finally, draw some conclusions. You can have students write reaction papers to in-class films, to lectures on campus, or to their reading assignments for the course.

Reading reaction papers — Valde (1997) uses this phrase to describe an assignment in which students respond, in writing, to an assigned reading outside of class and prior to the class in which the reading will be discussed. The reaction papers are then used in class to promote student participation, with all students selecting and sharing ideas from their papers. With respect to the class in which the students discuss the assigned reading, Valde's research (student surveys) and his own observations showed that the technique is useful in promoting timely reading of assignments, greater student participation, and a higher level of discussion. Students say they have a more positive experience as well.

Define a concept — During class, ask students to define a concept in writing. Then have them share their definitions with each other as a class.

Write an opinion — Ask students to write their opinions on a controversial topic related to your course content. Then, have them share their statements in dyads, in small groups, or as a class.

Summarize — Toward the end of a class meeting, have students summarize, in writing, the class discussion that has taken place. Then have them read their summaries, either to close the class session or to open the next class session.

Write a description — Ask students to write a description of a process or to define a system related to your course. Have them start with specifics and then move toward generalizations.

Write questions — Ask students to write questions they have that have been stimulated by their assigned readings, and to then bring those questions to class. You can use the students' questions in a number of ways. At the beginning of the course, for example, you could ask students to skim the chapters of the textbook at home and bring to class index cards (which you supply) with questions written from each chapter. You could then read students' questions and discuss them with the whole class. Another approach is to have students work in brainstorming groups to generate questions for essay exams or research projects.

Relate a topic — Ask students to write about how a topic relates to their own experience. Once again, you can have them share their responses in dyads, in small groups, or with the whole class.

Interpret a concept — At the beginning of a class meeting, ask your students to write their interpretations of a particular concept. Then, following class discussion of the topic, have them write revised interpretations toward the end of the class session. The revisions can be shared aloud in class to end the period.

Peer critiquing — When a homework essay is due, divide your class into groups of three students each. Explain the meaning of "peer critiquing" — tell students they'll be offering constructive feedback to each other concerning their writing — and have the students act alternately as either the reader/writer or as one of the two "critiquers," in the following way:

- Each student reads his/her paper aloud twice.
- During the first reading, the critiquers merely *listen* to what's being said.
- During the second reading, the critiquers make comments (in writing) according to the following format:

Think/write/share in a pair, then discuss — To facilitate meaningful discussion of your chosen material, ask your students to think about the topic and write about it privately for a couple of minutes. Then, have each of them share what they've written with a nearby partner. Next, ask the students to either read what they've written to the whole class or to simply speak about it without reading it verbatim. Whichever variation you try, having students first think about the issue, write privately about it, and then share their thoughts with one other person usually enhances the quality of the overall discussion.

Other Active Learning Exercises to Help Your Students Persevere

In addition to writing exercises, there are many other activities that will help motivate your students to complete your course successfully. The following classroom techniques, used as presented or modified to meet your specific goals, will enliven your classroom atmosphere to promote active learning:

Role playing — Role plays work in a variety of contexts and disciplines. Basically, you ask students to volunteer to play the roles of characters who will demonstrate an event or a concept. Some of the many possible examples include:

- Re-enactments of trials, with a defense and a prosecution (for criminal justice courses).
- A combined case study/role play in which students are given some information — for example, data on homelessness, the educational system, or racism in America — and they then play various roles (for political science, sociology, education, or history courses).
- Having students play the roles of therapist and patient after they've studied various therapeutic theories and techniques (for abnormal psychology courses).

"Fish Bowl" — To enliven classroom discussions, improve students' listening skills, and keep students tuned in, ask the students to sit in two or three concentric circles, depending on the size of your classroom. Allow each student from the inner circle to speak on the chosen topic for a limited time. Then, allow members of the inner circle *only* to ask questions and make comments. Finally, have students from the next circle summarize what's already been said, and then add their own questions and comments, and so forth.

"The Power of Two" (adapted from Silberman 1996) — This exercise is aimed at helping students recognize the potential of synergy when they put their heads together to solve a problem or answer a question. Once again, start by asking the students to think and write about your chosen topic privately. Then pair students together and ask them to compare their responses. (Note: If you want to, you can assign different questions to each pair.) Next, have the pairs create new responses to the question(s), using and improving their original responses. Once all of the pairs have revised their responses, reconvene the whole class and ask the students to share their comments with their classmates.

Panel discussions — Faust and Paulson (1998) note that the *panel discussion* is a great way to have groups of students make presentations based on what they've learned together. Simply give teams of students a topic to research, then have them present their findings to the class. (Note: This technique could also include the *jigsaw technique*, which I discussed in Chapter 4.)

Debates — When your subject matter lends itself to opposing views and multiple perspectives, Faust and Paulson (1998) propose that you use the *debate* form of panel discussion. In this format, you assign students to teams that will defend their various positions. One team presents arguments in support of its position, and the other teams are then allowed time for rebuttal. The original presenters may then respond to the rebuttal(s).

Problem-solving groups and blackboard work — This active learning activity encourages cooperative participation. As importantly, it also helps students avoid the embarrassment of being sent to the blackboard — alone — when they don't know the solution. Simply send *teams* of students to the board to determine the solution to a problem together. (Note: This activity works especially well in problem-solving courses in disciplines like mathematics, engineering, science, and technology [Springer et al. 1998].)

Invite a guest speaker to class to conduct a "press conference" — Silberman (1996) suggests an innovative way to turn a guest speaker engagement into an active learning experience. When you book a speaker who has particular expertise in your discipline, prepare your students by explaining what a press conference is like. Tell the students to prepare questions on the topic as a journalist would. Then, have the speaker prepare a few brief comments on the topic before opening the session to questions from the students.

Drawing the Semester to a Positive Close

In his book on active learning exercises, Silberman (1996) discusses strategies we as faculty can use to help our students understand and retain the information from our courses. According to Silberman, many faculty attempt to teach new material right to the very end of their courses, believing they have so much material to cover that they can't possibly spend any time reviewing and wrapping up. Silberman suggests that students will understand and retain more information, however, if we give them time to consolidate what they've learned.

There are many active learning activities we can use for this purpose, thus helping our students bring closure to the class and plan for their fu-

tures. Silberman categorizes these strategies under four headings: *reviewing strategies*, *self-assessment*, *future planning*, and *final sentiments*. The following examples are adaptations from each category (Silberman 1996, 158-189):

Reviewing strategies

- Put an outline of the topics covered in your course on the blackboard or on an overhead transparency. For each topic, ask the students a series of questions that relate to the topic. You can conduct a whole-class discussion of the questions, or you can use any of the techniques mentioned previously in this book — for example, think/write/ pair/share (this chapter) or the *modified focus group* technique described in Chapter 4.
- As a class, agree on the key concepts, names, and events covered in the course. Create a list on the blackboard. Ask the students to work in teams to develop a crossword puzzle. Tell them they can darken boxes and/or use fillers (easy, everyday knowledge that isn't part of the course content) in order to complete the puzzle. When students finish their puzzles, collect them and make copies of them. You can then give the students copies of each other's puzzles to complete.
- Create an activity similar to the TV game show "Jeopardy," in which students respond individually, or "College Bowl," in which students work in teams. Ask students to answer review questions based on course material.
- Faust and Paulson (1998) suggest *active-review sessions*. Contrary to the traditional review session, in which the instructor poses questions and students try to answer them, in an active-review session students work in teams to find solutions to questions posed by the instructor. A variation could have students working in teams to develop the review questions as well.

Self-assessment

- Near the beginning of your course, ask your students to write down their goals and expectations for the course. You can prod students with questions like these:
  - What do you want to gain from this course in terms of knowledge and/or skills?
  - What questions do you have about the subject of this course?

- What are your hopes and concerns with respect to this course?

Collect and save the students' responses. Then, at the end of the course, return them to the students and ask them to assess whether they've met their goals. Ask the students to think and write about what they've found most interesting in the course, what they've found most difficult, and what they might be able to use in the future. Discuss their responses as an entire class.

- Ask your students to write about what they've learned from the course — for example, new information and new skills. Ask them if they've improved in any skill area, if they've developed a new interest in any area, and if they've gained new confidence in a particular skill. Then, ask them to form four-person groups so that they can fill a large piece of newsprint with their collective learnings. Have them tape their respective sheets to the classroom walls, then walk around the room looking at each other's work. When they see something they've learned listed on another group's sheet, they can make a check mark next to the item(s).

Future planning

- To get students thinking about how they might keep learning beyond your course, ask them to form four-person groups and brainstorm what they can do to remember what they've learned and learn even more on their own. Students generally realize that they can periodically review their notes and readings; teach what they've learned to someone else; create a reading list for the future; continue reading articles in newspapers, magazines, and journals that relate to the subject matter; and take another course in the discipline.
- To give students an opportunity to create reminders of what they've learned in your course, ask them to create small signs (which they can attach to their refrigerators, doors, desks, or bedroom walls) reflecting what they've learned. After they've made their signs, the students can form four-person groups to share their ideas with each other. You can then reconvene the class and discuss the groups' creations.

Final sentiments

- Put (on the blackboard or the overhead projector) several sentence-completion statements that have positive themes. Some examples:

- What I liked most about this course was...
- I learned that...
- I re-learned that...
- What I most appreciated was...
- What I learned that will be most useful to me in my life is...
- What I will miss most about this class is...
- The classmate I most appreciated was _____ because...

Have the students write down their responses. After a couple of minutes, ask them to each share their responses with a partner. Then, have them share their responses back in the large group.

- For classes in which your students have really bonded with each other, ask the students to stand in a large circle. Have a small ball in your hand. As the instructor, you can start the exercise by sharing who and what you most appreciated in teaching the class. Then toss the ball to a student, who will do the same. That student tosses the ball to another student, and so forth, until everyone has had an opportunity to speak.
- Give students blank sheets of paper and ask them to write their most memorable positive moments from the class. Ask them to think about active learning activities they enjoyed, films they appreciated, and class discussions that were particularly enlightening to them. After the students have completed their own lists, you can create a class list on the blackboard or on an overhead transparency. (Note: You may want the students to first share their lists with nearby partners so that there is energy in the room and students are more willing to speak before the whole class.)

A Never-Ending Challenge

No matter how great of a "beginning" you create in a particular course — hopefully by using some of the strategies outlined throughout this book! — you'll never be able to completely avoid the "mid-semester blahs," or the responsibility of ensuring that your students stay energized for the entire term. Hopefully, though, the techniques I've outlined in this chapter — whether they involve writing, active learning, or establishing "closure" — will keep you and your students motivated for the entirety of each course you teach, so that the material you cover in your classes stays with the students not just for exams, but for the rest of their lives.

Taking Effective Notes

Instead of trying to write down everything your instructor says, listen carefully and make notes of:

- Key words, definitions, and phrases.
- Ideas that are repeated and emphasized.
- Facts and concepts that are written on the blackboard.
- Facts and concepts that appear on overhead transparencies.
- Material shown on a slide or in a PowerPoint presentation

Organize your notes as an outline. Write down major topic headings and then include notes beneath each of them. Indent less-important facts under more-important ones. Put major topics in all capital letters, underline them, or highlight them. Put key terms in boxes. All of these techniques will help you better remember the material.

Allow enough writing space. Leave wide margins or extra space in your notes so that you can write down additional information from your textbook, your own comments and ideas, and any references to your assigned readings.

Study your notes. As soon as you can after class, review your notes to be sure you understand them. If you think you've missed something or you don't understand something, check with a classmate or with your instructor. You might also want to recopy your notes, filling in the gaps and looking for connections among concepts. This technique helps you organize, outline, and understand the material better, and it helps you remember your notes. Reviewing your notes every day is a terrific study strategy.

Outline your notes using index cards. Write the key concepts on 3x5 cards, which you can then use as flash cards for studying purposes.

Review your notes frequently. If you study your notes after each class session, and your reading assignments as well, you'll be well prepared for your tests. The way memory works, we usually remember the beginnings and endings of things better than the "middles." One trick to make the middle less muddled is to make it the end and the beginning! In other words, when you study your notes, start at the beginning sometimes and read them to the end. At other times, start from the beginning and quit reading in the middle so that the middle becomes the end. And at still other times, read your notes from the middle to the end so that the middle becomes the beginning.

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