



Reenergize ¹

Source Unknown

Is your energy level dropping? Do you feel burdened with too much work and too little time to do it? Do you sense that your students are becoming lethargic? Then you and your students may be experiencing midcourse droop--an insidious yet common syndrome. Why? When enthusiasm wanes, the ability to cope with stress decreases and the joy of teaching is sometimes lost. Thoreau reminds us that "None are so old as those who have outlived enthusiasm." "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm," says Emerson.

At registration time, energy levels were high as you and your students envisioned the mountaintop of growth and possibilities inherent in the learning experience to come. Now at or near midterm the storm clouds of academic and personal problems may have obscured the summits of success.

Midcourse letdown strikes students when they have underestimated the time required to learn the content of your course. Or when poor time management skills cause them to delay the completion of major assignments until the deadline approaches and panic sets in. Disappointments occur when students fail to achieve the level of success they envisioned. Lower than expected test scores, poorly received contributions to class discussions, rejection by teammates assigned to a group project and the frustration experienced from working with lazy lab partners have taken their toll. What was first perceived as an enjoyable learning adventure may have by midterm become a code-3 struggle for survival.

On the other hand, you may be feeling discouraged because test scores reveal that the class exam averages are much below what you expected. Assignments may have been turned in late or poorly done. You feel that some students seem unable to write clearly and concisely and are exhibiting punctuation and spelling skills. Participation in discussion groups seems to be lackluster, and dozing has become more and more common during your lectures. Furthermore, this group of students seems to be taking twice as long to complete the required lab projects than usual, and in general you feel a bit panicky about how you will ever cover all the required material before finals. If this description fits you, you may have slipped into the quicksand of a mid-semester slump.

Survival experts tell people caught in a bottomless quagmire in the woods to stop struggling -- uncoordinated effort only causes the victim to sink ever deeper. Only by calm, purposeful and coordinated actions can the victims save themselves by swimming through the muck or sand to the safety of a solid shore.

How can you extricate yourself from the ooze of a midcourse sinkhole? Try a REFOCUS strategy. REFOCUS means:

- * **Recognize**
- * **Empower**
- * **Focus**

¹ University of Hawaii, "Dealing with Difficult Behaviors," *Teaching Tips*. Retrieved on April 22, 2010 from <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/energize.htm>.

- * **Objectivize**
- * **Commit**
- * **Unburden**
- * **Surprise**

First, consider that a likely cause of midcourse letdown is a slow change of the thought focus from achievement to deficiency. Each time reality doesn't measure up to an envisioned ideal, emotional energy is drained, self-esteem is lowered and feelings of being in control are diminished. The result is instructor burnout. Here is a prescription that can help you rebuild your enthusiasm:

Recognize

Recognize your achievements thus far. Remind yourself of the lectures that were well organized, delivered and received; the visuals that enhanced understanding of a complex issue; the assignments that sparked critical thinking and the innovative ways in which you activated and involved your students in the learning process. Give yourself a pat on the back for learning all your students' names, staying after class to answer questions, meeting with your students even though you don't have an office and taking the time to develop the individualized feedback designed to help each student improve his or her performance.

Recall the work that your students have completed despite the demands of other classes, a job and perhaps a family. Acknowledge the progress your students have made.

Empower

Create a list of your strengths as a teacher. Are you an excellent communicator, manager, instructional designer or leader? When are you at your best -- leading a discussion, planning a collaborative learning activity, delivering a lecture, or going one-on-one with a student who needs help? Maybe you're an outstanding motivator. List your five greatest personal achievements in the past year. Can you remember how you felt during these moments? Reliving these peak experiences can really empower you to teach with greater enthusiasm and sense of purpose.

At the beginning of the second half of your course, perhaps after spring break, ask your students to begin a class by sharing in a small group setting a personally significant learning experience. Encouraging them to remember and publicly affirm their academic achievements helps motivate and energize learners. Also, many students don't appreciate what they have learned while engaged in the process of reaching an academic goal. Therefore, help your students identify the skills, attitudes and knowledge they have acquired in only a few short weeks or study. For example, many aviation maintenance technology students were gratifyingly surprised when asked to list all the pieces of equipment and tools they could now use as well as the repair and troubleshooting procedures with which they were now familiar. It was then recommended that they update and keep these lists in a folder as data to help them prepare a resume upon graduation. Don't assume that students realize all they have learned or will learn in your course of the value of this education to bettering their lives.

Focus

Concentrate your attention on the material to be learned in the second half of your course and the selection of the most effective teaching style possible. Take a few moments to visualize the students' increased skills and changed behaviors or improved performances that you hope to see at course's end. Take a quick look at your syllabus. Are you on track? Will there be enough time? No? Then you have a management problem. Use a triage system to gain control of the situation. Triage is a strategy used in medicine under emergency conditions to son

patients into treatment categories. The number one priority is to treat those who will benefit the most and who require the easiest treatment. Then move to those who require more difficult treatment but will benefit greatly. Last, attend to those who require difficult treatments and probably won't benefit from it. In other words, in difficult situations work to achieve the highest benefit with the least amount of time and effort.

When course time is short and learning is proceeding slowly, work on the material that will bring the greatest reward with the least effort. Plan to accomplish first the learning tasks that will bring the highest reward for your students. When you assign the easy, important tasks first, you often motivate them to continue working until even more difficult responsibilities are completed. Triage thinking can help you more effectively manage the second half of your course.

Objectivize

In the intervening weeks since you formulated your learning targets or objectives, the stresses and strains of teaching and daily living may have caused you to veer from your original instructional plan. If you have refocused your teaching priorities, it's important to create learning targets to guide your post-midterm efforts. Learning targets are a series of statements that describe levels of performance increases that are required for your students to advance. Some faculty think that only teachers in occupational, technical or professional curricula need to develop performance targets. With today's accent on critical thinking, learning to learn, collaborative processes, total quality management, etc., faculty in humanities, business, fine arts and developmental education could significantly improve learning by teaching for doing rather than just knowing. For example, compare two statistics course sections:

Section A is built with knowledge objectives. The objectives are that "at the end of this course students will know the concepts of central tendency, variability, normal distributions, hypothesis testing and analysis of variance." How does the instructor know that these objectives have been achieved? By grading homework problems, unit tests and a comprehensive final test. Students achieving above 60% pass; those scoring below fail.

Section B is constructed using performance targets. The target statement says that "at the end of this course students will have chosen a random population, created an hypothesis, developed a questionnaire, completed an analysis of variance and presented a final report using a PC and recommended statistical software packages." In this course the instructor not only teaches statistical knowledge but ensures that each student can put this knowledge to practical use in a holistic manner. With this design, learning evaluation can be performance based rather than strictly knowledge based.

Which course would you rather take or teach? Which would be of more value to your students? To energize your teaching, apply performance targets.

Commit

After you visualize your goal and create specific, measurable learning targets for your students, commit to achieving them. To reach your goal you'll need a strong commitment; one that will not waver as you encounter difficulties. In teaching nothing goes completely as planned or as expected. The number of variables in the learning process are too great to permit total control. A staunch resolve enables you to persevere through tough times, and it builds self-esteem. Ask your students to recommit to success in learning. Their initial commitment may have weakened and they need to reenergize for the second half of the course. Remind them of the benefits of making short-term sacrifices to obtain long-term rewards.

To illustrate the point, remind them of the value of priming the pump. An old story illustrates the principle. As the tale goes; old Desert Dan traveled the deserts of the southwest digging wells and installing pumps to aid those traversing the parched sands of this region. Buried beneath each pump he left a full jar of water with instructions on how to use it to prime the pump and thereby obtain all the water a thirsty traveler could want. Each dehydrated passerby who reached one of these watering holes was faced with a difficult decision. Drink the water in the jar and hope that it was enough to sustain life until the next water source was reached or commit this precious resource to pump-priming and the promise of greater reward.

Unburden

You don't have to be perfect; you just have to be yourself. You may hold the expectation that as a college teacher you should know all the answers. Once you accept the fact that successful teachers emphasize the roles of learner, presenter, guide, coach, facilitator, designer, evaluator, manager and leader and minimize the role of expert, you unburden yourself from unrealistic expectations. Then teaching becomes much easier and more enjoyable. Your students will appreciate knowing that you and they are on the same learning path. You have just proceeded farther than your students.

Unburden your students by applying good management techniques to your course. Look for barriers to learning that hold your students back or cause them to devote time to unnecessary work. Question your assignments and tests and align them to your learning targets.

Surprise

During the second half of your course variety is often desperately needed to keep your students motivated. Two surprise teaching techniques are discussed:

1. Tell a story. It is said, "A good story can touch something familiar in each of us and yet show us something new about our lives, our world, and ourselves. Stories can also be powerful tools for growth and learning."

However, there are several things you should consider before choosing to tell stories as a teaching strategy. Before telling a tale experienced storytellers consider these aspects -- purpose, practice and priority.

Purpose. Stories should be used to fulfill a definite instructional purpose. They help students visualize and internalize complex issues or concepts. Anecdotes draw students into the learning process by activating their imaginations.

Practice. Storytelling takes practice to master. Effective communicators practice by developing narratives in three parts: context, challenge and climax. Begin the account by setting the stage; describe when and where it happens and introduce the characters. Next, add the dilemma and explain how each of the characters are affected. Resolve the problem in words that convey the kernel of learning contained in the story.

Priority. There are times when excessive storytelling in classes get in the way of learning. To prevent this situation, prioritize your strategies according to their effectiveness and time-benefit. Brief stories can serve as introductions to units of learning or as mental rest spots during a long lecture. Stories spaced about every 20 minutes work well for many faculty who lecture extensively. Narratives can help you summarize material in a memorable way and enable your students to understand how your course material relates to the "real world."

2. Simulate a crisis. Crisis situations occur in most occupations and students should be prepared to think under pressure. "The Crisis Game" provides an excellent way to explore crisis thinking and introduce the element of surprise into your class.

To play, announce to your class that the red phone has just rung and the president or other authority appropriate to your subject area has requested that a student advisory panel be immediately created to deal with a sudden crisis. (You have previously prepared a handout describing a crisis situation applicable to your course's study material.) Then divide your class into groups of five to eight students.

Explain to them that they will have a limited time (say 30 minutes) to discuss the emergency and prepare a contingency plan to meet it. You may wish to assign roles to group members to facilitate this learning activity.

After ten minutes interrupt the groups and verbally add some additional information that simulates the dynamic environment of crisis situations. About ten minutes before the end of the game declare that because of mounting pressures from the press, the group must complete their plans and participate in a press conference in five minutes. This new time frame increases the pressure on the groups to work quickly.

When the time limit is reached the recorder of each group presents the details of their plan to the entire class. After all plans are shared. It is recommended that students be debriefed about how they reacted to the crisis situation and the added pressures of changing information and compressed time schedules.

Through this game, you can accomplish two goals: (1) help students learn how to better function in emergency situations and (2) review in an intriguing manner critical course materials.

This seven step REFOCUS strategy will help you to reenergize and renew, and it will help you to continue to teach for success!

More material on this topic and other topics can be found in the CTL Library located in the Mason Room at the Smith House.