

## In the Classroom 47

# Tips for Ending the Semester

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**Stan Skrabut:** Well, thanks a lot for taking time to listen to my podcast, it certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things but you're hanging out with me. I really appreciate it. My class is about to end. Matter of fact, it's going to end next week. It has been a wonderful class, but it's now time to think about pulling it all together and shutting it down and getting ready for the next term or the next time I'm going to be teaching the class. That's what we're going to talk about today.

Well, to get started, I'm going to actually borrow from the army. I was hanging out with them while I was in the civil air patrol. One of the things that they used to do that I started to do was called an after actions review. Anytime they had a major exercise, a major event, they would conduct an after-action review. The whole goal was to identify lessons learned and incorporate them into their plans so they can improve their processes, something that's really simple to do.

According to Wikipedia, an after actions review is a structured review or debrief process for analyzing what happened, why it happened and how it can be done better by the participants and those responsible for the project or event. The cool thing is you really don't have to wait until the end of your course to do an after actions review. Matter of fact, you should be doing after actions reviews throughout the course, but we're at the end of the course, so we're going to talk it about right now. There is really a group of things that you're going to focus on.

The first is what happened, what was supposed to happen, what actually happened and why there was a difference? Next, you want to know what worked, what didn't work and why? Finally, what could you do differently next time? When we had a group of people, we'd go around the room a couple of times and talk about what were things that we really liked and we want to make sure that we keep doing? We'd go around the room three times and collect all the items until, obviously, things started repeating. Then we go around the room, what could we do better?

What was something that can improve on? We would do that a couple few times. We'd identify that. How does this apply for your course? Well, I would consider you to sit down and really think about your course from your syllabus, look through all your activities, look through just basically everything you can about your course and think about what was supposed to happen, what really happened and why there was a difference and then what of all those activities did you like and you want to keep, what were some activities that fell flat and that you wanted to improve?

This is a great time to do it because, all this is still fresh in your mind. If you go on break right now, it's really hard to reconstruct all this. I would really look for those pinch points, look for those places that you can make your course better and take time to

improve them right now before you go on break. I know you're bathing at the bay. You want to get out the door. You want to go home. You want to relax, but I would take the time to do it before you left. It will make your life so much easier when you come back and you'll be less stressed because you've taken the time to do this.

Some things that you want to do in order to do that. First of all, blackout your calendar. If you don't have to go to some meetings, don't go. See if you can get out of going to meetings. Higher ed, we do a lot of meetings. I can't say all of them are really useful. If you get a chance and you can control your calendar a little bit, everybody's winding down so all the meetings are coming to an end. If you can really control your calendar, do that. You're going to want to blackout your time to finalize your grading. Grade all those papers. Grade all those things. That's great.

I would also put time on your calendar to do this after actions review and be able to use it as an opportunity to improve what you're doing, what you're going to be doing in the future. Remember, anything that you say yes to, you're saying no to something else. If you want to improve your classes, you need to carve out time, which means you're going to have to not do something else. After actions review, blackout your calendar so you can do these things. This blacking out your calendar should give you an opportunity to also run your checklist.

I strongly recommend having a checklist that you use to start up your courses and use them to wind them down. If you haven't put together a checklist, take time to do it. Create a Google Doc or put something in Evernote that just lists all the things that you want to make sure that you take care of. I'm going to give you some ideas that you should put on this checklist and really just focusing at winding down your class because that's where we're at this moment in time. By having a checklist, this will help you offload a lot of mental processing.

The more that you can offload mental processing allows you to free up your mind to do really important things, keeping it with all that clutter on, "What do I need to do next?" That's just a waste of time and a waste of energy. Build a checklist, offload it. Then the nice thing about the checklist is you can pull it out, dust it off and run it next year and just keep improving it so you have the best wind down you ever had for the end of your term. Here are some things to think about. First of all, finalizing your grades. You have a lot of papers to grade, a lot of exams to grade.

You're going to need to settle in to be able to do this. Some of the things that you're going to want to do, if you figure that you're going to have a large block of time where you're going to have to focus on this is, stock up on necessary beverages and snacks so you can at least be comfortable while you're doing this. I would also invest in TextExpander. I've talked about this in a previous episode and I will put that in the show notes. TextExpander is a force multiplier. I was recently grading papers and I ended up saving about eight to nine hours in that whole grading process because I used TextExpander.

It allows you to use shortcodes and those expand into Midi feedback that you can share with your students. It's worth investing into. Also, run a Pomodoro timer. Basically, it's just a timer. I set mine for 42 minutes and then I take a five-minute break.

I do that a few times and then I take around a 20-minute break. It is not good to just sit there for continuous multi hours stretches to do your work. You need to get up. You need to get the fluids running through your system, get moving. That will actually help in the grading process and it'll help you do it quicker.

You need time to get away from your desk and just go out for a real quick walk and come back in and dive right back into it, but set these timers to do that. Then also get your music playlist ready to go. I happen to like classic '70s rock and roll. That's what I use when I'm grading. I have that running in the background, not crazy loud, but I have that going and it makes grading a lot more fun. Then once you get down with your grading, immediately get them up into your school system and that way you are done with grading. That's the first thing on your checklist, get your grading done.

Next, send out that last email to your students, finalize email, let them know where they stand in their grades, just put that to bed. With your grade book all completed, download it, make sure that you have a back up of your grade book, set that aside. Next, you're going to want to back up your course especially if you do an online course, just archive that. There is a capability depending on what system that you're using, but all systems have a way that you can back up your course and download it.

That way you can put it on to a backup file system or upload it to Google or something just to set it aside. While you're backing up your content, you should also remind your students to back up their content. Part of that email that you sent them, remind them to go back through the course, grab all the good stuff that they like. That's going to be useful to them, again, back up their content. If you have an opportunity, if you're teaching the same course in the next term, this is a good time to copy all that content into your new course shell so you can start making improvements on it.

Using that after actions review, those things that you identified, this is a great time to be doing that where you can go in and make those updates. Just before you go on break while still fresh in your head, go in and make those changes to your course. Then one of the other things that you should do is update your CV. Go through your past term and see all those things that you did, conferences that you worked on, major projects that you worked on, any research. Just take time to update your CV. Look through your term. See what you need to do.

It just takes a few minutes and you can get that all ready to go. Take a moment to clean up your office. What documents do you need to file away? Let's file away those documents. Let's go ahead and discard anything that you don't need. This means purging old student work that you may have a requirement, that you have to keep things on hand for such period of time but this is now, take that box of all that material for that obsolete term and send it to the shredder and get rid of all that content. While you're cleaning up your office, reclaim any office supplies. Make sense of all the pens, anything that's empty, throw it away.

Notebooks that are empty, throw it away but go ahead and just get things ready. Then while you're filing documents, this may actually be a good time to digitize some of those documents. If you have a capability of scanning documents, taking it down to maybe your copier where you can scan them or where I work, we have a scanner

available to faculty where they could just bring a pile of stuff and scan them to PDF documents, this is a very useful time to do that.

It was really useful when I had to move across the country. I filled up five paper recycling bins for our house. I filled up five of them with documents that I scanned and just discarded after, so something that you want to consider doing. Speaking of digitizing content, taking time to go through your digital filing system. What's supporting your classes, all those different documents, make sure that they're named appropriately so you could easily find them.

Also, just reorganize things so it's going to be more useful in the next term. Those are things that you want to consider when you're cleaning up your virtual filing cabinet and certainly, you may want to back it up. While you're cleaning your office, any library books you got to return, good time to do them now. While you're cleaning up your virtual filing cabinet, email is something that needs to be cleaned up also, archive all those messages. I set up a system where I do things in six months batches.

I have files that I set up for six months of email and so, I get ready for the next term, I build out my systems and I unload mail that I sent and also mail that I received in six month blocks and I put it onto a filing system and just you know, remove it from my email. I have a blog somewhere that talks about that. I'll hunt it out, see if I can get it into the show notes. While you're cleaning up your email, look through things that you really don't want to subscribe to anymore.

We often get onto these lists, they're no longer serving their purpose, so this is a good time to unsubscribe and get off those and make sure that you archive your messages. Also while you're doing it, set up some rules to better process your messages so you can find this information just a little quicker. While you're in your email, this is a great time to write those thank you notes. There's probably a lot of people that helped you have a successful term.

Just taking a few moments writing a note, sending a note out to thank people just a nice gesture and especially, as you're getting ready for the summer or getting ready for winter break, this is just something nice to do. Those are things that are definitely I would put on a checklist so that you can make sure that you knock them out. I will work on putting together a checklist and see if I can attach it to the show notes, so that may be coming.

Before you head out the door, commit yourself to learning something new, learn something new that you can enhance your courses. A new teaching technique, a new use of technology, something and just say, "Okay, for the upcoming term, this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to put that into play." It only has to be one thing but every time you learn one new thing, you build in your toolbox, you build your repertoire, so those those things are really important.

In this episode, we talked about after actions reviews. Going in and spending a little time to understand what was supposed to happen, what actually happened, how you can improve it, things that you you want to keep, things that you want to change out and improve. Making sure that you block out some time on your calendar and then run

your checklist and on your checklist, you're going to be finalizing your grades, sending out email to your students and also those folks that helped you.

Downloading your gradebook, backing up your course, getting your course loaded for the next term and making those tweak to that course. Updating your CV, cleaning out your office and also your virtual office and that requires purging old work, turning in library books, cleaning up your email and lastly, I want you to go out and learn something new. With that, I am going to make a quick plug for my book.