



12-1-2014

# And In The End, the Class You Make Is Equal To... (or, How Did This End So Fast, and How Can I End It Well?)

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## Recommended Citation

Bird, John and Teaching and Learning Center, "And In The End, the Class You Make Is Equal To... (or, How Did This End So Fast, and How Can I End It Well?)" (2014). *The Weekly Reader*. Book 65.

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December 1, 2014  
Volume 6, Issue 13

# The Weekly Reader

*Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC*

## UpComing Sessions

Watch for a new set of sessions in the spring. And remember the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning, January 31, 2015.

**Deadline for proposals extended to December 9, 2014!**

Register at:

<http://www2.winthrop.edu/login/tlc/default.asp>

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## And In The End, the Class You Make Is Equal To ... (or, How Did This End So Fast, and How Can I End It Well?)

How did it become December so fast? What happened to November? Wasn't it early September just a few weeks ago?

Maybe it's just a sign of my advancing years, but the semesters seem to zoom by faster each year. But even my students, all of them substantially younger than I am, have commented on how fast this one went. All that said, the semester is not over yet, and the way we finish it is really important.

I think I may have written this before, but I will repeat it. In one of my other lives, I am a bluegrass mandolin player. One of the things I learned early on when improvising solos is that the most important parts of the solo are the very beginning and the very end. If you start well and end well, the listeners will forgive some of the oddities of the middle parts.

But the ends of solos ("breaks," to a bluegrass) are what I most often mess up on. All

seems to be going well, then the last few notes are a train wreck.

That can happen with our classes, too. In the harried rush to the end, it is easy for us to mess up. We worry that we have not covered all we need to, so we rush through everything that is left, making a mess of all of it. Better, perhaps, to decide what really matters and cover that part well.

With end-of-semester assignments, the students are apt to rush, too, undoing their good work all semester with a bad finish. We give them deadlines, and deadlines are important, but perhaps a bit of flexibility can help them do their best work. I have a deadline next week for the last paper in my CRTW 201 class, but I have told them the deadline is flexible; all they have to do is tell me when they can get the paper done (although with a hard deadline). That bit of leeway lets my students juggle final papers and projects and final exams,

all of which might be due on the same day. A little bit of reasonable flexibility can make all the difference in the world.

We all put a lot of thought and preparation into the first class of the semester, but what about the last class? Rather than being a whirlwind of rushed material, that last class can provide the closure for the course that we and our students need.

All of the ending matters can be suitable ways to put finishing touches on a successful course. At the end, everything should be pointed toward assimilation. Even course evaluations can be part of the assimilation of material. I have found that taking four or five minutes to explain to students how important course evaluations are to the institution and to the instructor helps them take the process more seriously, yielding more thorough and reflective responses. I also tell them that the course evaluation is for them too— a way for them to begin to reflect on

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the course and what it has meant to them.

In classes that I will teach again soon, especially introductory courses, I have found a very good ending exercise to be the writing of a letter to a student in the future. If I have time, 10-15 minutes, I ask my students to write an anonymous letter to a student who will be taking the class next semester or next year. What advice would you give that student? What should they make sure they do, and more importantly, what should they *not* do? Any advice about dealing with crazy old Dr. Bird? More than just a fun ending exercise, this letter is actually a good way for students to take stock of their own experience. And if I have done this with a previous semester's class, they got such a letter early in the semester.

Even the final exam can be an opportunity for closure and assimilation. Rather than thinking of the final as merely the last test, a well-designed exam can give students an opportunity to pull things together one last time. Consider including an open-ended question, even if it is not graded, asking students what is the most valuable thing they learned in the class, which might be content,

but could also be a skill.

Speaking of final exams, I often have students tell me that mine is the only course that is having a final exam during the final exam period. That may or may not be true, but I have noticed during my scheduled exam time that many of the classrooms around me are empty, classrooms that were full for the rest of the semester. We have agreed that we will administer a final exam or other comparable culminating experience *during the scheduled exam time*. Not giving students a final exam during the scheduled period cheats them out of an important learning opportunity, diminishes the integrity of our courses, and violates our agreed-upon policies. If only half of us are using the exam time as it is designed, why do we need an exam period that includes a Saturday? I may take off my TLC hat and put on my Chair of Faculty Conference hat on that one...

Many years ago, when I was teaching at another institution, I had scheduled a review session on Study Day, at the students' request. I had four or five students who told me they could not come because they

had to take a midterm. What? We had a strict policy that no papers or projects could be due that day—it was to be absolutely sacred. And he was giving a midterm exam, on the day before exams started? What?

I could not believe it, so I went to him and asked him. This crazy, impossible, unethical news was true. He gave his students their midterm on Study Day and a final exam a few days later. When I expressed surprise, he started screaming at me. I still remember his red face in the stairwell and the echo of his voice. “You’re messing with my academic freedom!” he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Of course, academic freedom had nothing to do with it. Academic freedom does not mean freedom to do anything we want to do, violating rules and best practices and academic responsibility just because we want to. Academic freedom allows us to speak and write our opinions, but it does not allow us free rein. Along with academic freedom, we also have academic responsibility. We must practice both wisely. Rant mode off. Happy endings! But we have miles to go before we sleep...

## Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

## A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

## Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session  
At  
[www.winthrop.edu/tlc](http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc)

## The 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

The call for papers and presentations for our Second Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015 is posted on the TLC webpage. **Extended deadline for proposals is December 9, 2014.** Come join us for a great day of teaching and learning!  
<http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

## Thought For the Week

"Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example."  
--Mark Twain