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**Subject:** Teaching Toolbox: Returning to Reflection: Finding Value in Student Feedback  
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## **Returning to Reflection: Finding Value in Student Feedback**

**by Joshua Rashon Streeter**

As we close this semester, we could still be in a trial-and-error phase as we figure out how to hold final class meetings and exams. Many of our usual end-of-the-semester rituals may not work as effectively, or at all, in an online learning environment. While we need to continue to adjust our pedagogies to fit our current teaching modality, this moment in the semester also offers an opportunity to consider reflection as a process to measure learning and growth, for both instructors and students. And it may be even more important now, as this specific semester ends, to return to the value of [reflection](#).

There is a lot of focus on building community in a classroom at the start of and throughout the semester, [even online](#), but the way we close a semester is just as critical. One study showed that, of the students surveyed, 90% wanted more closure in their classes ([Eggleston & Smith, 2002](#)). Closure meaning “class-ending activities” that academically and/or emotionally wrap-up and reflect on the course content and semester-long experience; also referred to in the article as “parting-ways strategies” ([Eggleston & Smith, 2002](#)). These closure activities highlight the role reflective practice can have in the learning process. Reflection at the end of the semester allows students to think critically about course components and activities, organize their knowledge, make connections beyond the classroom, and meta-cognitively process the what, how, and why of the course ([Northeastern University](#)), with the hope that they will transfer some of these insights into future learning environments.

At this moment, noting all that you and your students have achieved to pull through this unique semester is something to be applauded. While online teaching can “feel detached, remote, and impersonal” ([Darby, 2020](#)), so much could be said about the ingenuity of teachers and the dedication of students in the past two months. I was astounded to see the care and commitment to learning-centered teaching that happened across JMU’s campus as we all transitioned online. Surely, we will reflect on this semester for years to come, but how might reflection serve us specifically as instructors in this moment? I wonder how we might return to where we were mid-March—not the place, but the mid-semester pedagogical headspace where we re-evaluated what content is important, why we teach the way we do, and what the best aspects of our teaching are. While I’m eager to get back in a physical classroom with students, I hope that there is something to take away from the past few weeks—how we created inclusive spaces for teaching and learning through digital platforms, how we developed and delivered content in new ways that pushed us outside of our comfort zones, and how we prioritized community and connections with our students. These aspects are *as important* as the content we teach, whether we’re online or face-to-face.

Certain online tools (a [word cloud](#), [survey](#), or [poll](#), just to name a few) can help us know what the best aspects of our teaching are, including half a semester of online instruction, albeit unplanned. These methods allow us to hear directly from our students, capturing their perspectives on the

semester. Most importantly, collecting feedback on the student learning experience amid a crisis might also show that we do care about their experience this semester, even if we all know it wasn't ideal. Frequent prompts I use for end-of-the-semester reflection are "What aspects of the course were most valuable to your learning?" and "Describe your most significant learning experience in this course." In recent semesters, I have asked students to identify their "Top 5 Takeaways" or create hashtags that sum up what they will remember long after the course is over.

Additionally, you can utilize an informal discussion with students via a digital conferencing platform (like [WebEx](#)) or even Canvas. This method allows you to begin with a reflection from your perspective as a teacher. Then, you can facilitate a conversation that includes follow-up questions and allows for organic dialogue to occur. Finally, you can end with a thank you and message of gratitude for their willingness to engage. When doing this in my own classes, I set a timer and set some [ground rules](#) before we begin. While this [constructivist method](#) of eliciting feedback might not be comfortable for all instructors or work in all classes, having an open conversation with students provides a different feedback mechanism than a survey. Though not anonymous, a class feedback session is another useful reflection strategy.

While we may be tempted to just toss 'em, course evaluations can still provide valuable information to consider what aspects of teaching worked for students and what to change in future semesters. Student evaluation tools come with much [critique](#) (such as bias and a correlation between a student's expected grade and their evaluation of a teacher's effectiveness), but we might find useful information from students about the online course structure, materials, and delivery methods we used in the second half of the semester in addition to our more "traditional" mode of delivery during January and February. Because end-of-semester course evaluations at JMU may not be used as stringently to evaluate teaching this semester, reading them once the semester is over can provide an opportunity to use these as a [formative assessment tool, rather than a summative assessment](#).

I will be the first to admit this was not a perfect semester and my teaching didn't always go as planned, but I value the ways in which it pushed me to think, create, and perform differently. Reflection helps us celebrate the big and small success each semester brings, in addition to the critical critique (something we are good at as academics). Reflection also helps us strengthen our own teaching as we move into an unknown future, considering what remains and what we will leave behind. This provides us the opportunity to learn from the risks we took and truly engage in a growth-mindset (something we ask our students to engage in daily). Finally, and most importantly, reflection at this time of the semester offers a sense of closure, which is needed for both the students and instructors amid all the changes. As we move forward into the summer, still a very uncertain time, reflection helps us remember that teaching and learning is a relational and reciprocal practice—an aspect that might have drawn you to the classroom in the first place.

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