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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Pre-Course Questionnaires

Date: Thursday, August 18, 2022 11:52 AM

Pre-Course Questionnaires

by Emily O. Gravett

Welcome back, everyone! I will be on leave this semester, but before I go, I thought I'd offer the opening Toolbox of the new academic year. CFI faculty associate Daisy Breneman (brenemdl@jmu.edu) will be managing the process, and serving as acting assistant director of the CFI's teaching team, for the rest of fall.

Most summers for the past several years, I head over the mountain to UVA to support faculty attending their [Center for Teaching Excellence's Course Design Institute](#), which is similar to CFI's jmUDESIGN (actually, ours was modeled after theirs). On the final day of the institute, I'm always asked to talk about a "Getting to know you" questionnaire I assign in each of my courses. I couldn't believe it, but when I looked through past Toolboxes [here](#) and [here](#), I realized I hadn't ever written about this idea for a JMU audience. So, here we go!

Though the timing is variable (sometimes before class begins, through an ungraded Canvas "survey"); sometimes on paper, during class on the first day; sometimes as a homework assignment, submitted as a Word Doc or PDF, within the first few days), I always ask students in my religion courses to fill out a "getting to know you" questionnaire early on. It's an assignment. It's got a due date. It's worth a small percentage of their final course grade (2.5%, combined with another 2.5% for meeting with me during office hours within the first three weeks). It's easy to complete. I enjoy reading them.

Here are the demographic questions I include on the questionnaire:

- Name on JMU class roster:
- Preferred name*:
- Class year:
- Major(s) or anticipated major(s):
- Pronouns (e.g., they/their/theirs; she/her/hers)*:

* I will use these to refer to you publicly (for example, during class)

And these are the open-ended questions I typically ask, with some variation, depending on the course:

- Why did you decide to take this course?
- What previous experience, if any, do you have studying about religion? (If you have taken related courses at JMU, or elsewhere, please list them here.)
- What do you hope to achieve, learn, or be able to do as a result of taking this course?
- What do you think about religion at this point in your life?

- Do you currently identify as part of a religious group? If so, which one and how does it impact your life? (Please only answer if you are comfortable sharing with me.)
- How might your current stance toward religion help AND hinder your learning in this course?
- As a learner, I do best when my professors...
- As a learner, I do best when my peers...
- As a learner, I do best when I...
- Is there anything else you'd like me to know about you at this time?
- Is there anything you'd like to ask me at this time?

At UVA, I always invite the faculty participants to consider what I might learn about students from this questionnaire, as well as what students might be learning about me, from the questions I ask, or even from making them do this kind of assignment in the first place. After all, initial assignments, the first day of class, the syllabus—such early activities set precedents and expectations that carry through the rest of the semester. Faculty in the institute realize that I convey how I care about my students as individuals, that I let them know that the class will be interactive and engaged, that their identities and experiences will be valuable and welcome, that their current positions and opinions affect their learning, that I will be open and available to them. It's just one of many community-building activities in my classes and, every semester, students note “community” as one of the strengths of their experience.

Of course, I'm not the only one who has had the idea to integrate “pre-course surveys” into my classes. Check out this [podcast episode](#), from an instructor who teaches primarily online. You can get other ideas from [Yale's Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning](#) too. Safe Zone at JMU offers resources for [Inclusive Introduction Questionnaires](#). And, in chatting with [Paul Mabrey, over in Learning Centers](#), the other day, I learned that he also uses pre-course surveys in his communication classes too. He usually invites students to complete the survey 3-6 weeks before the semester begins. Paul's survey is optional, not for credit and framed as an opportunity to provide feedback and help shape the course. Some questions he's asked his students in the past include:

- What skills, content, knowledge, speech genres, etc. would you really like to focus on this semester? For example: speech research, visual aid design, outlining, online video delivery, etc.
- What kind of speeches do you think are most important for you to prepare/practice for your future? For example: wedding toasts, pitches, job interviews, political speeches, group, etc.
- What kind of professional career do you hope to enter? And what kind of work would you enjoy doing?
- What kind of business and professional communication skills would you really like to develop?
- What business and professional communication topics would you like covered most?
- Do you have any learning, disability, technology, or other accessibility needs that you want to share?
- Do you have any other feedback you would like to share?

What I especially love about Paul's surveys is that he [attends to access](#) and he really gets students thinking about what *they* want to get out of the course (potentially tapping into, or at least making them

explore, their [intrinsic motivation](#)) and how it could be relevant to their lives outside of the classroom. He shared that students often call back to the survey invitation positively during classroom discussions and end-of-the-semester evaluations.

I would be remiss if I didn't also mention that Paul happens to be directing JMU's new 2024 [Quality Enhancement Plan \(QEP\)](#), whose theme is "[Early Alerts: Improving Retention and Closing the Equity Gap.](#)" While the QEP's focus is specific (i.e., "create a data-informed, formal, proactive, feedback system that sends notifications about targeted student segments to JMU practitioners who can take action to intervene"), I can't help but perceive a link between its broader aims (engagement, retention) and the small but practical things we can do in our own classrooms, like "getting to know you" questionnaires. In fact, [a recent study being circulated within higher education](#) confirms what many of us have experienced, already know, and yet too easily forget: faculty play an essential role for equitable student success and retention.

What will you be doing to encourage engagement and retention, early on and throughout, in your own classes this semester?

About the author: Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and an associate professor in the [Department of Philosophy & Religion](#). She can be reached at graveteo@jmu.edu

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Daisy Breneman at brenemdl@jmu.edu directly. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit [our webpage](#).

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