



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## *The Class Recap: Some Advantages of Regular E-mail Contact*

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E-mailing classes is nothing new. We have all e-mailed our students from time to time to inform them of the occasional syllabus change or to remind them of important due dates, etc. In a recent semester, however, I experimented with a more regular form of cyberconnection by sending a "class recap" e-mail after each meeting of my Studies in Fiction course. What I found was that this simple technique made me a better teacher and my students better learners.

Regularity increases the effectiveness of this method so, after each meeting, I try to get to a computer while the spirit of a particular class session is still fresh in my head (though it is certainly possible to use class notes later). In the body of the email, I address what we set out to accomplish in the class and what we actually accomplished. Sometimes I chronicle where we got bogged down on a point, sometimes where we moved a bit too quickly. I consciously avoid simply summarizing the class because, as I learned in an earlier iteration of this technique, students will either use the email recap as a crutch or, worse, they will ignore it altogether. The key is to include new information. One way of providing new information is to briefly acknowledge the topics that did not make it into the discussion for a particular day. This relieves the pressure that most of us feel to hit every topic that we would have liked or planned to discuss. In my first years of teaching, I remember feeling like I had short-changed my students and myself when my elaborate preparation never made it into the class discussion. Simply knowing that I had an

additional pedagogical outlet waiting at the end of the meeting relieved much of the pressure I was experiencing from trying to make a myriad of topics fit neatly into an inflexible time block. More importantly, my students benefited from discussions which moved more organically and less frenetically from point to point. None of this is to suggest that regular email contact can or should substitute for rigorous planning or defined classroom objectives. Far from it, the technique allows a space for extended discussion which in turn functions as a diagnostic for a particular class meeting's performance in terms of goals and objectives. I have found that identifying on a regular basis what we do and do not cover in class is as important for me as it is for my students.

Often, what we did not cover in one meeting provides a natural segue into how we will begin the next class. In the email recap, I outline some of what we covered but I also make sure to tell students how we will begin the next meeting. I've found this has at least three advantages. It gives me a (more realistic) sense of the trajectory I'd like to follow for the next class, but it also gives the students the advantage of knowing exactly where we'll begin the next meeting. More quiet students have told me that knowing where we would begin in advance allowed them to prepare responses for a specific set of questions – something that made them much more inclined to share their views with their classmates. Finally, establishing a definitive starting point for each class substantially minimizes the "warm-up" time at the start of class meetings so students are more apt to dive in to the pre-proposed topic.

In each of the recap emails [see sample below], I also recognize by name the students who made strong contributions to class discussions. Not only does this make the class meetings "feel" more

comfortable, but it also works to dismantle the firewall which so often exists between instructor and student. The ambiguous evaluation category of “class participation” becomes more personal and, ultimately, more meaningful for instructor and student alike. Students begin to participate less because they must and more because they want to. A quieter student once confided in me that her friends made fun of her all semester because she always wanted to check the class recap to see if her contributions were mentioned. Her confession revealed how effective this technique was for engaging students – especially those who seem to linger at the margins of class discussions.

Reviewing the e-mail recaps at the end of the semester can also serve as an additional mode of both student and course evaluation for the instructor. I get a far more vivid sense of who participated in what ways to class discussion, but I also get a chance to evaluate my own performance by reviewing the ways I chose to run individual class meetings. In this sense, a glance through the emails at the end of the semester can serve as a rough and ready electronic teaching journal for any given course. Doing so has allowed me to identify strengths and weaknesses in my pedagogical methods in far more specific lights than those offered on single page evaluations.

One of the obvious concerns with adding an e-mail recap-type component to a course is the amount of extra work it puts on the instructor. In order to prevent myself from becoming mired down with this technically extra part of the course, I hold myself to a strict ten-minute rule on the computer. I think about what I want to say on the way back from class so that by the time I get to a computer, it’s easy to compose the short recap. The more I did it, the more I found myself responding to a simple but substantial question: What would I say if this particular class meeting could have continued on for ten more minutes? So far, those ten hypothetical minutes spent emailing my classes have helped extend learning beyond the classroom walls – and beyond the registrar’s time blocks.

#### **SAMPLE**

Dear 226Mers,

I realize there were a lot of "details" to get through today so that we could even position ourselves to analyze the "ending(s)" of Great Expectations. This part of the analysis is sometimes rough but necessary for the illumination of bigger ideas later.

The good news is that we've completed most of the dry stuff. Now we can move on to the juicy, remarkable words of Dickens himself. Obviously, though, you will be using your words to comment on his words! Notable contributions to today’s discussion came from \_\_\_ on female aggression; \_\_\_ on Pip’s moral transformation; \_\_\_ on handwriting in the text; and \_\_\_ on Havisham’s definition of “love.”

Remember that for Wednesday (9/27), each class member will compose an email with exactly 3 (THREE) words in the SUBJECT LINE by noon. As we discussed in class, this is a time to compose three words in any manner you see fit – but, as also discussed, expect to be pressed a bit by me and your classmates if your chosen words seem to come, as Karl Marx (and later Krakauer) would say, out of "thin air." We’ll begin Monday’s meeting with your three words.

Be well.

Pete