

Ep. 005: Midterm Chats

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Evaluating our own teaching is just as important as evaluating our students' learning. Too many of us simply rely on end-of-term surveys.

In this episode, we explore ways to plan and conduct an assessment of teaching in the middle of the semester. We highlight a few options that might fit your teaching situation. Learn about the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis-- informally known as a Midterm Chat-- and how it can not only inform your teaching, but it can also provide your students with a sense of agency and empowerment in their own learning.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching Learning and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Jim Gee And joining me today is Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Weirdly enough, we're going to be talking about the middle of the semester. And specifically, today, what how to how to see how the class is going. How would you phrase that?

CLAIRE: Yeah, I think so. I think that's what we're going to be talking about, um, you know, Ken Dane, says that there are four questions, four basic questions that, "The Best College Teachers", ask themselves as they prepare to teach.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And one of them is, basically this is the short version, this is the clear version. What do I want my students to know, or be able to do by the time the course is completed? The second one is, how can I best help my students learn those things? The third one is How can I assess whether or not my students have learned those he says these much more elegantly?

JIM: And I think, yeah...

CLAIRE: Yes. And and the last one, interestingly, is, how can I assess my own teaching of the course. And I think that's the one that we often don't think about as much we tend to think about those first three a lot. But particularly, as we're planning our courses, we're not always thinking about how we're going to assess how the courses go. I think there's some things we take for granted, we just assume that at the end of the semester, we're going to be told that we need to administer student evaluation.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And we all know that and so we sort of say, okay, well, you know, I'll check that off for somebody who's going to assess how this course went. But actually, I think we do ourselves a disservice, a grave disservice, if that's the only kind of information we're providing about our teaching and our courses.

JIM: So, we're not talking, we're talking about not just relying on those end of semester end of term evaluations. So, it's a good time to plan for doing something.

CLAIRE: It's never too early to plan your midterm chat.

JIM: There you go.

CLAIRE: You know, these have gotten to be pretty popular...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: campus...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: We would be in big trouble if all 1100 of our faculty decided they wanted to do midterm chat, because they're five of us right or six.

JIM: Right. And it'd be clear, when you're saying midterm chat, you're talking about a service that we offer here at CTLT, which is one way of doing a midterm assessment of a course. But it's also something that that which we're going to talk about in a little bit more detail today. And it's something that faculty members can also try to do on their own or maybe partner up with a another faculty member to do or something like that,

CLAIRE: right there. There. There are multiple ways to collect midterm feedback on a course. And I think the, the important thing is not the not the manner that you use, or not the system that you use, or the procedure or whatever, but the fact that you do it.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And so that's really waiting until the end of the course has, you know, the obvious problem of oops, the course is over, those students are gone, you're never going to have that specific teaching and learning situation. Again, you may teach that same course again, but you're going to have different students and things will be different, you'll be a different teacher, there'll be different students. The course material may be different by then. So getting some feedback, while the course is in progress is a really useful thing.

JIM: And it also, depending on how you do that, but even if you're just giving them a survey of midterm, as opposed to the midterm chat, which again, will explain in a little bit more detail what that is. It also gives students students get something out of it too, don't they?

CLAIRE: Absolutely. For one thing, they get a real sense of empowerment. When you ask students about the progress of the course, they know that you're interested. And if you listen, that's the key?

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: If you listen to what they say, then they know that they have a significant investment in the course as well. You know, you have a lot of invested in the course you've spent hours designing this course, if not days or weeks depending on the process you use. But and students have an investment in taking it but they don't always feel that they have much invested in the way the course is going. But when they do have that investment, then they get, they get much more interested.

JIM: Mm hmm. So when we're talking about the midterm chats that we facilitate here at CTLT, those are based on a process that I think you kind of introduced here, or at least you, you, you brought about when you started as the assistant director here.

CLAIRE: I did. Yeah, at the at the urging of the director, Patrick O'Sullivan. He had a phone call from I think, I think a department chair who had had this process at his or her, I don't remember, previous institution. And it's actually called small group that Small Group Instructional Diagnosis,

JIM: Right, which makes it always sounds like a disease to me. Are we trying to figure out disease or something? It

CLAIRE: Sounds it sounds far too medical?

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: To Me...

JIM: Yeah. There's something really wrong with the course which may not necessarily.

CLAIRE: Which may not be the case. But you know, often we do these chats and find out that everybody thinks everything is hunky dory. So, you know, well, maybe not everything, but you know, but mostly. And we, you know, I so I stole the name midterm chat, actually, from some colleagues in the English department.

JIM: There you go.

CLAIRE: Who were using a similar process to get feedback from students for each other. And so and that was a very collegial process. It wasn't exactly the same but that I thought midterm chat sounded like a much friendlier name, that small group instructional diagnosis.

JIM: Sure. And it's just I think it's, it also, I think, better fits what the ultimate goal is for this, because it's not really the diagnosis, as we kind of hinted at before. It's the faculty member taking what happens in this process, and then following up with the students, right, and so is actually so the midterm chat to my mind is not really, me, as a

facilitator coming in to do the midterm chat. That's not the most important part of the of the chat. It's actually the faculty member following up with the students.

CLAIRE: Right, Val in that chat. And the really important thing, I think that the thing that the students find very important is that the faculty member voluntarily requests this. So students, you know, every once in a while, I'll go into a classroom and the students will look at me a little bit skeptically and say, is our teacher in trouble, right, sure. And I always, you know, I always tell them, I tell all of them as part of my introductory spiel that this is a purely voluntary process. Instructors sign up for these, no one is going to see the feedback except the instructor and the students and me not even anybody else at CTLT. So um, you know, students like that.

JIM: Yeah, yeah. And I think faculty members like that, too, because, and I know that when you and I both go in when we would facilitate something and our colleagues here at CTLT, we emphasize that point to students to say that no, this is not, this is not a required sort of thing. And of course, you've had the experience. And I think I've had, we've talked about this before, I've had the experience, where sometimes students have such a good experience doing a midterm chat that they come up to us later, and they say, Hey, could you do this for my other class as well? And then we have to kind of flipped around say, No, it is a voluntary process. We can't just swoop in and do that?

CLAIRE: that really hammers it home that we really meant that when we said volunteer, yeah, yeah, Yeah, although really that fourth step of following up with the class.

JIM: Exactly. So for people who aren't familiar with a midterm chat, I guess it's easiest to describe it as a sort of a three step process on the part of the faculty member. There's a pre chat where we sit down, and we'd kind of just see how things are going. There's the actual chat itself, when the facilitator, one of the five or six of us who do it here at CTLT, goes into the classroom, and conducts this sort of discussion with students. And I want to touch on that more from your perspective here in a moment. And then and then we take the data that we gather the comments, the consensus is really the the key word, the consensus, we gather from doing the midterm chat, and we present that to the instructor so that they can then do with it as they will, rightfully, we encourage them to follow up. Yeah, that really should be...

CLAIRE: That really needs to be included in that because that's, that's really important. If you just do it, and then they don't hear anything more about it, then that's sort of almost worse than not doing it at all.

JIM: So So talk to me in the actual midterm chat process. And I think this could inform other types of assessment that maybe if they're not doing a midterm chat this semester, and instructor could still come up with the importance of this concept of consensus.

CLAIRE: Yeah...

JIM: And how that makes it different from some of the other evaluations or assessments that are done.

CLAIRE: Yeah. I think when we do midterm chats with students, we really, we really focus in on the consensus building aspect of the chat that this is this really needs to represent the class As a whole, and so if there are sort of outlying or individual opinions, those may not be reflected in the report from the chat. A better time to share those would be at the end of the semester or, or in a conversation with the instructor, you know, one on one conversation with the instructor. But what we're trying to do is capture true consensus of the class. And we work pretty hard at that. I, I stop multiple times during the chat at least four times, once for each question, but often more than that, and ask the students whether I'm, you know, whether what I'm recording is actually a consensus of the class. And sometimes I find out that it's not sometimes you know, sometimes the class will be divided, you know, sort of 5050 or, or there will be just a few students. And what I do at that point often depends on sort of what I'm sensing from the class, but I like to encourage them to talk to each other and sort of find out what it is that they're agreeing about and what it is that they're disagreeing about. And is there a, is there a different way to phrase this that would make it reflect a consensus opinion? Or do we need to just pitch it out, because people really aren't ever going to agree on this point.

JIM: And and we should probably say, at this point, for those who aren't familiar with the process, the instructor is not in the room for this, right. This is what we we schedule a day, yeah, we there's a day scheduled where we come in for, you know, preferably a whole class period, or if it's a longer class period, at least a good chunk of it, and actually do this sort of exercise. And you talked about the questions, there are four questions that are very open questions that we ask, what are those?

CLAIRE: Well, they all focus on student learning. So the first question is, What is there about this class that helps you learn? The second question is, is there anything about this course that's making it more difficult for you to learn? The third one is, can you suggest anything that your instructor could do that would make this a better learning experience for you as a class? And the fourth one is, the fourth one is really interesting, and often the most revealing? And that one is, can you suggest things that US students could do to make this class a better learning experience? And you know, it's really interesting that last question, this sort of go to answers, students will say, we should all come to class read, we should all read the assignment, you know, the, but sometimes, sometimes, the responses go much deeper than that. And so, you know, they may have mentioned that class discussions aren't proving actually very helpful in their learning. But then when it gets the question about students, they'll say, Well, yeah, it would probably actually help if we participated in class discussions, right? Oh, yeah. Think?

JIM: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So what it's, it's a very inductive process, and that you start with individual answers. So we start with the little picture, everyone comes up with their own answer. And then they then you put them into groups, right, right, small groups, small groups, and then as groups, they come up with kind of a group consensus, or a group list, and they all have to agree on on each point. And then you debrief as the class and I always tell students, okay, now we get to the performance art of the class, because I'm typing the answers directly into a PowerPoint on the big screen.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I tell him, I say this is the part where you get to laugh at my typing. Yeah. Because it's really it's hard to listen and think and type all at the same time. So I end up with some gobbledygook sometimes, but we fix it before I before I leave.

JIM: Right, exactly. And so that way, everyone can see exactly what's going to be in the report. Right. And so talk to me about taking that information. And what are the suggestions you often give to instructors? So you're doing the post chat? How do they use that typically? Or how do you suggest that they use that information? Typically?

CLAIRE: Well, I don't suggest that they use it all. We usually collect more information than anybody can really use at that particular point. I asked them to, to take away what I've given them to think about it and to think about, is there a suggestion here that that I can buy into that I also think might improve the learning of the class? Is there anything that the students suggested that's just really not going to go for me? It's, you know, it's contrary to my current Yeah, it's a deal breaker, it's contrary to my teaching philosophy, or my pedagogical style or whatever. And then go back and share that with the students. So let them know, Hey, you made the suggestion and I think that's a great one, I can't I can't implement all your suggestions. You know, that would actually change the class probably more than any of us would be comfortable with. But let's try making this let's try making this small change or this, you know, even a sort of a major change, moving forward and see how that works. And also By the way, I noticed that you all said that, you know, the class would be better if you made this this other change. And I encourage you to do that. So let's try to make that change as well.

JIM: Yeah, and I think that that's important, because it allows for a little bit of a transaction and allows for a little bit of a of a, let me, let me help you in the way that you say you would like to be helped. I think that's a great position as a teacher to be dealing with students, and, and really, you know, help their learning, tempered always by the fact that they don't always have the most unbiased perspective of the learning process, right?

CLAIRE: Well, you know, you really have to, you have to emphasize that you really are talking to them about actual learning, and not just sort of, so occasionally, I'll run into a class where the teacher has been trying something new, and the students will say, you know, we just wish you just lecture. And and, you know,

JIM: because I have homework to do for the class, right?

CLAIRE: Yeah, no, yeah. Yeah. So it's, you know, then sometimes we have to have a conversation about what is that really what would help you learn? Or is that really what would make your life easier,

JIM: or another example I've run into very similar to that is, you know, students, and I don't know if this has increased over the over the years. But I find now that students are really into the, it's not gamification, in terms of a teaching practice. It's more of they play the game with the grades, you know, how many quizzes? Can I skip? You know, how many reading quizzes? And so they so sometimes I'll be very careful when I facilitate a midterm chat. Because I find sometimes that students really get into the well. But if he you know, if he or she would give us 30 points for this assignment

instead of 20 points, and this would, and that's not what we're talking about either. Yeah, no, the learning. What are you getting out of this?

CLAIRE: And I haven't even I haven't even run into that that much myself. But I do I have had students sort of suggest that a teacher returned a lecture, I would say, actually, I would say that I have had far more classes, ask that the instructor get away from lecture. Sure, particularly in those really long, you know, long classes that meet for multiple hours. But even in even in shorter classes, and interestingly, students nowadays, I don't know where they're getting this, or maybe I'm running into a lot of education students, which wouldn't be surprising. They, they asked for active learning by name, they say, Yes, I have had, yeah, we wish you'd use more active learning in this class, which I always, you know, like, hey, okay. Alright, you know that you know, the word passing on. Yeah, buzzword,

Jim

buzzword. So when it comes, and we should probably also mention that, that when we conducted midterm chat through CTLT, we limit the class size to I think it's 50. And I've done I think the most I've done is 47. And that was a, I think I went for an extra long lunch after that one. That's it. That's a that's a long one. So for a large lecture course, you'd be looking at doing some other sort of assessment, because you can't really do that sort of,

CLAIRE: yeah, it there just isn't that there's just not the time to work through the process and to and to get to get a true can to get a true consensus of 100 people and 50 minutes or even 60 minutes is just it's really just not really possible. We have some other approaches that we've tried, we haven't found one that we've been very, very happy with yet, mostly because we haven't found another one that builds consensus in the way that the chats do.

JIM: Right. And, and again, going back to that idea of consensus, because I used to explain this to people as well. It's like a focus group. And I noticed you, you You reacted to that at one point. And understandably so because that's not entirely true. It may operate like someone would conduct a focus group, in that you give them a series of probing questions. And but with a focus group, you're aggregating the numbers. And you're coding the responses. Typically, this is truly a a qualitative sort of snapshot of how the course is going at midterm. So I have two last questions.

CLAIRE: Okay.

JIM: Before we're done. The first one is, if I can't do a midterm chat, or you know, for whatever reason, you're not going to come to through CTLT to do a midterm chat. What are just briefly some of the other things that you would suggest that maybe you could have students do that may not be as ideal because the you're the you're the professor are presenting this, instead of having a third party come in and do it. But what are some of the quick quickly, what are some of the things that you could?

CLAIRE: Well, I would recommend that you get mid term feedback, whatever, whatever manner you use, and certainly there are a lot of pretty easy ways to do it. You can you

can use a survey, you know, any of them should be anonymous, you can use a survey. You can ask students just to jot down some thoughts on you know, you can do a one minute, essentially a one minute paper, you know, you can ask a colleague to come in and conduct a chat that's that's much closer to to what we do and I think if you have a trusted colleague, you know, that's that's a great way to do that. But basically, you know, you you're interested in in the answer to sort of those four questions or some, some some number of those four questions. But I think getting that information about how, how student learning is progressing in the course, as a midterm, so more or less, it's a great idea.

JIM: And so when we're talking midterm, at least here at CTLT, we only do these chats between the fifth and 10th. Week. Yeah, and the 10th, we tend to push

CLAIRE: really too late. That's good. That's kind of pushing it, I keep trying to sort of inch that back a little bit, you know, it right. We can't always because sometimes stuff happens. But the one good reason to be thinking about this early in the semester is, you know, to do this, you have to build in a day. Right. And so, um, you know, if you're thinking about it while you're constructing your course schedule that allows you to sort of put in a day, although, to be perfectly honest, I don't encourage instructors to put on the course schedule. Midterm chat right now.

JIM: Because we do want it we want to get we want to have an honest and the whole population of students there, among others. So if people are interested in actually doing a midterm chat for this semester, or for a subsequent semester, they can go to our website, which is CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Click on the consultations link, which is at the top and you'll see a list of all the consultations we do including midterm chats. There's an online form they can fill out, we will do up to two chats, or two classes for an instructor per semester. If I write

CLAIRE: Two chats, two chats. What if you have two sections of the same course right into that? Or you've got two different courses? But but no more than two?

JIM: Yeah, yeah. And finally, the last question I wanted to just touch on is something that we've talked about Off mic, as it were, about how these are used to get a longitudinal view of one's teaching. Because this is this is a good snapshot about how this class is going at this particular time. And it will inform you if you're trying something new that semester, this is a good way to kind of test the water and see how it's working. It's

CLAIRE: a great time to use one.

JIM: Yeah. But we have both had faculty members come to us and we've worked with him. Over several Yeah, over several semesters. So can you talk just to sum up briefly, what what are they pulling out of?

CLAIRE: I, you know, I I actually think that this, I actually think that having midterm chats over time, is maybe one of the most effective things you can do in terms of your own professional development. I have seen people come in as new instructors and ask for midterm chat in their first semester and then continue to have midterm chats for three or four years. And the growth that I see in, in the in, in those instructors over that time.

Of course, it's not solely attributable to the midterm chat. There's a lot of other stuff going on.

JIM: Exactly.

CLAIRE: Um, but I but the the chat is a great way to track that. And I think having that evidence of professional growth is not something to be sneezed at. I think that's that's really a nice thing to have, you know, even to be able to include in your in your tenure and promotion materials right at the end of a at the end of several years.

JIM: Absolutely. All right, clear. Well, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM: And you've been listening to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. Find out more about CTLT and, of course, our podcast by going to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Click on the podcast link at the top of the page. And you can see the latest episodes, instructions on how to subscribe through your favorite mobile app. And we are now on iTunes so you can search for us. Let's Talk Teaching on iTunes. Go ahead and give us some comments and give us give us a few stars. I appreciate it too. So, on behalf of Claire and everyone here at CTLT I'm Jim Gee, Happy Teaching.