

## Ep. 057: The Importance of Midterm Grades

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Reporting midterm grades may seem like just more paperwork, but it can be vital to our students' success. In this brief episode, Claire and Jim unpack the uncertainty students sometimes have about their grades and kick around some strategies for giving meaningful feedback... even when you haven't accumulated many points yet in the semester.

### Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching.

[Music playing]

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

CLAIRE: Hi Jim.

JIM: So, I got this big thing behind me now.

CLAIRE: I know there's light pouring in here.

JIM: Where is it coming from?

[Laughing]

CLAIRE: We're going to have to wear sunglasses all the time.

JIM: So, for those of you who may have listened to some previous episodes of Lets Talk Teaching, you know that CTLT the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology has moved across campus here at Illinois State, and lo and behold, Studio Gee, which is also my office, there's a window.

CLAIRE: There's a window in your office. You know what? There're two windows in my office.

JIM: This is true, well it's good to be the king, as they say.

CLAIRE: Yes, it is good to be queen.

JIM: And deservedly so. Well anyway, so we're here post move, and we're just doing a little episode today because we haven't done one in a couple weeks. Quite frankly, I'm very curious to see how this is going to sound and how much foam I have to attach...

CLAIRE: Yeah. We'll see.

JIM: How much foam I'm going to be decorating my office with? Well, this is also kind of a good test because we, you know, this is a busy place and we have a lot of meetings and a lot of people going through the hallway especially right now because they're still moving stuff over here. So, you know, I'll apologize in advance to our listeners if they hear sudden drilling, hammering,

CLAIRE: or if an electrician pops his head through our door.

JIM: Right. Yeah, we're not entirely sure what's going to happen here, but we are getting towards the middle of the semester and we always love talking about midterm for many reasons, here at CTLT. Including our drinking game on Let's Talk Teaching, talking about midterm chats, which we're not talking about today. Right?

CLAIRE: No, we're not going to mention midterm chats, we're not taking a shot every time we say midterm chats. Sorry.

JIM: Sorry. So, and we're not even talking about midterm assessments of teaching, which a midterm chat is one of, but not the only option you have. We're talking about good old-fashioned midterm grades...

CLAIRE: for students.

JIM: Yes, for students.

CLAIRE: Yeah, actual grades for actual students, yes.

JIM: Yeah, midterm grades on our campus are turned in around the 6th week, I think. Right?

CLAIRE: Yes.

JIM: So that's where, so we're pretty much there.

CLAIRE: We're just about there, yeah.

JIM: And that's not exactly midterm, it's a little before midterm, but it's done at that time for an important reason?

CLAIRE: Right. The idea is not to get them in by midterm but to get them in before the date, the last date, on which a student can withdraw from a course.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, if a student is truly failing a course, and sometimes, I have learned in my long-checked teaching career that students really don't know that they're failing a course, and so it's a good idea to let them know that. Because, if all of a sudden, they find out they're failing several courses, it may be, you know, that may just be too much. They

may just look at that and go, "I can't, I can't recover in all of these situations". So, at that point, the best option for them may be to do a little selective, you know, weeding and drop a course.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And then they can concentrate on their, on doing better in their, other courses.

JIM: Yeah, I've only once... Have you ever had a student who dropped the course and then came back... later...?

CLAIRE: In the same semester?

JIM: No, not the same semester.

CLAIRE: Oh, came back and had you for that for that course again? I have not. Yeah, but the 100 level courses that I've taught that passed were of course first year composition which is required for all students but there are also so many sections of...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: that. It would be highly unusual for a student to select to come back and have a course with the same instructor.

JIM: I had that happen once in a journalism course at another institution, that I taught at, and it was awkward for the first 10 minutes, but then it worked out. And, that second time around, that student was one of the better, I mean, had really learned something about... learned something about learning, had really grown up a little bit but frankly...

CLAIRE: Yeah, that happens. They do that while they're here.

JIM: They do that, well that's and, that's a good thing. We like it when they do that. So, on our campus, I know, midterm grades are kind of nebulous. They're required but they're not required for all students, or they may not be entirely required, but we're all, but they are a good idea, obviously.

CLAIRE: They're requested for certain courses and certain populations of students. So, I believe that anyone teaching a 100-level course, is going to get a request for midterm grades.

JIM: Yeah, and actually I can confirm that because, I am this semester,

CLAIRE: Oh, there you go.

JIM: and I got it for all 20 students in the class.

CLAIRE: Okay, so that would, you know, that would be not at all unusual and then that would mean the system is working. The way it's supposed to work is a good thing and then you may also get MIT requests for midterm grades for certain populations of students. So, for example, student athletes, they need to know for eligibility reasons.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: The Department of Athletics needs to know that those students are in good standing. Students with certain kinds of loans, the federal government, you know, has a stake in and students. To be honest, I'm not sure how all this works, but I know students have to be enrolled in a certain number of courses; they need to pass a certain number of courses, so and so forth, so you know, for whatever the specific regulation is. Then that might be one reason that you'd get a request for student midterm grade for a particular student, so... But you know, (a) it shouldn't matter why you get the request.

JIM: Yeah, right.

CLAIRE: and (b) having a grade at midterm early or earlier in the semester is just good teaching practice, providing students with a grade at that point. Students need feedback on how they're doing. They're not good at judging their own learning,

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: and they, and particularly of course, students who are new to the University. So that's why the requirement is for all 100 level courses because you know those first-year students, first time in college... I just learned a new way, there's a new acronym that I learned this summer, late this summer, FTIC "first time in college", [Laughing] so anyway, I love that for some reason. But anyway, students the first time in college... students really don't have a clue. You know, I got, this is just ancient history, but I got straight A's my first semester in college, and I know more could have told you that I was headed for straight A's, even at the time that I went home for the semester.

JIM: mm-hmm.

CLAIRE: I mean, you know, those were the days when professors used to put your, you know, you could give them a postcard, this is really ancient history...

JIM: Yeah, they would mail you your final paper...final grade. I had a final paper mailed to me once I am, well I am, old enough to where that did happen to me too.

CLAIRE: But my first semester in college, those postcards started coming in, and my mom was so excited she started hanging them on the Christmas tree. She was, I think we were both, surprised. I don't know what that says about me. Well it says a lot about my career as a high school student. I had no idea. So...

JIM: Did you have a trouble...

CLAIRE: It can work the other way too.

JIM: Now wait a minute, did you have a troubled career as a high school student, in terms of grades?

CLAIRE: Oh, I had an uninterested career.

JIM: Oh, you were like, you used...Were you really good until, like, your junior year?

CLAIRE: No, no, no, I just had much more important things to worry about in high school.

JIM: Oh, okay.

CLAIRE: I did fine, I mean, I got into the University of Missouri.

JIM: Yeah, I was going to say.

CLAIRE: but I wasn't by no means, I was so far from being a straight-a student, that was, you know, yeah, I was not.

JIM: I had a German teacher who told my parents well he's getting a "B" in the class and that's mainly because he's charming,

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: but he really can't speak the language, but he said "but he's such a...

CLAIRE: joy". Little Jimmy is such a joy.

JIM: Yeah, so just do that with a German accent you'll get what the conversation was like. So, it's not just about university policy and procedure and all of that other stuff, it's... This is important information that these students need at this time. So, what do you say to the faculty member, and I've been the instructor, who said this before... "Yeah, but I haven't given them any real meaningful assessment," see I mean, "we don't have a lot of grades?" We don't have a lot of points yet semester. You hear that quite a lot.

CLAIRE: Yeah, and that's you know that's a tough one, um, you know, ideally, you will have had some graded work, before you have to submit this midterm grade. Because it's not helpful to anybody to just sort of, you know, make them, make a wild guess. If you guess low, it doesn't really, you know, it doesn't really help and if you guess high, it doesn't really help, so you know, particularly, if you're teaching one of these courses, where you know you're going to be asked to submit midterm grades, it's really a good idea to have had some graded work and to have given some feedback to students at that point. I think that most people have some sense of how a student is doing in a class whether there's been graded work or not. And so, if you feel like you could sit down to with a student and say, you know, my sense is that you're doing okay in this class but not great. You know, you, you've got some room to grow. Here are some things you could do better. Then, you know, you could translate that sense of, okay, but not great, probably into a "C", you know. I mean that's probably what a "C" means to you; is okay, but not great.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: If you could sit down with another student and say, "boy you're, you set the curve in this class". I know you are doing great. I'm so, I love your, your contributions to class discussions, you know, your reading journals have been fabulous, you know, well you

could probably, even if you haven't given grades. Some of those reading journals or those class discussions...

JIM: mm-hmm

CLAIRE: you could probably ballpark that, that student is, getting an "A" or a "B".

JIM: And I think that this is an opportunity to pause and talk to your students about where they're at as a group. You can say "look I'm, I'm going to be turning in midterm grades" or whatever we call it. I'm going to be doing progress reports. I'm going to be turning this in and you, if it's on 100 levels class, be safe for all of you, and I'm going to, or you say, for some of you, there's some of you I'm required to do this for. I'm being asked to do this and we haven't had a lot of grading done yet this semester so this is going to be my estimation based on your attendance and everything else so once you get that, if you have questions, come talk to me. And I might seek you out and do all that. So, I think, it's pretty... to have a conversation with your class, to get their communication. Now, the other thing about how we turn in midterm grades on our campus here at Illinois State is you can put in more information than just the grade.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: This goes through the University College and especially for when you're dealing with first-year students, but, I think, for all students if they're asking for it. You can also talk about how many classes have they missed and are they in danger of failing. You can indicate that, and also, they ask for open comments as well, and the thesis is that an advisor then is going to is going to have a conversation.

CLAIRE: Conversation with the student and they look for patterns they've, they're really seriously... U college is really good at this. They look for patterns for students and they call in the ones that look like they're at risk, so you know, that's a, really, that's an important thing to do.

JIM: So, struggling students in the sense of...

CLAIRE: Students who are who are struggling to do well in your class.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Right, so maybe they're not as sophisticated readers as they need to be, maybe they aren't just experienced writers as they need to be, maybe they are, you know...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Afraid to contribute to class conversations, whatever, well...

JIM: So, as we're kind of wrapping up this brief episode, what else do we need to keep in mind?

CLAIRE: So, I think a couple of things. One is your use the word progress report interchangeably with midterm grades.

JIM: Oh yeah, and that's a mistake.

CLAIRE: Oh well it was an understandable mistake, but... Yes, Jimmy it was a mistake. There are no wrong answers, but that was one, that was wrong.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: So, midterm grades are where we're asked to submit midterm grades about week six and progress reports are asked or requested about week 11.

JIM: Yes, so that's kind of a second check-in for some populations of students so, you know,

CLAIRE: I don't know why they have, well they have different names so that, you know, they can be differentiated.

JIM: They could be differentiated. So, I know that, for example, student athletes, I've had in in my classes, there's usually that second check in during a semester.

CLAIRE: Yes.

JIM: and whatnot.

CLAIRE: it's really important to the NCAA that students remain eligible.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And it's important to the University that the students are, and it's important to their coaches and their teammates...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: that they remain eligible because, you know. There are universities that have had to forfeit games because it turns out they were playing ineligible players, you know, somebody who is academically ineligible. So, you just don't want to go there and, you know, and besides that, you want to give all students a chance to buckle down and learn better.

JIM: Right. Well Claire, thank you very much, okay.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. To find out more about our podcast, go to our website [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu) for Dr. Claire Lamonica, for all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching.