

**Improving University Teaching
Innsbruck, Austria (July, 2012)**

Title:

**LEARNING RESOLUTIONS: ASSESSMENT, COMMUNITY BUILDING, AND
COURSE CLOSURE**

Theme:

Assessment Outside of the Box

Author:

Dr. Bonnie Farley-Lucas
Director, Faculty Development
Southern Connecticut State University
501 Crescent Street
New Haven, CT 06515
203-392-5488
farleylucab1@southernct.edu

ABSTRACT

Learning Resolutions: Assessment, Community Building, and Course Closure

Learning Resolutions are an end-of semester classroom exercise designed to help assess learning outcomes, while also providing a community-building experience and a positive closure for a course. Used in conjunction with formal written learning summaries and written course evaluation forms, learning resolutions provide valuable data about what students have learned throughout the course of a semester. This paper defines and offers examples of learning resolutions, reviews benefits for assessment of student learning, community building, and student learning, and provides several variations of active learning modules utilizing learning resolutions that can be adapted and used across all disciplines.

Learning Resolutions: Assessment, Community Building, and Closure

Learning resolutions are an end-of semester exercise designed to help assess learning outcomes, while providing a community-building experience and a positive closure for a course. Used in conjunction with formal written learning summaries, learning resolutions provide valuable data about what students have learned throughout the course of a semester. They enhance the learning process by focusing on actions that students will take after the course is concluded, so students are more inclined to apply what they have learned to their daily interactions.

Learning resolutions collected for a course in Interpersonal Communication include the following:

As a result of what I have learned in Interpersonal Communication, I WILL:

- Be more direct/specific to reduce uncertainty
- Know how to handle a conflict when I encounter one
- Use the “SCREAM” method to manage my own anger
- Pay more attention to using more I statements rather than you statements
- Be more aware of my nonverbal communication when talking to others
- End my relationships using the steps [of termination] so they will be more civil
- Give positive feedback. Listen to others.
- Resolve conflicts in a less confrontational manner (using I statements)

As a result of what I have learned in Interpersonal Communication, I WILL NOT:

- Judge others before I have met them
- Keep my response in my head when listening, therefore becoming a better listener
- Interrupt people because it sends disconfirming messages
- Interrupt my friends and family
- Over-self-disclose or touch others too much
- Call nonverbal communication “body language”

Other stems can be used for learning resolutions. To make resolutions more discipline specific, they can be restated to reflect professional behaviors or standards, such as, “In order to be the best biologist possible, I will...” or “As a teacher, I will make sure that I”. As a mid-term exercise that encourages independent inquiry, the resolution could be stated, “As a result of what I learned in this class so far, I will learn more about”.

Suggested Concurrent Learning Activity: Learning Summary

A Learning Summary is a final written paper that synthesizes student learning throughout the semester by highlighting the Top 5 points, concepts, theories, or skills that they have learned more about or enhanced throughout the semester. This paper should highlight key concepts and theories that they have employed from the textbook, self-assessment exercises, classroom lectures, learning activities, and independent readings. The learning summary helps students to reflect upon their own learning and provides valuable data that can be used for assessment purposes. For my classes, I keep it a “low-stakes,” manageable 2-3 page paper worth 05% of their total grade.

Benefits of learning resolutions

Learning resolutions provide a unique window for assessment of both student learning and one check as to whether a course met its objectives. As Polomba and Banta (1999) succinctly note, “Assessment must be seen as an activity done with and for students, rather than to them (p. 71).” Learning resolutions, by their very nature, support students’ self-reflection on their own learning. Resolutions help students identify changes that they plan to sustain long after the class is over.

Summative evaluation can be seen as providing data as to whether the instructional interventions produced the desired effect (Dick, Carey & Carey, 2001). Since students make a personal statement of their own growth and transformation that they attribute directly to their learning in a particular course, the data is very useful. Learning resolutions can be compared against outcomes stated in the course description or syllabus. Data can be shared with colleagues within academic departments and can be particularly useful when shared with colleagues teaching in other sections of the same course. The data is also very helpful in reporting actual learning outcomes for courses serving as prerequisites for other courses.

Learning resolutions support community building and provide an effective course closure. After an entire semester spent together in building a safe, supportive classroom culture, end-of-semester learning exercises should sustain the positivity. The valuable community building that had taken place over the course of a semester should have a smooth closure, a transition that is respectful of the community members. Ideally, these learning exercises should link the end of the class to students’ present and future lives.

Finally, learning resolutions support significant learning. Fink (2003) defines significant learning experiences as those that incorporate six dimensions: foundational knowledge, application, integration, learning how to learn, caring, and the human dimension, which includes ethics, citizenship, and serving others. According to Fink (2003), the more these six elements are activated, the more likely that significant learning will take place. Learning resolutions support all six dimensions, particularly the human dimension, the caring dimension, and integration. The exercise promotes lifelong learning by making students accountable for changing behaviors based on their learning and continuing in those changes. By making students aware of their collective impact made on our community if their resolutions are kept well into the future, ethical behaviors and citizenship are activated.

Facilitation Process

Version 1

The instructor begins by providing participants with two reflective writing prompts for a “one-minute paper” (Angelo & Cross, 1993): What is the most important thing you have learned in this session? What is the greatest change in your thinking or behavior that arose from this session?

Several flip chart pages, each with the words “As a result of participating in this course, I will/will not...” are placed on the walls in the room. Students are provided with markers and are instructed to write a brief summary of their resolution on the flip chart paper.

After all participants have written their responses, the instructor leads a brief discussion asking students to note the key themes or similarities in their responses, as well as the range of comments. To conclude, the instructor wishes all participants best wishes in continuing all of their resolutions and reminds them of the positive change they will make if they all keep their resolutions. Then the instructor provides contact information, so they can continue connecting after the session has ended. Students are invited to do the same.

Version 2

Prior to the last class session, the instructor provides participants with an overview of the learning resolution process, stressing the community-based nature of the document. The instructor provides students with a reflective writing prompt: “As a result of participating in this course, I will, or will not...” Students are informed not to put their name on their paper. After students engage in this “one-minute paper” (Angelo & Cross, 1993) writing assignment, completed papers are collected.

Prior to the next class, the instructor records each response in a single document. Duplicate mentions of items can be noted in parentheses after the entry [for example: “I will not fear conflict (3)”].

On the last day of class, the document is shared via a PowerPoint, document screen, or a handout, and students take turns reading the items out loud. The instructor asks each student to initial the final document, as a symbolic testament to their commitment to create positive change. As in Version 2, the professor concludes by wishing participants best wishes in continuing all of their resolutions and providing contact information, so they can continue connecting after the course has ended.

Version 3

Learning resolutions can be easily accomplished through blog postings and can be used in on-line courses via two postings: “As a result of what I have learned in this class I WILL” and “As a result of what I have learned in this class I WILL NOT.”

Discussion/Appraisal

Students start from varying degrees of already acquired knowledge and sophistication in applying their knowledge (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett & Norman, 2010). Therefore, it is important to note that what may seem like a trivial resolution to an instructor or even to another student, can indeed be an impactful learning experience for a student. For example, in one class on Gender and Communication, a student who resolved that he would “never use sexist language again” shared that he had a significant experience with self-awareness and social responsibility. From his perspective, he had to overcome years of guilt for “going along” with his football teammates when they made demeaning remarks and teased the smaller boys, calling them various homosexual slurs. After a semester, he was able to analyze his previous behaviors and how his associations with homophobic males also contributed to sexist communication aimed at women. Thus, all students’ self-reported resolutions for future behaviors should be met with respect.

Students' overwhelmingly positive reactions to the learning resolutions process indicate that it is certainly worth the time invested. In-class comments typically center on the variety of learning occurring throughout the course. Participants often comment on "how much we have learned," thus contributing to a sense of accomplishment and ownership in the learning process. One student commented, "I feel that we have really come along way since day 1." Written comments from end-of-semester evaluations indicate that students enjoyed "wrapping up the semester with a positive affirmation" and that that the exercise helped "bring us together at the close of the class."

Instructors also benefit from the process. As the facilitator, I find the exercise affirming as participants often identify outcomes that made significant changes in their lives, yet had not been previously articulated in discussions or written exercises. While students' self-reported resolutions may not actually be enacted upon, and certainly not for the duration of their lives, they give a strong indication of behavioral and value changes that students associated with their course learning.

References

Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C., & Norman, M.K. (2010). *How Learning Works: 7 Research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Angelo, T.A. & Cross, K.P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A Handbook for college teachers*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Dick, W., Carey, L, & Carey, J.O. (2001). *The systematic design of instruction*, 5th ed. New York: Longman.

Fink, L.D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Palomba, C.A. & Banta, T.A. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.