



Teaching With a Dose of Rhythm and Flow

One of the biggest challenges faculty face when planning a course is how to pace content delivery and assignments so that students (and instructor) manage the workload effectively. Two concepts—rhythm and flow—can help faculty think through the overall organization of the work as they plan their courses. Rhythm is the pattern of emotions often observed over the course of a term. Duffy and Jones (1995) note, “As class begins, the possibilities are vast. Energies and expectations are high, and professors and students are anxious about the new beginning. . . . Students start the class hopeful that it will be their best class yet” (p.36). Yet, instructors might lose their sense of rhythm. The course could start off slowly but then build rapidly to a crashing crescendo as due dates for assignments, readings, projects, and examinations begin to collide. To promote a better sense of rhythm and to create an academic term that has a steady and predictable beat, faculty can use a more global approach to course planning. For example, the course syllabus can help create a big-picture view to orchestrate how learning experiences are planned, sequenced, and distributed over the span of the term.

The second concept, flow, is a state of mind characterized by total immersion and attention to a topic or activity, even to the extent that concerns about self are surrendered to the joy that comes from participation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Walker (2010) describes the phenomena of flow as it might be observed in the classroom:

Flow is an intrinsically rewarding, highly absorbing state in which people lose a sense of time and the awareness of self. Flow states are likely when individuals freely choose activities, goals are clear, performance feedback is immediate and concrete, and challenges are high but the performer has the competencies to gracefully dispatch the challenges. (p. 3)

Walker’s description incorporates many of the key elements of effective teaching (i.e., choice, clear outcomes, immediate feedback, high expectations, growing competencies). Instructors can quickly apply the concept of flow to individual classes as they think about the levels at which the learning experiences are engaging, informative, and interactive. They can implement the same principle over the course of a term as they think about the ebb and flow of energy and involvement (i.e., both theirs and their students).

Strategies for Promoting Rhythm and Flow

An academic term demonstrates both rhythm and flow when

- topics and learning experiences are thoughtfully distributed over the term and progress logically and systematically;



“Action and reaction, ebb and flow, trial and error, change—this is the rhythm of living. Out of our over-confidence, fear; out of our fear, clearer vision, fresh hope. And out of hope, progress.”

—Bruce Barton,
American author

- students and faculty are thoroughly aware of the schedule, expectations, and process of acquiring and sharing newly acquired knowledge, skills, and dispositions; and
- the initial burst of energy at the start of a course is sustained systematically over the entire term.

Here are some suggestions for making rhythm and flow happen.

Visualize the Entire Term

When preparing the syllabus, first create a course-long calendar to visualize the pace, difficulty, and spacing of individual assignments and learning experiences (Pregent, 1994). Make sure the plan is spaced, balanced, and sequenced.

Slice and Dice Big Assignments Into Pieces

If a course requires, for example, a lengthy writing project that will be due at the end of the term, consider breaking up the assignment into smaller pieces that will be due across the span of the term (e.g., outline, rough draft, peer editing and review, final draft). This strategy will spread the work across the entire term and create built-in accountability for students.

Create Hand-in Dates

Typically, course syllabi specify the assignments that students are to complete during the term and the dates when those assignments will be due. An alternative is the hand-in date strategy:

- At the beginning of the term, give students a list of the assigned projects, papers, and presentations.
- Instead of providing specific due dates for each assignment, provide a series of completion dates (e.g., completion date #1, completion date #2).
- Allow students to choose the order in which they complete the assigned tasks for the term and submit one completed assignment on each of the designated completion dates.

This strategy allows students to decide which assignments they can complete first and which assignments will require more time to finish. They also can front-load assignments to prevent the common practice of requiring a massive amount of work to be completed during the final two weeks of the term. In other words, this strategy invites students to create their own levels of rhythm and flow (Garner, 2012).

Monitor Your Own Stress Levels

Periodically assess levels of stress, anxiety, or fatigue over the academic term. Ask: Is the stress related to the course schedule? If faculty are stressed, students likely are feeling the pressure, too.

Always Do a Postmortem

Always, always, always take some time at the end of each course and each academic term to reflect on what has been learned about how to make the course more efficient, effective, and conducive to good learning.

Let the term begin—with rhythm and flow!

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By Jennifer A. Latino and Michelle L. Ashcraft

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April 9-May 11, 2013

Strategic Planning for Your First-Year Experience Program—facilitated by Bernard Seva-rese, Associate Director in Undergraduate Admissions and First-Year Experience, and Julie Schultz, Senior Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions and First-Year Experience, at The Ohio State University

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Award Nominations

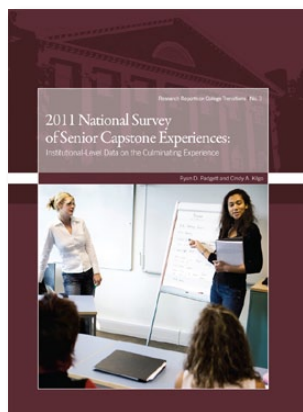
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Transitions and the Role of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Partner session by Mary Stuart Hunter and Rico R. Reed, at the 36th Annual NACADA Conference, October 5, 3:15-4:15 p.m. in Nashville, Tennessee.

Peer Leadership Within Higher Education: A National Portrait. Plenary session by Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center Director, at the 2012 National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) Conference, October 28, Las Vegas, Nevada.

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The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

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