

Scaling Student Assessment Podcast Series

[Episode 2 – Mid-Semester Feedback](#)

Intro

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Drew Vartia: Right.

Dyan Morgan: It's not a rush to be willing to do. My students have been willing to do that.

Drew Vartia: This is our second installment of the Scaling Assessment series. And today we are talking about scaling mid-semester feedback. And I'm here today with Dyan Morgan. Dyan, go ahead and introduce yourself.

Dyan Morgan: Hi, I'm Dyan Morgan. I'm an associate teaching professor in the undergraduate biology program here at KU

Drew Vartia: Could you tell me a little bit about the course, the course or courses that you're teaching this semester?

Dyan Morgan: Yeah. So, this semester I'm teaching immunology. I have about 140 students. In the past, I've had up to 190 in that class. But most of my classes these days are somewhere between 100 and 150 students.

Drew Vartia: So, a good size.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah. I'm not teaching the jumbo classes of a thousand.

Drew Vartia: Or have you done 600?

Dyan Morgan: No, I taught a 500 person class once. But this I like this size.

Drew Vartia: So, this is the season when instructors often think about how to make their courses better in the sense that they're at a place where both the instructor and the students have experience with the course and its initial inception and have enough information now to think about what they might change or improve or add going forward to finish out the semester in a strong way.

So, in that spirit, you know, we think about mid-semester feedback in contrast to end of semester feedback. This is really a time to make a mid-course correction in a very literal way, mid-course and in principle you wouldn't collect feedback on anything that you're not willing to actually change or implement.

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Dyan Morgan: Yeah, I mean, I think that's a really important place to start when you're doing any of this kind of mid-semester feedback is what? What could I change? You know, what restrictions have I set for myself and my course structure or syllabus? What do I have time? Just thinking about your schedule. What do you have time to do? What scale of change would you be able to do?

And so thinking about what kind of feedback you're opening yourself up to or that you're interested in getting, is it about a specific assignment? Is it about a specific part of the class? So, so thinking about what questions you will pose and what what kind of questions you might pose, I think is a good place to start with when you're planning.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, I think based on what you're saying, it's easy to think about this in terms of large classes, say 100 or more, and particularly this semester when there are so many more students in the sense that simply thinking about what you are willing to do or the changes you're willing to make as the instructor, automatically focus the kinds of questions that you'll ask and the kinds of meaningful student input you're willing to to collect so that automatically, I think when I was things from very, very open ended feedback and several questions of open discourse, you know, down to something more manageable in this higher enrollment phase, right.

Dyan Morgan: So, I think if I did have one of these jumbo classes of 500 or more, maybe I'd be leaning more towards less open ended, more restricted options like a multiple choice type of survey or something or a Likert scale. Whereas so far, I've been able, with the size of my class, I've been able to do more open ended questions where students are writing some kind of narrative.

Drew Vartia: So that's narrative feedback for 140 students. Am I hearing that right?

Dyan Morgan: Yes.

Drew Vartia: So, tell me more about that, because that seems like a lot to bite off. How do you manage it?

Dyan Morgan: So far? I've managed it by working through the responses quickly. The assignment that I give students each week are one. One assignment I give students each week is it's an extra credit assignment for one point, so they have a carrot to do this assignment. And the questions I ask are, What did you learn this week? What was most challenging?

Dyan Morgan: Or we'll need their most review this week. And then is there anything else you'd like to share? And so when I'm looking at this feedback, I do it quickly. So I really skim the first two questions that what did you learn and what was most challenging? This is my seventh semester teaching this class, so I am pretty familiar with what things they should be learning that week and what things are probably most challenging.

And then I'm watching out for misconceptions or inaccurate information. I'll correct that. And then I'm especially watching out for students that have written something in that third response box. So students share all kinds of things with me. Some of it is relationship building. You know, they'll tell me what they're up to. They'll tell me about the plans they're excited about for the weekend.

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They'll tell me about the new mango smoothie that they had at the shop downtown. Yeah, but also sometimes students share things like, you know, mental health concerns or things that I need to follow up separately. So those those sections. That third question is really where I'm focused when I'm reviewing them, but I do try to review them very quickly.

So, I've never timed myself, but I would guess that it's like 30 seconds per per students responses.

Drew Vartia: They're okay. Yeah, that's just.

Dyan Morgan: Based on the time that it takes me to grade them each.

Drew Vartia: Week. So that's a little over an hour. Sounds.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah. So I usually, I block off, I have a recurring event on my calendar to block that hour every Monday to review those responses.

Drew Vartia: For those first two questions that relate to the topics for that week, are those amenable to being reformat added in a way where you give them the topics that week and they simply have to circle one or something a bit less time intensive on your part than reading a response.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah, absolutely. So I think what I could do if I needed to, you know, if this course gets much bigger, which it probably will in the coming years as as this freshman class moves up through our curriculum, I think I could give them maybe the learning outcomes for that week and say which you know, which of these was most challenging.

You know, I may not even need them to restate for me what they learned. I do like having that question in there now because I feel like it contributes to their metacognition in the course. Just what am I learning and thinking about the connections? And and also students have told me in the past that they use they use this assignment each week as like a to develop a study guide for themselves.

Drew Vartia: Nice. Yeah. Now, that's fantastic. Yes. And it's sort of reminiscent of the minute paper.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah. Yes, absolutely.

Drew Vartia: And I know that that can be useful to get people to take all of these skills or ideas or information that they've learned and try to put them together more than they would have otherwise. Right. It's sort of a forcing mechanism to make the connections you're talking about. I think that's smart and really worth keeping in your original survey.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah. I've done a a minute paper before. Back when I was in grad school, we had an assignment at the end of the class period where the students would tell us they could give us a high. Maybe it's not a one minute paper, but it's like a modest point or, I don't know. There's different names for this type of assignment, and the students would give us, you know, what's your lingering question at the end of the class period?

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And then we also in that class, we had a semester long project that the students were working on. So our second question for each class period was, you know, what questions or concerns or comments do you have about this project that you'd like to share or to have answered or addressed? So that was really helpful because it helped us figure out for that larger project what things do we need to scaffold a bit more, what things are not are just not clear.

We didn't provide clear directions for it, so that was really useful to get that feedback about how the project was going for student The student side.

Drew Vartia: It sounds like that was a pretty regular check in and it makes me wonder about the same tool used less frequently. So in this mid-semester stare, yes idea. Can you still have sort of a modest point for, say, the prior 6 to 8 weeks and, you know, asks students to report on that and then use that for for maybe informing instruction for those back 6 to 8 weeks.

Dyan Morgan: Absolutely. I think that's a great, great point, Drew, that, you know, even if you want to keep the narrative aspect or you want to keep the open ended ness, you could adjust the frequency so that you're not having to set aside an hour or 4 hours, depending on your class enrollment size, but that you still get that type of feedback.

But just less frequently. I like that idea.

Drew Vartia: At some point we had touched on the use of different forms of support for for taking these narrative data that you collect from students and analyzing them. You know, what do some of those forms of help look like or have you used in the past?

Dyan Morgan: So, I've been reading these student responses myself. I have a colleague that I co-taught with. You know, he likes this assignment as well, this weekly feedback. And he now has a teaching assistant that is in charge of reading those responses and kind of distilling them down, providing that summary to him. So that's one thing to think about when you're trying to scale up this narrative feedback and its analysis.

If you get additional teaching assistant support as your class grows. But you've told me about something that you've been talking about with with Doug Ward maybe related to I have. Was that.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, does.

Dyan Morgan: That work?

Drew Vartia: Doug Ward and I. Doug Ward is an associate director here at the CTA. He's heavily involved in investigating AI and its its growth in sort of the academic sphere, and I was talking with him about it in relation to assessment, specifically how it could be used as a tool to take student feedback and analyze it in a number of different ways that could be useful to instructors.

Drew Vartia: So, he and I are going to sit down on a future episode of this this podcast and talk more about the mechanics of this. But the idea is if you can collect student feedback in some type of electronic file, So

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presumably they've typed it into a survey or some other mechanism, you can generate a file that that you feed into an AI platform such as Chat, JPT, and at that point you can interrogate those data any number of ways.

So, you could say what are the top three most common themes that are positively worded? What are the top three most strongly worded student concerns? Can you provide me with five examples of outlier comments? And it will do all these kinds of things for you at the same time, I think there is a human element that gets lost.

If you do only that and there is the ability to not see something important. And you mentioned that sometimes students report fairly personal things to you through these feedback mechanisms. So, I think that there's still a place for reading through all the comments that you get, certainly. And then also we touched on this. There is something of a contract, whether it's implicit or explicit, but between you and your students, when you ask them to do something, if you make them write something to you specifically, it is incumbent upon you.

You have some moral duty to then look at what they have produced. Right? So, there's sort of twofold reasons to continue reading all of those comments, at least in a cursory way. Right. But in terms of picking out themes, AI is something that can easily help instructors do that.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah, that's a great idea. Great point. I also think AI clickers can do some of this. So if you did some of these types of questions during class, I clicker will generate a word cloud and you could see maybe see some themes there, but probably not as distilled or not as clear as you would see with with the AI method where with the word cloud you're just seeing, you know, keywords or key phrases.

Drew Vartia: So, so understanding that everybody's sort of at a different point with AI and clickers have certainly been around a bit longer. Yeah. And have a particularly heavy presence in STEM courses. Could you tell me a little bit more about how you get those clickers to generate a word cloud for you? I'm actually not familiar with this process.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah, I'm I'm probably not an expert on this. I'm well, I'm not an expert on this. My understanding is that when you write your question in the clicker format, you just need to select that It's what you want it to generate. A word cloud. I'm not sure of the exact steps, but I have done it before. It's just been a little while.

Drew Vartia: Sure.

Dyan Morgan: Going super low tech in my class. I have also just done the thumbs up, thumbs sideways, thumbs down option. If you if you don't want to use clickers or you're not already using them and maybe you want feedback on how a particular thing has gone, of course, the students have to be willing to give you a thumbs down to your face, but.

Drew Vartia: Right.

Dyan Morgan: It's not everyone should be willing to do. My students have been willing to do that.

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Drew Vartia: For better or.

Dyan Morgan: For better or for worse. They don't mind giving me the thumbs.

Drew Vartia: Down and that is certainly a great method. Tried and true with 140 students. And thinking about that scale, is it How confident, I guess, are you in your ability to to read the responses for that room?

Dyan Morgan: Yeah, I feel like I can still see people pretty well in the space that I'm in. But I'd say if you're in, you know, in some of the rooms and building like, I don't know if I feel like depending on how spaced out the students are, I'm not sure I'd be able to see them. So that might be a technique for certain spaces.

Drew Vartia: Well, now I'm wondering what you said Got me thinking. Is there a simple variant on this where you say, if you would give this a thumbs up, stand up from your seat.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah.

Drew Vartia: Okay, great. I have a handle on that. Go ahead and sit down. If you're unsure or feel like you're in the middle, go ahead and stand up, you know, and kind of go through them that way just so that the visual read isn't quite as difficult. Yeah.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah, that's a good point. Get them moving. Tutoring? Yes. Wake them up. And you could also just do that through the eye clicker. Also, you could make a yes no maybe option or multiple choice or Likert option for questions that you ask.

Drew Vartia: That's a great point.

Dyan Morgan: Or use something like mentee or I don't know, maybe coat. Yeah like and anything, any sort of polling website could be used for that type of question too.

Drew Vartia: Yeah. All of that makes sense. Sort of the key seeming to be that if you can make it selective. Well no, not meant is not selective response. You can just type in whatever you want.

Dyan Morgan: Yeah, I think so.

Drew Vartia: As long as you can create some kind of an interface between the students and something that you can see. Whether that's through clickers or mentee or, or like who. Yeah, no, totally valid. But that is a valid way of collecting information. And for some of these, having it analyzed in real time as those results roll in. And so you don't have to do a lot of that work on the back end.

Drew Vartia: Yeah but you're right that that's kind of a live in person thing and you know, yeah, there's something of a comfort.

Dyan Morgan: Not everyone may want to get the answers back live in front of their full class. Right. If you're getting some sort of negative feedback.

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Drew Vartia: No that's a good so I.

Dyan Morgan: Think that's something just to be aware of is that you may not get the responses you were expecting. And then how do you handle that in front of your whole class?

Drew Vartia: Yeah, and I think that relates really strongly to this idea of don't ask it unless you're willing to act on it, right? Don't ask it unless you're willing to react to the outcome in front of your class.

Dyan Morgan: The dark side of your feedback during your class period. One advantage to getting feedback during class is that you probably increase your response rates. I've done. Yeah, I've done mid-semester feedback surveys using Qualtrics and my response rate is usually quite low, so I suspect you'd have higher response rates doing in class. In class methods or somehow linking points to the feedback.

Drew Vartia: I think that is really timely in the sense that, you know, people in the next few weeks are going to be thinking about doing this if they haven't already. Something to always keep rolling around in your head as it's thinking about response rates and making sure that students have the opportunity to participate in this process and that also you want to if you're going through all this trouble, collect as much information as you can so that you know what's going well in your course and what you might adjust.

Drew Vartia: well, thanks, Dyan, for all of that information. I think that you have a lot of experience in this area and had a lot of really great ideas to share. So thanks for batting some of that back and forth with me and providing your insight. My hope is that a lot of faculty can benefit from this, either as a refresher, a source of inspiration, some general guidelines kind of going forward into the middle of the semester.

Dyan Morgan: But thanks for the chance to talk with you today, and I'm walking away with some new ideas to try out, too.

Drew Vartia: Sounds great. Thank you so much.