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Pivoting at the Midpoint: How Midpoint Course Adjustments Influence Student Engagement

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Abstract

In higher education, instructors must often pivot to new methods, approaches, and exercises to help students achieve learning objectives in a particular course. These course pivots can be challenging to navigate; however, they are often the difference between a successful course and an unsuccessful one. Research on the punctuated equilibrium model of group development provides important insights for instructors on managing and navigating course pivots. This article reviews research on midpoint transitions and discusses the benefits of implementing midpoint pivots. It then introduces an example of a midpoint course pivot: The Stop-Start-Continue exercise. It concludes with a discussion of the implications this exercise has for instructors and students alike.

Keywords: student engagement, course pivots, midpoint transitions

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges instructors face in higher education is how to keep students engaged in the classroom (Crane, 2017). When students are engaged in the classroom, the learning process is enriched, and learning outcomes are more likely to be achieved (Burke & Moore, 2003). Conversely, successful student learning is hindered when student engagement is low. Therefore, how instructors respond to low engagement is an important aspect of teaching that educators must consider to create a successful learning environment. In moments of low student engagement, instructors can pivot to new methods, approaches, and exercises to better engage students and achieve learning objectives (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). A course pivot can be defined as a shift or change in an instructor's particular strategy to help students learn. Such pivots inevitably involve change, but such changes lie in an instructor's strategies to engage students and not a change in the ultimate course objectives or

purpose. As Eric Ries wrote, “A pivot is a change in strategy without a change in vision” (Ries, 2017, p. 108). While instructors often have opportunities to make course pivots, they can still be challenging to navigate. Effectively carrying out course pivots can be the difference between a successful course and an unsuccessful one.

In this paper, research on midpoint transitions is reviewed, and the benefits of implementing them in courses are discussed. The Stop-Start-Continue exercise is also introduced as an example of a midpoint course pivot. The paper concludes with a summary of the positive effect midpoint course pivots can have on student engagement and learning.

Scholarly Research on Midpoint Transitions

A robust body of research in the business management literature explains how the temporal midpoint presents an important opportunity for group change and growth. This line of research grew out of the punctuated equilibrium model of group performance, which describes how group lifespans include extended periods of stability or equilibrium followed by dramatic periods of change (Gersick, 1988). Gersick and others found that groups often use a temporal mid-point in their life span or the lifespan of a project to recalibrate and ensure success for the rest of the group’s or project’s life (Gersick, 1991; Okhuysen & Waller, 2002; Waller, 2002; Waller, Zellmer-Bruhn, & Giambatista, 2002). Gersick specifically noted that groups “paid special attention to time at the midpoint of their time spans, made abrupt shifts in the focus of their work activities, and depended on midpoint agreements to provide a basis for work in the second half of their time” (Gersick, 1989, p. 305).

These midpoint transitions have been documented in groups with both stable and unstable deadlines (Waller, 2002) and have been shown to help groups to “stop and think,” allowing them to pivot or make changes in their strategies to carry out their work (Okhuysen & Waller, 2002). Furthermore, efforts in attempting change at the midpoint provide a group with enough experience to know what needs to be changed while also granting enough time to successfully make the changes (Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007). This was demonstrated in one study, which found that providing MBA students feedback on their performance and dynamics at the midpoint increased teams’ efficacy beliefs and subsequent performance (Quigley, 2013).

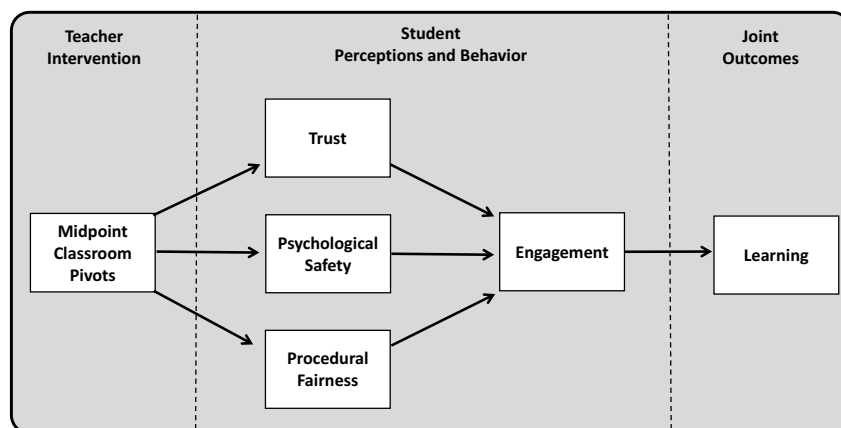
While midpoint transitions have been well studied in workgroups and goal-setting contexts in particular (Okhuysen & Waller, 2002), relatively little is known about how mid-point transitions might be implemented in courses or classrooms. Yet, implementing midpoint transitions in courses—or what can be labeled as midpoint course pivots—can pave the way for greater student engagement and learning. In what follows, the benefits of implementing a midpoint course pivot are discussed. In doing so, rather than focusing on the midpoint of a

single class session or the midpoint of a project, this paper's focus is on pivoting at the midpoint of a course.

Benefits of Midpoint Course Pivots

By employing a midpoint course pivot, instructors will be able to effectively engage students and improve learning outcomes in three primary ways: namely, by increasing student (1) trust, (2) psychological safety, and (3) commitment (See *Figure 1*). First, midpoint course pivots can increase student engagement through greater trust because such pivots allow instructors to demonstrate vulnerability. At its core, trust is reflected in the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to another's actions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Romero, 2015). For example, an instructor who recognizes that a specific delivery method of instruction is hindering student learning in some way can involve students in a decision-making process to determine what methods might better suit a particular learning objective and pivot methods of delivery based on student feedback. When this happens, instructors demonstrate vulnerability in that they admit they do not have a monopoly of authority on what methods are best. Previous research has found that when instructors demonstrate vulnerability by involving students in decisions about the learning process (Tarchi & Pinto, 2016), students are more likely to become active participants, and learning outcomes can be improved. (Whipp, Jackson, Dimmock, & Soh, 2015). When instructors demonstrate vulnerability by reflecting with students at the midpoint of a course about what changes in strategies would enable significant progress on course objectives, student trust will grow. In turn, students will have increased motivation to learn and a greater willingness to take risks necessary to be taught in the course (Yair, 2008).

Figure 1: Model of Midpoint Course Pivots and Student Learning



Second, midpoint course pivots can better engage students by increasing psychological safety in a class. Psychological safety is characterized by an individual's perception that it is safe to take interpersonal risks such as speaking up or asking questions (Edmondson, 1999). Research has convincingly shown that when individuals feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to take intelligent risks, ask questions, speak up about mistakes, and overall are more likely to learn (Edmondson, 2003). When instructors solicit student input during a midpoint course pivot, student's feelings of psychological safety are likely to increase (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In turn, student willingness to ask questions, seek feedback and contribute to class discussions increases (Detert & Burris, 2007; Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012).

Lastly, midpoint course pivots can increase student engagement by involving students in course design and increasing perceptions of fairness (Brockner, Wiesenfeld, Diekmann, 2009). When instructors seek the input and suggestions of their students, they involve students in decision-making, thereby tailoring methods and strategies to the needs of the students and incorporating student feedback into the course design. Previous research has demonstrated that when individuals perceive fairness in the process in which decisions are made, their identification with their group increases and they are more committed and engaged (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Often, having a fair process is more critical to commitment and satisfaction than the fairness of the outcome itself (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). Similarly, when students are involved in the course's decision-making process, student engagement increases, and commitment to course objectives grows. As these results take effect, students will likely be more committed to ensuring the changes are successful.

Taken together, midpoint course pivots can promote student engagement by increasing student trust, psychological safety, and procedural fairness. These characteristics provide ample motivation for educators to utilize midpoint course pivots. One example of such a pivot is the Stop-Start-Continue Exercise. Described below, instructors' use of the Stop-Start-Continue exercise can improve students' engagement in the course and increase student satisfaction within a given course.

Stop-Start-Continue Exercise

Business consultants have used the Stop-Start-Continue exercise and its variations as an effective tool for leading change (see <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/start-stop-continue/> and <https://www.retrium.com/retrospective-techniques/start-stop-continue> as examples). However, to our knowledge, the exercise has not been documented in higher education research. This article's first author has used the exercise in each of his full semester classes and

found it helpful to solicit student feedback and make effective mid-course course pivots. The exercise is simple and straightforward to carry out.

A week before the midpoint of a course, instructors provide students with an anonymous survey, either electronically or using a paper-based format. In the survey, instructors ask students to consider three basic questions: (1) What have we been doing in class that we should stop? (2) What have we not been doing in class that we should start? And (3) What have we been doing in class that we should continue to do? Students respond to each question with as many items as they choose, though typically, students provide two to three responses per question. After the surveys are complete, instructors analyze the responses in aggregate, looking for connections, patterns, and themes, and points of disagreement in student responses. Approximately a week after the survey is sent to students, instructors use a portion of a class session to present the connections, patterns, and themes identified in the surveys to students (see *Table 1* for some examples of common feedback categories). This can be done orally or with accompanying visual aids demonstrating the common themes visually. As instructors present the themes identified in the surveys to students, they can elicit discussion regarding possible ways to address the themes that were identified. Such discussions allow the class to make an active contribution to the future direction of their learning within the course and increases student engagement in subsequent course objectives, projects, and activities.

Once the discussion is concluded and the students who wished to make comments have had the opportunity to do so, instructors can identify ways to address the issues raised. Also, instructors can address with students why specific issues raised may not be able to be addressed. After the exercise, instructors can implement the changes they identified with students throughout the remainder of the course. As a result, student engagement and learning seem to increase; however, empirical evidence is still needed to verify the exercise's efficacy. This is an area for future research that scholars should consider.

Table 1: *Feedback Examples from Stop-Start-Continue Exercise*

Categories of Comments	Examples of Student Comments	Possible Solution
<i>Course Content</i>	"I do not like our book. The chapters and passages inside are weird and old stories. It is hard to understand."	Use more current readings that teach the same principles
<i>Content Delivery Methods</i>	"I'd like the way participation in class to be 'stopped'/modified. I think it's a good idea to motivate everyone to participate and get more out of the class, but it's difficult to get full participation points every class even if you try raising your hand."	Provide participation points for trying to make a comment and raising a hand even if not called upon

<i>Grading</i>	“I honestly enjoy this class very much. The only thing that concerns me is the fact that an A is a 94% instead of the more standard 93%. However, this offers me additional incentive to study hard, and work for the grade I want.”	Explain the purpose of the grade breakdowns, that may be idiosyncratic to the particular class.
<i>Course Requirements</i>	“So much writing. I write more papers for this class than I did for some of my English classes.”	Provide writing support and resources to students
<i>Student Interactions</i>	“Spend less time on team-based collaboration of the readings. Those who read are already prepared and benefit more from a deeper class discussion than explaining what the reading was about to those who aren’t as familiar with it.”	Adjust time allotments to different class activities
<i>Physical Class Environment</i>	“It would be nice to mix up seating or small discussion groups every so often. I feel like I hear the same opinions pretty frequently from my project group, and it would be nice to listen to others in a smaller setting more frequently so we can build on each other’s ideas.”	Change team membership throughout the semester

Common Challenges

While the Stop-Start-Continue exercise can yield significant benefits for student engagement, it can also be challenging to implement. From the first author’s experience using the exercise, the most common challenges include discrepant student feedback, insufficient resources to enact change, and unflattering feedback. For example, some students may see an aspect of the class as a strength, while other students see it as a weakness. This can be challenging to navigate and, at times, impedes the opportunity for complete consensus. However, in the original survey, a majority of the class will usually express a desire for a similar change in direction. In addition, some students may be unaccustomed to providing feedback in this manner and may feel a lack of authority to have a voice in enacting course changes. Some preparation for the survey to explain the reasons for the exercise, reassuring that students’ voices will be heard, and ensuring anonymity of the results may be necessary to promote student responses.

Furthermore, student feedback may address issues that instructors do not have the time or resources to address within the course’s time frame. For example, certain aspects of the curriculum and the course’s designation are out of an instructor’s purview of authority to change, such as grading procedures or thresholds that are part of standardized departmental

requirements. Moreover, student feedback may focus primarily on instructor performance rather than course objectives, which may reveal ways in which students feel the instructor has fallen short. This can be difficult to process, especially when feedback lacks a constructive tone. However, difficulties aside, this process can be an important opportunity to learn for students and instructors alike.

Conclusion

Student engagement and satisfaction are essential to improve learning outcomes (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006). Drawing upon research on midpoint transitions, we have argued for using midpoint pivots within higher education courses. By increasing student trust, psychological safety, and fairness, midpoint course pivots can effectively promote student engagement and satisfaction. In turn, learning objectives are more likely to be achieved. One effective way to carry out midpoint course pivots is by using the Stop-Start-Continue exercise. This exercise can help instructors recalibrate and alter their strategies to better achieve course objectives. Through this process, both instructors and students will be better positioned to contribute to a course's effectiveness. In this way, midpoint course pivots can be an effective means to improve the course experience.

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