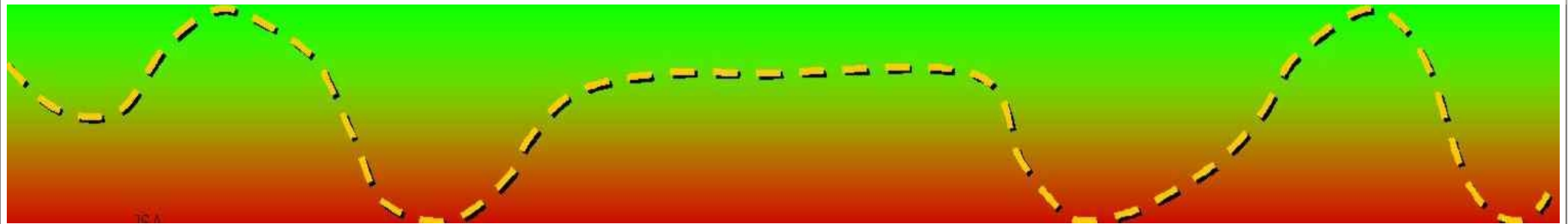


Introduction	Testing-out	Routine	Blues	Assessment Anxiety
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The **introductory** phase is characterised usually by a degree of expectancy mixed with uncertainty, even if the students have met you before. Assuming that you provide adequate **security** for them (handbooks, module outlines, reading-lists, and a sense of knowing what you are doing), and that they are not dismayed unduly by the bizarre group of colleagues they are stuck with for the duration, there *may* be a honeymoon period in which motivation is higher than normal. However failure on these counts is likely to induce premature testing-out.

My experience, for what it is worth, is that while it is important to provide the security in the very first session, students also want a sense of **going somewhere**, so they need to emerge from that session with some information or something to think about which indicates that they have "really started".

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The speed with which **testing-out** arrives, and its intensity, is very variable. It is the teacher-student counterpart of **storming**. It takes many forms: awkward questions (or failure to respond to yours), attempts to get you off the topic, unapologetic adherence to **surface learning**, lateness and absence, conversations at the back, mobile phones ringing, objections to workload, and so on. Some forms are overtly disruptive, some eminently reasonable. Some may try to split you from course or institution policy.

The shared characteristic is that they are all about **what you will do**. Can you be intimidated or seduced? Do you become authoritarian under pressure? If your style does not conform to expectations, can you be manipulated to change it?

You have to respond on the hoof, although a realistic undertaking to respond to a reasonable request next session usually works as long as you do indeed respond. This may be the time that you identify the "trouble-makers" — but it is important not to make premature judgements. They may be acting on behalf of others, or just be more confident in challenging authority.

The rule is to keep your eye on the ball, which is **student learning** rather than your teaching. You are unlikely to emerge unscathed in the eyes of some of the group, but you can't please all of the people all of the time. The question is whether you have a good-enough working relationship to carry on effectively.

The morale and performance level of the **routine** phase, which of course (all being well) is likely to constitute the majority of the course, tends to be determined by the outcome of testing-out. Echoes of previous phases and harbingers of those to come always disturb its equilibrium—the teaching and learning process is dynamic, after all.

This is the settled phase, and it has its disadvantages as well as its advantages. Once it is established — and the longer it is established — the more difficult it is to change it. You may not notice that the level of achievement (or perhaps participation) is lower than it might be, if previous courses have settled down like this, or you may be dissatisfied and keen to do *something* to shake the student up. A mid-course test is a favourite. Like all induced crises it is a risky strategy: it may be just as effective to consult the students about your concerns, and help them to *own* the course as much as you do.

On the other hand there may be a real sense of progress and achievement — congratulations!

Usually, there has been a break: it may be a lunch-break, it may be Christmas or a summer vacation, depending on the time-scale we are working to. Some students may not have come back, for reasons which may have nothing to do with the course.

Whatever has happened, this is when the course is likely to hit the **doldrums**: there may be a sense of "just going through the motions". Desultory testing-out may re-emerge. You may find yourself counting how many sessions there are left, either looking forward to being rid of them, or anxiously lest you have not covered the material, or both.

Like the "mid-term blues" of an elected government (a net search on the subject only produced references to this), you can't prevent it from happening, but if you can maintain your own enthusiasm you can shorten it. Use this time to introduce a major new topic, for example.

This is when you may well see an increased adoption of surface learning strategies on the part of the students: try not to buy into their cynicism. Model continuing to work through the blues, and they will follow (usually).

The blues often end with the arrival of **assessment anxiety**, although this can of course be a factor with coursework at any stage during the course. It may be stimulating, or it may be paralysing. Students can fall back from deep engagement to panicky surface-learning in the face of the day of judgement.

Obviously, assessment design affects this stage. Transparency of assessment and its perceived fairness is crucial: it is appropriate to be anxious, but anxiety needs to be realistic, and fantasy too easily obtrudes. Students need kind but realistic feedback on progress of possible.

However, it is also the stage at which everything may come together, when students begin to form their own Gestalts of the subject. The diagram above very crudely represents the potential swings of this stage, from excitement to despair.

And so to evaluation: was the course a "good experience"? Is there an element of **cognitive dissonance** — it was so tough it must have been good for me? Do the evaluation forms represent a simmering agenda from the first stages, or a considered overview? And can you look back on it with a certain reflective and self-critical pride?

You'll do it even better next time!