

# Activity Post-Mortem

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I am so old that Post-Mortem is a well-known technique for debugging programs. And so old that when I started teaching as an assistant, pedagogy did not exist – we were just “thrown into the deep end of the pool and told to swim”. So it seemed obvious to me to turn Post-Mortem into a pedagogical technique for debugging and improving my teaching. To first dump data about *what* happened and then analyze that data to find out *why* it happened and what *actions* to take to remove the problem.

Most teachers want to become good at teaching – and when they have become good they will try to become better. However, that is often easier said than done. A critical friend with whom you can discuss and develop your teaching is one popular proposal. But in our busy everyday life it is often difficult to find time and occasion for such discussions – or even find a critical friend who has the time. So even if we might have the best intentions, there are many excuses for not being disciplined and structured. The killer argument often seems to be: lack of time.

The key to learning something is experience and reflection as expressed in Kolb’s learning cycle. It says that our students learn through “Active Experimentation” giving “Concrete Experience” on which they can make “Reflective Observations” leading to “Abstract Conceptualization” that can start new “Active Experimentations”. If this is a good way for students to learn chemistry or medicine, surely it must also be a good way for us to learn teaching. It turned out that my Activity Post-Mortems (APM) were simple light-weight rounds through Kolb’s learning cycle done after any teaching activity.

In its most simple form, the *first step* of APM is nothing more than one single 10x15 cm index card (or A6-format piece of paper) and 5 minutes of undisturbed time. Immediately after a teaching activity, you first spend one minute trying to empty your mind from distracting thoughts. Then you spend two minutes reflecting on *what* happened during the teaching activity (good things, bad things, new ideas). Finally, you spend two minutes writing down the unfiltered results of your reflection. That’s it.

In the *second step* of APM, you schedule the results of your reflection for processing and action. You try to figure out *why* things happened and *what* you can do to repeat or avoid things happening again (depending on whether they were good or bad things). Sometimes you will be able to find time and reason to process the reflections immediately and decide what the resulting actions should be. Sometimes you will find it better – and have time and possibility – to postpone the processing of the reflections until later. In any circumstance the data from your reflection will be there on paper for you to use any time you find suitable.

APM gives structure and discipline for the necessary reflection and takes it from an implicit to an explicit process in a cost-effective way. Capturing reflection data is cheap (easy and fast) and using the results to reflect and act on is no higher cost than usual. APM encourages you to reflect early (immediately after a teaching activity) and in most cases that will allow you to act immediately on the outcome when your action can still make a difference.