

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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So Much Content, So Little Time

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If there's one lament that I've heard over and over again from teachers it's the statement "I have too much content to cover!" It lies behind much of the resistance to change in teaching methods which I have encountered and has probably killed more innovations than any administrative dictates or situational constraints ever could. Surely with a little effort, we could think of a way of alleviating the problem rather than letting it dictate our instructional choices.

Let's begin by examining the assumptions which might lie behind our felt need to "cover" the content. If content must be "covered" in class in order to be learned, are we implying that mere exposure is both necessary and sufficient for learning?

In the first place, merely being exposed to content is not sufficient for learning. It is not the lecture which produces learning; it is the studying, summarizing and organizing of lecture notes on which learning depends. In the second place, it is equally inaccurate to assume that learning can only occur within the context of the class period or interaction with the instructor. In reality a great deal of learning occurs outside the classroom when students are grappling with the content by themselves. When instructors recognize that it is the struggle that produces learning, they design their classes so that some of the struggle will occur during classtime where they can intervene in the process and save the students some frustration and time.

An insistence on covering the content in class may also inadvertently communicate to the students that it is only what occurs during classtime that is worthwhile. What they do on their own is a pale reflection of truth, which is only revealed in class. Is it any wonder that students complain when something on the exam "was never covered in class?" Haven't we communicated to them, however subtly, that it is what occurs in class that matters?

One way to approach this problem is by viewing it as an exercise in time management: too much to do, not enough time to do it. Time management procedures seem to divide themselves into two categories: (1) making the quantity of work manageable and (2) streamlining the process of working. The analogous instructional categories might be viewed as: (1) making the amount of content manageable and (2) streamlining the learning process.

Making the amount of content manageable In time management one of the first things one is advised to do is set realistic goals and priorities. This seems like an obvious first step in content management as well. It will, however, necessitate abandoning the "pack rat" syndrome of content selection (that affliction in which we never abandon a bit of information because at one time it was useful and it may be again some day). As new information arises, it is simply poured into the course without any of the old stuff being drained out. That cannot continue forever; sooner or later, the cup runneth over. To avoid this spillage, the instructor must take a hard look at the content. How much is it realistic to expect students to grasp in the time allotted? If you want to add new information (and you should), something else must go, either in terms of breadth or depth of coverage. If you set firm limits on the amount of information which can be included, then you must also do some priority setting. You must decide which concepts are top priority, which are nice but secondary and which are superfluous, even to the point of sacrificing subtlety in the interest of initial understanding.

A second content management technique might be thought of as "cut to the chase." It is possible that for each concept or skill we are trying to get across to students there is a nugget of information or a component of the skill which is the critical. For example, in problem

solving in engineering, mathematics or computer programming, the critical skill is setting up the problem; the rest is mechanics. Of course the mechanics are important, but they need not be a component of every assignment or discussion once they have been mastered. One way of condensing content is to concentrate primarily on that critical skill of problem set up with only occasional prods to the support mechanics. Not every problem needs to be worked to completion.

A third content management suggestion has to do with the management of resources. Good time managers seek outside resources to help them solve their time problems. The analog in instruction would have us look beyond the bounds of the classroom and the single course for a possible solution to our content crunch. In the first case, if we can admit to the possibility that not all content need be learned by all students, we might save a little time by making some of the content available in alternative formats to those students interested in pursuing topics repeatedly or in more depth. For example, the use of videotaped lectures as supplements, either for remediation or enrichment, might make us feel less guilty about not packing every bit of content into the classtime itself.

In the second case a departmental, cross-course analysis of content might reveal areas in which content is being reviewed in several courses unnecessarily while other concepts are being neglected because of a perceived time crunch. By coordinating cross-course objectives more closely, all instructors might be freed to spend less time on content coverage and more on student learning.

Emphasizing the process A second area in which time management might help us with our coverage problem revolves around the process of learning itself. There are ways of making it more efficient in general and thus allowing more to be learned in a shorter period of time.

One helpful idea is the "routinization of the mundane." How much time is wasted in class carrying out mundane tasks, such as handing out materials or repeating instructions? If the class agenda followed a consistent pattern (assignments always written on the left end of the board, the first five minutes spent in review, the critical concepts

always written in outline form during the lecture, and so on), the routine would alleviate the need for repeated explanations of what's going on. The routine would become a shorthand way of communicating expectations and information and cut down on the need for time spent on spelling everything out.

At another level of pattern use, the pattern of the content itself can be used to facilitate its own acquisition. An instructor can speed up the learning of content in the latter part of a course by establishing patterns of understanding in the early parts of the course. For example, using the same sequence to analyze each new concept gets the students into a rhythm of analysis so that each concept need not be approached as an entirely new problem. The procedures and patterns already learned can be used to learn the new material, which should then be learned more quickly. This does require that the instructor search for patterns across concepts, but this is part of the fun of scholarship, a search for the bigger pattern behind microconcepts. A final process technique from time management which might be useful is the idea of using a more efficient storage medium to manage information. In the time management area this means that the individual stops trying to memorize every bit of information, all appointments, all responsibilities and instead works out a system for recording and accessing that information from a more permanent medium such as an appointment book. One way we can increase the efficiency of our students' learning is to help them learn about the use of such information resources. For example, instead of trying to memorize all the formulas and procedures, students would be far more efficient if they produced an individualized index to their notes and textbooks. The simple step of creating an information retrieval system forces students to organize the information, which is the first step toward learning. Some instructors have used this procedure when they allow students to prepare a study guide which can be brought into the test period and used as reference material, a sort of sanctioned crib sheet.

Work smarter, not harder The foregoing discussion is meant primarily as a stimulus to your thinking. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive guide to content management. Rather I hoped to use the concepts of time management as a prototype for problem solution. It is not a simple process nor is it painless, but we cannot

continue to "cover" everything nor use that plaintive cry as an excuse for continuing the status quo. We must try to solve the problem before it overwhelms us and our students.

Useful Readings in Time Management The following books are well-known in the area of time management. With a little imagination and inventiveness the ideas they contain might offer the busy instructor some additional ideas about ways to get control of course content and time.

References

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