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AdJUNCT
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NEWSLETTER FOR LEWIS & CLARK LAW SCHOOL ADJUNCTS

Fall 2016 classes begin soon. This newsletter offers three articles on issues faculty face as they prepare for the beginning of class. We hope you find them useful.

- *Backward Design, Forward Progress* – introduces structuring your class around identified learning goals;
- *Five Things To Do On the First Day of Class* – ideas to set the tone for the term on your first day;
- *Using Cumulative Exams to Help Students Revisit, Review, and Retain Course Content* -- if you wish to offer a cumulative exam, planning should start now.

BACKWARD DESIGN, FORWARD PROGRESS

By: Pete Burkholder, PhD

Readers...are probably already familiar with backward design. Most readily connected with such researchers as Grant Wiggins, Jay McTighe, and Dee Fink, this approach to course construction asks faculty to initially ignore the specific content of a class. Rather, the designer begins the process by identifying desired learning goals, and then devising optimal instruments to measure and assess them. Only thereafter does course-specific content come into play—and even then, it is brought in not for the sake of “covering” it, but as a means to achieve the previously identified learning objectives. Courses designed this way put learning first, often transcend the traditional skillset boundaries of their discipline, and usually aim to achieve more ambitious cognitive development than do classes that begin—and often end—with content mastery as the primary focus. Although the advantages of backward design are manifest, it’s probably still the exception to, rather than the rule of, course planning.

Yet, backward design has benefits beyond those outlined above. Just as the technique is advantageous to the students we teach, it is valuable to our own growth trajectory as educators, and serves as a useful bridge to interactions with faculty outside of our disciplines.

MAKING TOUGH DECISIONS

First, (re)designing a course via backward design forces us to step back from our fields of expertise, which we know so well and hold so dear, and approach the learning process as novices. That is to say, we are so familiar with our disciplines and their content that it's hard to imagine anyone not endowed with such knowledge or a burning desire to acquire it. Even more importantly, we love the content that makes up our fields, and it can be downright painful to imagine excluding parts of it for the sake of skill development or the realities of semester time limits.

Backward design forces us to make tough decisions about what content is really needed for our students to achieve their learning goals. Maryellen Weimer writes that our attitude toward basic content “has always been dominated by one assumption: more is better” (p. 46). If that construct embodies the typical “coverage” approach, then perhaps “just enough content—and no more” could define the course built around backward design principles. And in forcing us to make fundamental decisions about learning and the role of basic content therein, we must confront the very nature of what we seek to achieve as educators. Is it simply for students to know a lot about our field? Or is it primarily for them to develop the habits of mind that typify practitioners? The former aims low at the Bloom's Taxonomy target, while the latter requires an elevated trajectory.

Ken Bain writes about “expectation failure” (p. 28) as a necessary component to students' cognitive breakthroughs. That is, students must be placed in a situation where they realize their extant ways of knowing won't serve them adequately. Only then can they make their way through the “learning bottlenecks” (in the language of Díaz et al.) which populate our fields. I'd like to push Bain's analogy further: it is often only through our own expectation failures that we as faculty can devise more authentic and meaningful learning experiences for our students. For better or for worse (and usually it's for worse), most of us started out teaching the way we'd been taught ourselves—and many of us still do. Only when we realize that these approaches can't achieve our desired learning goals do we stare into the instructional abyss to contemplate the fundamental riddles of education. If we're lucky, we can seek help from a peer, or stumble across a good pedagogical read. And if backward course design is deemed a solution, we just might squeeze through our own instructional bottleneck and offer something so much better.

BREAKING DOWN SILOS

Second, it is precisely this type of work—the fumbling, the grappling, the eureka moment—that allows us to bridge the chasms between ourselves and faculty in other fields. Too often we remain siloed in our disciplines, knowing little about what our brethren do and assured they couldn't possibly understand us. But if we momentarily remove discussion of specific course content and focus instead on desired learning goals, we find that we actually have a great deal in common. Is clear and correct writing a goal only of composition classes? (Of course not.) Do we relegate critical thinking to the field of logic? (I sincerely doubt it.) Are group work, information literacy, and quantitative reasoning skills that can be developed and synergized across a broad spectrum of classes in

disparate fields? (Absolutely.) Conversations and workshops about backward design necessarily raise these issues, help us emphasize the commonalities (rather than the differences) of seemingly unrelated fields, and serve as vehicles to interdisciplinary empathy and cooperation in ways that content-based curriculum development fails to do.

In the 1998 film *Patch Adams*, Robin Williams plays a physician with quirky but effective approaches to helping his patients. When questioned about his focus on the patient rather than the disease, he replies, “You treat a disease, you win, you lose. You treat a person, I guarantee you: you’ll win, no matter what the outcome.” I think there’s a parallel here for course design. Lead with content, and maybe the more ambitious learning happens, maybe it doesn’t. Lead with learning goals, as epitomized by backward design, and educational outcomes can’t help but have an impact on students’ development. And in adopting such a scheme, we become a more self-aware and interconnected faculty. It’s hard to see a downside.

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<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/backward-design-forward-progress/>

FIVE THINGS TO DO ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I don't know if the first day of class is the most important day of the course, but I don't think many of us would disregard its significance. What we do and how we do it matters. There are lots of good first-day activities—we've shared some in this blog over the years. In this post I'd like to move our thinking in a different direction and suggest five first-day essentials that go beyond the activities. These are the goals for the first day that we can use the activities to accomplish.

1. **Showcase course content.** The first day of class is the time for introductions, and the content should be among those things introduced. I recommend a bit of content show-and-tell that features a surprising fact, a question the content answers, some current issue that relates to the content, or something that illustrates, better yet, demonstrates why the content in this course matters. Establishing relevance and promoting intrigue can help motivate student learning right from the start.

2. **Get students talking.** Expectations for an interactive course should be set from day one and telling students that you want them talking isn't nearly as effective as getting them talking. They should be talking to you and talking with each other. Maybe it's a getting-to-know you ice-breaker, or some initial exploration of a content issue of interest to students, or a student discussion of what's on the syllabus. The goal is hearing multiple voices in the classroom or online on the first day.

3. **Be personable.** Yes, you are the professor, but you are also a person. Students know that you're the one in charge and that you're the one who enforces the rules. I don't agree with the idea that teachers have to come across as the big "heavy" who lightens up only if students understand and accept who has the authority. It's much more effective to begin the course letting students know that this is a course you want to teach (fingers crossed that it is) with content you love, and that you are there to help them learn. Students want to be taught by a professor but one who acts like a person.

4. **Give students a reason to read the syllabus.** In most courses teachers cover syllabus content so completely students don't have to read it. Talking at length about the syllabus also sends the message that students can ask you rather than look up course information. How about this, distribute the syllabus and give students five minutes to review it. Then put them into groups and give the groups five minutes to answer 10 questions about the syllabus. The first group to answer all the questions correctly wins stickers that say "We're #1," high fives from the teacher, applause from the class, or whatever suits your style and conveys the message that the things students need to know about this course are in the syllabus and they should look there before asking you. The goal is teaching in ways that make students responsible learners.

5. **Be authentic.** Yes, this relates to being personable but it's not the same. Since the students probably don't know you, maybe you can fool them on the first day, but they will find out and they will feel cheated. It's about being true to your personal style right from

the start. That doesn't mean "doing what you've always done" on the first day. It's good to change things up, make improvements, and step outside our comfort zones a bit. I have a good friend who is forever after me to try current fashion trends. "Try this wrap, it'll look good on you." I try it, it feels strange, but maybe it does look good. Then I wear it for cocktails on the neighbor's dock and get compliments from all sides. And I'm making a fashion statement I never thought I could make. Teaching can be about discovering who you are and sharing those discoveries with students.

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USING CUMULATIVE EXAMS TO HELP STUDENTS REVISIT, REVIEW, AND RETAIN COURSE CONTENT

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD

The evidence that students retain content longer and can apply it better when exams and finals are cumulative is compelling. When I pointed to the evidence in a recent workshop, a faculty member responded, "But I can't use cumulative exams. My students would revolt." Students don't like cumulative exams for the very reason we should be using them: they force regular, repeated encounters with the content. And it's those multiple interactions with the material that move learning from memorization to understanding.

Another reason students object is that they don't know how to study for long-term retention, but there are things we can do to help. With regular, short review activities in class or online we can encourage them to regularly reconnect with content covered previously. Here are some examples.

- Use previous or potential test questions.
- Display a question at the beginning of the session. "Here's a test question I've asked previously about cognitive dissonance. How would you answer it?" Then give them time to talk with each other. Have them look in their notes. It's a great way to get students to discover whether they have any helpful material in their notes that relates to the question. Furthermore, test questions keep students engaged and attentive until they're answered, especially if several possible answers are proposed and discussed.
- As a wrap-up exercise, have students create a possible test question. "This material on self-efficacy is fair game for the exam. What might a test question about it ask? How about jotting down some ideas." Then ask several students to propose possible

questions and identify those that are good. With a bit of editorial polish, create a question from one of their suggestions use it at the beginning or end of a session the following week. And, if one those student suggested questions ends up on the test, that pretty much guarantees that students will take this activity seriously.

- Let students propose potential test questions. Encourage students to submit possible test questions. Those that are good get posted (without the answer) and the author gets a bonus point. Maybe one or two of those show up on the exam. Getting students involved in creating test questions makes them think about questions, not just answers and this student-generated test bank can be used for review across the course.

Regularly, in every class or whenever you're online with a class, make a habit of asking questions about previous material. A few guidelines to this approach:

- Resolutely refuse to answer the questions yourself. That's exactly what students want you to do.
- Ignore their looks of confusion and claims that they don't have a clue.
- Give them a hint. "We talked about mindset when we were talking about motivation. Check your notes for October 20. You might find the answer there."
- Be patient. It takes time to retrieve what you've just learned and barely understand.
- Still no response? Tell them, that's the question you'll start with next session and if they don't have an answer then, that's a potential exam question for sure.

Have students do short reviews of previous material. There are lots of good times to do this—at the beginning of class, in the middle when they might need a break, or as a way to end the session.

- On April 2 say, "Let's all look at our notes from March 3. You've got two minutes to underline three things in your notes that you're going to need to review for the exam." Let them share underlines with someone nearby and then facilitate a short class discussion. This confronts students who don't have notes for the day with the fact they may need some.
- Late in November say, "Take three minutes to review your notes from November 1. Do you have anything in those notes that doesn't make sense to you now?" Encourage other students to respond to what others have identified. "Help Shandra out. What do you the rest of you have in your notes about this?" Conclude by encouraging them to write more in their notes if they need to.

- Or try this, “Your friend Leo wasn’t in class last Tuesday. He texts, asking what happened in class. Text Leo a short answer and don’t tell him ‘nothing’.”

If students are regularly encountering previous content in the course, that makes studying for cumulative exams easier. It also highlights relationships and coherence between content chunks.

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