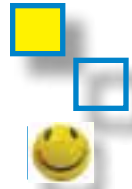


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It's Time to Face What Isn't Working in Our Courses and Find Out Why

NOT EVERYTHING we do in our courses works as well as we'd like. Sometimes it's a new assignment that falls flat, other times it's something that consistently disappoints. For example, let's take a written assignment that routinely delivers work that is well below our expectations. It might be a paper that reports facts but never ties them together, an essay that repeats arguments but never takes a stand, or journal entries that barely scratch the surface of deep ideas.

We know in our heart of hearts this assignment (it could also be a classroom activity, a collection of readings, or almost any aspect of instruction) doesn't work. Maybe we're telling ourselves it's not our fault. Students can't write. They didn't learn how to write in their composition courses. Other teachers aren't making them write enough. They don't want to learn to write. They hate to write.

To be sure, students aren't blameless. Often they don't expend much effort on written assignments. But blaming students shouldn't become the default mode that keeps directing us away from those aspects of instruction that aren't working.

Often teachers avoid facing what doesn't work with one of my least favorite sayings, "It is what it is." In other words, nothing in the world can be done about the problem beyond passively accepting it. Given the kind of students we teach or given what we've come to believe about ourselves as teachers, we muddle along and hope for the best. We shouldn't be asked to face what can't be fixed—or so it seems some have convinced themselves.

But we can face what isn't working and I'd like to suggest how. First, there's got to be a willingness to find out why it isn't working and that question needs to be approached with an open mind. This means not looking for the reason while already suspecting you

know what it is. It also means being willing to pursue the answer wherever it leads, even if that ends up being your front porch. Finding out why some aspect of instruction isn't working is easier when others are involved. You may want to solicit feedback from students. You may benefit from input provided by colleagues—those who can offer wise pedagogical counsel. Finally, this task must be approached with a firm belief that the vast majority of things that aren't working in our courses can be fixed. The "vast majority" doesn't mean all and "fixed" means made better (generally significantly better), but not perfect.

Here's a great example illustrating how this can work and why it helps to involve others. In the paper referenced below, Paul Van Auken, an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, starts out admitting to being disappointed with the quality of student work done in a semester long research project he assigned in an introductory sociology course. Students weren't very engaged in the project and couldn't seem to write a final paper that synthesized their learning in the course. He made one change that improved student engagement but not the quality of their papers. He decided to find out why—why weren't students able to pull it all together in their final paper?

Several months after the course was over he asked a colleague to convene a focus group of students who received low C's to low B's in the course. His colleague facilitated and recorded a 90-minute discussion during which these students talked about their learning and experiences in the course. Much to Van Auken's surprise, the recording revealed that students had way more understanding of the issues and concepts of the course than they conveyed in their papers and this was two months after the course had ended. A colleague wondered if maybe his assignment didn't allow

students to demonstrate their knowledge. Could he try giving students more options for sharing what they'd learned? He could and he did. Students still had to write a final paper but they also had to create a nonpaper artifact that demonstrated their learning. The results? A teacher satisfied and excited about student learning in the course.

What isn't working must be faced
and can be fixed!

Reference: Van Auken, P. (2013). Maybe it's both of us: Engagement and learning. *Teaching Sociology*, 41(2), 207-215. [There's more about this excellent article in the May issue of the Teaching Professor newsletter.]

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; It's Time to Face What isn't Working in Our Courses and Find Out Why; Faculty Focus; May 1, 2013; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/its-time-to-face-whats-not-working-in-our-courses-and-find-out-why/>]; May 27, 2013

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Looking for 'Flippable' Moments in Your Class

WITH ALL OF THIS discussion around flipped classrooms, more instructors are asking this question and wondering when and where flipped strategies are best integrated into the learning environment. Certainly, some topics lend themselves more easily to flipped strategies than others, but every lesson plan has the opportunity for at least one "flippable moment." This is the moment during class when you stop talking at your students and "flip" the work to them instead. This is the moment when you allow your students to struggle, ask questions, solve problems, and do the "heavy lifting" required to learn the material.

The Internet, online textbooks, online lectures, MOOCs, and other resources provide access to endless amounts of content, much of it free. Students can discover information on their own and find the answer to a question within a matter of seconds. What they can't always do on their own is analyze, synthesize, and experience the process of engaging in higher levels of critical thinking. This is when they need to do the messy work of learning, evaluating, and critiquing. This also is when they need your structure and guidance, but not your answers. They have to make meaning for themselves. This is a "flippable moment."

So, back to the original question: How do you determine what can be flipped? Here are four locations in your lesson where flipped strategies might be needed:

Flippable Moment #1:

Look for confusion.

Ask yourself, "What's the most difficult or challenging part of this lesson?" "Where do I anticipate students' having problems or encountering difficulty?" These are the places in your lesson that would benefit from flipped strategies. Re-think this section of your lesson and design an activity for students to engage in. Maybe they need a video to watch and re-watch several times before and after class to reinforce the main points. Maybe they need a group activity to discuss the material with their peers. Maybe they need more time to practice and test their skills.

If this is a lesson you've taught before, then you probably know where confusion is likely to occur. If you've never taught this lesson before, consider adding a classroom

assessment technique to the middle or end of your lesson. This will allow both you and your students to determine where additional work is needed to achieve the learning outcomes.

Flippable Moment #2:

Look for the fundamentals.

Ask yourself, "What's the most fundamental, most essential, and most critical part of today's lesson?" "What MUST students know before they can move forward?" Some may argue fundamental knowledge isn't what needs to be flipped, but if this is an essential skill your students need to develop before moving on, then it might be the perfect place to flip your approach. Your challenge is to design multiple learning opportunities and create a variety of opportunities where students can practice, test, and reinforce their knowledge to ensure mastery.

Flippable Moment #3:

Look at your extra credit question.

Ask yourself, "What makes this an extra credit question?" "How could I turn this extra credit question into an activity or project for all of the students?" Extra credit questions are often designed to test the next level of thinking by moving students beyond memorization or comprehension, and therefore they can provide the perfect opportunity to flip your lesson. An extra credit question might encourage students to analyze, synthesize, and create alternative models or hypotheses. Students who think they know the answer will go for it just to show you how much they know (and to get a few bonus points, of course). That's the moment when your students are motivated and curious. Motivation and curiosity are cornerstones for learning, and you can leverage that energy by using the extra credit question as a place to flip your lesson.

Flippable Moment #4:

Look for boredom.

Ask yourself, "Are the students bored?" "Am I bored?" Boredom will destroy a learning environment. When you come to a point in your lesson or course when boredom strikes, it's time to flip your approach. Design a task for your students to DO. Instead of continuing to lecture to them, take an actively passive approach and step to the side. Put them in pairs or groups. Pose a challenge. Allow them to design or evaluate

something. Give them the space to struggle, practice, and imagine "what if?" so they are challenged and inspired. That's the power of the flip.

When you sit down to plan your lesson, always begin by asking yourself, "What should students DO to achieve the learning outcomes for this lesson?" To learn what you know now as an instructor, you had to do the "heavy lifting" yourself. You had to analyze, reflect, and evaluate. You had to make meaning for yourself. Now it's your students' turn. Flip it to them.

Barbi Honeycutt, PhD in Instructional Design; Faculty Focus; March 25, 2013; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/looking-for-flippable-moments-in-your-class/>]; April 25, 2013

BOOK

Learning to Teach in
Higher Education



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This bestselling book is a unique introduction to the practice of university teaching and its underlying theory. This new edition has been fully revised and updated in view of the extensive changes which have taken place in higher education over the last decade and includes new material on the higher education context, evaluation and staff development.