

## Successful Course Makeovers: Identifying Good Candidates

Pottruck Technology Resource Center, Simmons College

### What causes a course to become stale?

#### *Just an "Off" Day, or...a Bigger Problem?*

Sooner or later, it will happen to anyone who teaches. The blank stare. In a course which you have taught successfully for many semesters, suddenly you fail to capture the students' interest or attention. Discussion flounders, participation is weak, or worse, nonexistent. Student focus appears to be on the clock, rather than the subject of the session. There is perhaps no worse feeling than trying to facilitate a class that just has no pulse. Of course any instructor, in any class, can have an "off" session, however, there are a number of factors which can contribute to the larger problem of a course that just isn't working anymore.

#### *The Evolution of the Student Body*

Age, socioeconomic status, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and learning and physical ability all factor in to define a student body. The diversity found today among these defining characteristics may be greater than at any time in the history of American higher education. Previously considered the "traditional" college student—the white, male, 18- to 20-year old, who attends a four-year, liberal arts college full- time, and lives on campus—no longer represents the typical student in any class.

Rather, he is the minority in higher education. In addition, significant numbers of older

students returning to school due to changes in the economy, women's roles, and work environments now populate classrooms. Indeed, the "older" set now dominates the undergraduate population. More than 50% of undergraduate students are over 21, with 41% over 24 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994).

"Collectively, the trends clearly require educators (i.e., faculty members and administrators alike) to re-examine -- and probably transform -- current assumptions about the ways we engage learners in the educational process."

--*Learning and Teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

#### *The Evolution of the Collegiate Experience*

Given the changing nature of the student, it isn't difficult to imagine that the collegiate experience, too, has undergone a significant shift. Four or five years of full-time study at a residential college is no longer the most frequently traveled road to a college education. Enrollment in graduate and professional degree programs is rapidly increasing, as is enrollment in abbreviated certificate programs. Varied educational goals, combined with diverse life and economic circumstances, result in non-traditional attendance patterns. For many students, college attendance must compete with employment and family obligations, and is therefore not necessarily the central or defining activity of their lives.

#### *An Evolving Understanding of Learning*

##### *"Multiple Intelligences"*

Howard Gardner's theory of "multiple intelligences"— the idea that the students sitting in your classes have intelligence in a number of areas, including, for example,

linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist--informs much of current thought on teaching and learning. As such, learning is multi-dimensional, as well. Learning styles—the ways in which one absorbs and understands material—vary greatly among students.

### ***A Pedagogical Shift***

The passive classroom experience, consisting of an educator lecturing to a large class, encouraging informational absorption and regurgitation, and finally assessing the students simplistic standardized tests has largely been found to be ineffective. Traditional ways of teaching and learning are in need of some serious restructuring. In order for today's young people to become actively engaged in learning, and importantly, competitive in tomorrow's marketplace, yesterday's pedagogical methodology is no longer sufficient.

## **Diagnosing an ineffective course**

### *The "Lookout Weather" approach*

Just as looking out the window may be the best indication as to whether to bring along an umbrella for the day, one of the most obvious indicators of a course's vigor stares an instructor right in the face each time the class meets – student engagement and responsiveness. Thus, the first step to determining if your course may be in need of a makeover is simply to pay attention to the dynamic of the class. Are students engaged? Do they ask questions? Do they participate in lively discussion about the topic at hand? Or, are your thought-provoking questions met with little, or no, response?

### *Assessment*

In addition to observation, assessment offers you a more formal method of measuring the success of your course:

#### **Formative Assessment**

Formative assessment involves building in opportunities throughout a course to assess what and how students are learning. Educators can use this information to make beneficial changes in instruction. Formative assessment allows you to gather feedback on any range of topics, including student perception of the course, suggestions for improvement, and/or topical mastery.

#### **Summative Assessment**

Deployed far more widely than formative assessment, summative assessment reports the overall achievement of students at the end of a course of study.

## **What role can technology play in a course transformation?**

### ***The Medium, not the Message***

The role of technology in teaching and learning should always be a supporting one. Technology should be utilized as a means of facilitating the course goals and as such, should only be considered once goals have been identified.

Technology can assist in a course transformation at many levels:

### ***Uses in Assessment***

Offering web-based assessment tools (formative and summative) offers students the convenience of completing and submitting their feedback on their own time, rather than jotting something down in the last five minutes of class time. This flexibility can lead to submission of more meaningful feedback.

### ***Additional Uses***

The possibilities for using technology to support desired outcomes in (and outside of) the classroom are nearly limitless. For example, online components to courses allow students to continue discourse in between class meetings, students can give web-based presentations of projects, and simulations can be used to incorporate case studies into a curriculum.

The possibilities are endless, but these types of projects are best developed in collaboration with academic technology specialists. If you have an idea, want help with brainstorming and planning, want software training for yourself and your students, or need help integrating technology into your teaching, contact The Pottruck Technology Resource Center. You may even be eligible for mini-grant funding or a fellowship that provides course development release time.

## **References**

Magolda, Marcia Baxter, Patrick T. Terenzini, and Pat Hutchings. Learning and Teaching in the 21st Century: Trends and Implications for Practice. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2004. from <http://www.acpa.nche.edu/seniorscholars/trends/trends4.htm>

A New Tool in the Arsenal: The Role of the Web in Curricular Reform. (n.d.). Retrieved March 1, 2004 from <http://www.ibiblio.org/edweb/web.effects.html>

Howard Gardner, Multiple Intelligences and Education (n.d.). Retrieved March 2, 2004 from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/gardner.htm>

## **Additional Links**

Traditional Intelligence Theories

<http://www.edwebproject.org/edref.mi.intro.html>

The Case Method of Teaching Science

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/teaching/teaching.html>

Harvard Business School: How the Case Method Works

<http://www.hbs.edu/mba/experience/learn/thelearningmodel/howthecasemethodworks.html>