

STRUCTURING FOR ADULT LEARNING IN THE TIME INTENSIVE COURSE:
USING CLASS TIME EFFECTIVELY

by

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Abstract

The need of nontraditional students for scheduling flexibility in higher education has necessitated the time intensive course, one in which the term is generally shortened and the class sessions are lengthened. This class format presents a challenge to educators to structure the course for maximum learning. While some have questioned the quality of programs that accelerate the learning process by compressing knowledge and skill acquisition into a short period, the literature shows that no significant difference exists between the amount and quality of learning gained in time intensive and traditional course formats. Establishing the learning environment, effective teaching practices, and the academic benefits of time intensive courses are discussed in this paper.

STRUCTURING FOR ADULT LEARNING IN THE TIME INTENSIVE COURSE:

HOW TO (EFFECTIVELY!) USE CLASS TIME

“Remember that the cerebral cortex is directly tied to the gluteus maximus, and the attention span of the latter strongly affects the former.”

The Time Intensive Course

Universities have responded to the needs of the growing number of nontraditional students by implementing a variety of flexible course scheduling formats, including evening and weekend classes and time-shortened term lengths. While these course formats have enabled more working adults to attend classes, the increased length of the classes has presented a pedagogical challenge for instructors. The concern that intensive courses might produce reduced learning prompted studies that found comparable results between the learning of students in traditional and intensive courses as measured by examinations or grades (Gaubatz, 2003). Some educators expressed concern that examinations administered at the end of the courses did not indicate whether students retained information learned in intensive courses as well as in intensive courses; however, researchers such as Waechter (1967) found that there was no significant difference between the two types of courses in either long or long-term test scores. Furthermore, the literature supported the use of time intensive courses to promote active learning, encourage academic achievement, and improve class and faculty interaction (Gaubatz, 2003).

Teaching success in the time intensive course lies in carefully structuring a learning environment that capitalizes upon the strengths that the longer class periods afford and minimizing the disadvantages. Courses may run from three to four hours to as long as eight or more hours; therefore, instructors should incorporate a variety of teaching techniques whenever possible and actively involve students in the learning process if they are to maintain the interest and engagement of their students. Messina (1996) found that intensive courses permitted more time for in-depth class discussion, practice at applying theory, experiential learning activities, and greater interaction between the instructor and the students.

Teaching and learning experts from several major universities responded to a question concerning alternative class scheduling posted to the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (POD) listserv. Their observations included the following:

The longer block of time allows for extended problem solving and other involved tasks. (Rutgers)

The longer block of time requires a variety of activities to avoid students losing interest. If the program relies on active learning, the added time helps in completing activities during the session. (Purdue/DeVry University)

The longer block of time allows for more time on task, greater depth of coverage, and less review time at the beginning of each class. (Kwantlen University College)

Creating an Effective Learning Environment

Adults learn best in an atmosphere in which they feel both safe and challenged (Imel, 1994). The effective instructor will achieve a balance between being friendly and challenging the students so that students feel comfortable in the class but not so relaxed that they fail to take responsibility for their learning. It is particularly important to give adult students the opportunity to share relevant experiences.

The classroom climate is established with the first class session. According to Lyons, Kysilka, and Pawlas (1999), an effective first class meeting will prevent many potential problems later in the course. Every instructor should meet at least the following six goals in the first session:

1. Create a positive first impression
2. Introduce yourself briefly and without apology
3. Clearly communicate course objectives and performance expectations
4. Conduct student introductions
5. Learn the students' names
6. "Sell" the students on the value of the course

The arrangement of the classroom furniture is important. If you don't believe it, try sitting in various seats within the room and looking at where the instructor stands. I get a different perspective each time I change locations. If possible, arrange the furniture in a way that suits your instructional purposes. For instance, I try to arrange the furniture in an informal structure that encourages class discussion, much like one often sees in small graduate seminars, when I want

to stimulate a great deal of class discussion. For the easy assignment of small group tasks during the class, I might group tables to accommodate three or four people. Arrangements that permit students to see one another and the instructor and visual aids work very well.

In the first session, introduce yourself without being too lengthy. Like every leader, you need to establish credibility. Adults students like to know who their instructor is and what qualifies him or her to teach the course. Avoid apologizing, no matter how dire the conditions or short a time you have had to prepare. Suppose you were asked to teach the course at the last minute; if you share this excuse with your students, they will lower their expectations of the course. If most students in the class already know one another, you may not think an ice-breaker is necessary. However, if many of your students do not know each other, you can break them into pairs and have them introduce each other or prepare some similar introductory activity.

The syllabus should be handed out and explained in detail so that everyone understands the plan for the course and the performance expectations from the beginning. Time should be spent discussing the relevance and value of the course and what learners can expect to gain. Adults need to know why they should spend their time in your class.

Establishing an effective teacher-learner relationship, according to Tiberius, Teshima, and Kindler (2003), "is as important to the facilitation of learning as are the traditional skills of the trade such as clarity of expression and organization" (p. 213). They related that recent discoveries by a group of psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, child development researchers, and pediatricians called the Boston Group indicated that there exist moments of opportunity within the teacher-learner relationship when trust and communication are either furthered or hindered. Tiberius et al. (2003) reported that the work of the Boston Group "suggests a mode of action through which teachers' authentic responsiveness in teacher-learner relationships may contribute positively to the learning process" (p. 214). The exchange between instructor and learner consists of a series of moments called "present moments," and when the moment becomes one of increased intensity, curiosity, questioning, or uncertainty, then it becomes a "now moment." If the moment is responded to openly and authentically by both participants, the relationship is furthered; however, failure to seize the moment will have a negative effect. The key to capitalizing

upon now moments is to practice awareness, to free oneself to improvise, to be honest about what one knows, and to realize that the student is trying to learn (Tiberius et al., 2003).

Teaching Practices in Intensive Courses

Brown (1992) reported that greater independent work was required of students in intensive courses as more material was learned at a time. She found that the success of weekend courses at City College required three key elements: “a) careful organization by the teacher; b) varied kinds of approaches/teaching techniques; and c) unique outcomes perceived by the students” (p. 4). It is necessary to pay particular attention to the organization of the course, keeping in mind the amount of time that students have to prepare in between classes. Sometimes it makes sense to modify assignments to reasonable lengths that can be accomplished within a shortened term. For instance, it may be best to assign only one longer paper or several short writing assignments rather than several long research papers. The structure of the course must permit students to learn in a variety of ways. Application or experiential learning activities are especially effective in this setting. Using case studies is one way to get students involved in learning and to encourage independent learning as well.

An effective case, whether real or not, is the prerequisite for learning by the case method. According to McKeachie (1999), providing too many details may hinder beginning students from getting the point of the exercise. Cases should progress in complexity and difficulty. Cases are most often conveyed in writing; however, they may also be presented through videos, on the Web, or through role-playing. In role-playing, participants are assigned parts and perform impromptu dramas based on specific character roles. Be sure that students can (a) identify the problem, (b) speculate regarding the causes of the problem, (c) gather clarifying evidence, and (d) draw conclusions and make recommendations (McKeachie, 1999).

In Teaching Studies in Rhetorical Theory, which met for about four and one half hours one night a week, I chose the controversy surrounding the crash of TWA Flight 800 as a case study to give students practice in analyzing the parts of an argument, weighing the validity of claims and proof, conducting research, and writing a position paper based on their conclusions.

All of the students were pilots, and all but one were also flight instructors, so the case held high salience for them. They worked on the project independently: critiquing the article that I provided for them in class, listening to Mike Wallace's account of the crash, conducting further research, and drawing upon the concepts of persuasion learned in the class. They peer reviewed one another's work as their drafts progressed, revised, and subsequently submitted papers of which they were justifiably proud. A salient case study, coupled with independent and group activities, is an example of a method that works well in the time intensive course.

Few people can pay attention for 50-minute spans, let alone digest new information for hours at a time. In fact, Medina (2003) has found that people listening to verbally presented detail need a change of pace or break of some sort every 10 to 15 minutes. When students remain in class for long periods of time, a comfortable classroom climate and sufficient variety become vitally important. I have tested Medina's principle in my own teaching, have observed others' teaching, and have found his rule to hold true. Students are more engaged when the material is presented with "breaks" about every 15 minutes. What qualifies as a "break" varies. Writing in a different color of marker or changing position in the room may be enough to break up the material on a good day, while other times may call for more obvious variation such as a different activity altogether. One of the most effective means of breaking up a lecture is to tell a story. Telling stories captures students' attention and "buys" the instructor another 10 or 15 minutes of attention after the story is over. Ideally of course, stories relate to the material under discussion and reinforce or introduce material. However, an unrelated story is sometimes just what is needed. Part of the art of teaching is discerning when to get students need to be "off the track" and for how long.

Some teaching practices that have been shown to work well in intensive courses include distributing the course syllabus to registered students before the term begins and using alternative forms of assessment such as student demonstrations or projects. Guest speakers, student presentations, audio/video materials, and Web resources can enhance the course and create variety. In one particularly effective evening doctoral course, the instructor scheduled a specialist as an invited speaker for the topic of the night as well as included student presentations

and projects. Teaching the intensive course is an opportunity to use one's imagination and create a unique learning environment that capitalizes upon the extended time format.

One of the best methods for engaging adults in time intensive courses is what I am convinced is also one of the most misused: group work or cooperative learning. Group work is not putting students into groups to work independently or to have those who finish quickly help those who do not; nor is group work a situation where one student does the majority of the work while the rest ride along. As Imel (1994) observed, group work that is well designed does offer a number of positive results. The learning environment is participative and collaborative, peers form positive relationships, students learn from each other, groups produce a result that is better than any one of them could have achieved alone, and students learn communication and leadership skills. In well-structured cooperative learning, students work in a team to achieve a common goal, work interdependently, and are accountable as individuals and as a group (Smith, 1996).

Research has shown that cooperative learning experiences are as important at the undergraduate level as the graduate level. Indeed, Smith (1996) reported the findings of Astin (1992 as cited in Smith) who observed that the quality of the undergraduate experience was dependent upon the degree to which students were actively engaged. Smith listed five elements that signal effective cooperative learning: (a) positive interdependence (students' success or failure is linked to that of their team), (b) face-to-face promotive interaction (students helping each other to boost one another's success), (c) individual accountability (individual performance/contribution is assessed), (d) teamwork skills (leadership, shared decision-making, communication), and (e) group processing (discussion of how group is doing in achieving goals).

Teaching for long periods of time requires the instructor to pace the course. Experienced instructors find that easing in to the course material at the beginning of the class period gives the students an adjustment period as they transition from a busy work day to a night or weekend of class. Generally, students are the most able to absorb new material and complex concepts after a warm-up and review. When attention begins to wane, it is of course, time for a mini-break or time out. Toward the end of the course, the material should be lighter, as students will reach a

saturation point beyond which they will not be able to learn much more. Staying sensitive to the learning needs of the class will help you pace the course effectively.

Academic Benefits of Intensive Courses

Brown (1992) observed that “students in [intensive] classes often work together and form friendships analogous to those of traditional undergraduates, making college a more satisfying, shared experience than is sometimes true for adults working towards a degree” (p. 6). The atmosphere can resemble that of a workshop where application is a natural part of the process and interaction is the norm. This situation is ideal for cooperative learning, case studies, and peer review.

To best take advantage of the longer class sessions and shorter term, the instructor must plan the class sessions carefully. Variety, visuals, interaction, and novelty with frequent changes of pace should be incorporated as much as possible. The most effective instructors in this format will prioritize the course goals and structure activities accordingly, as students will retain those principles that are most emphasized and applied.

Intensive courses permit far more one-on-one interaction with students. I schedule individual conferences with students during periods of assigned class work and talk with each student about his or her progress in the course, being sure to communicate what is going well and what the student could do to improve. These conferences can also serve as a reality check for the instructor to find out what students think is going well in the course and what might need to be changed. I have found that communicating face-to-face does far more to help the student improve than any amount of marks that I may make all over a paper. I encourage students to ask me questions about the comments I make on their papers as well and gladly spend time going over a student's work after class or during a break, as these are valuable teaching moments when the student is trying to learn.

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