White Board

Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Trying Something New?
Seven Things that Boost Success Rates

SO, THE FALL SEMESTER is about to begin and you've decided to try something new in one or more of your courses. Maybe it's a different quizzing strategy, a revised assignment, or a new group activity. Or perhaps you read about a note-taking technique or exam review strategy that you want to try. You want it to work—you want to make learning better for most students (hopefully better for everyone, but there's value in being realistic). Here are some things you can do to increase the chance of success when you roll out something new in your courses.

Plan for it carefully – Don't just up and do it because you think it sounds like a cool idea. Start a bit more objectively by exploring questions such as these: Which of your learning goals is it best equipped to accomplish? Should you be trying it in all of your courses, or does it fit better in certain ones? At what point in the course should it be implemented? What logistical decisions need to be made before you implement the activity? How will you assess its impact?

Modify, adapt, and alter – Don't plan to do it exactly the same way as the person you learned it from. The new approach needs to work with the kind of content you teach, the kind of students in your courses, and the kind of teaching you do. When it worked for someone else, those variables were different. You need to make the innovation your own, and I think there's justification for trusting your gut. What do you think needs to be changed? What strikes you as a reasonable way to change it? Think creatively and make this new approach something that you believe will make a difference for your students.

Talk about it – Changes have a better chance of making a positive difference if they aren't done in isolation. Consult with a trusted colleague as you plan and make alterations.

But even more importantly, involve students in discussions about the change. They are the ones who are going to experience it firsthand. It makes sense to talk about the new approach before they do it, while they're doing it, after they've done it, or at all those times. New approaches have been known to strike fear in students, to foment protests, and result in resistance. The best way to prevent that kind of negative response is to communicate openly. What motivated the change? What's the educational rationale on which it rests? What objectives are you hoping it will accomplish? Instructional change directly affects students; the chance for success improves significantly if you make them part of the process.

Implement confidently – Preparing, adapting, and communicating all build confidence, and teacher confidence contributes to successful implementation. Students take their cues from the teacher. If you look tentative and unconvinced, they'll start to feel unsure. Your confident commitment decreases their anxiety and helps them get more involved, and that, in turn, grows your confidence. You and the students are in this together. Implementing confidently doesn't mean you expect everything to go smoothly and work perfectly. When it doesn't, that's when confident leadership makes a huge difference. An "I know how we can make this work" attitude can keep things from going off the rails.

Forage for feedback – Aggressively seek feedback, and then devour it. One of the values of thinking about assessment before implementation is that you can develop a plan for collecting feedback. It's essential that you receive feedback from students, and the question to them is not whether they "liked" whatever you've had them do. You need to know the impact of this new policy, practice, activity, or assignment on their efforts to learn. What about it helped

them learn, hindered their learning, or had no effect on their learning? Use that student input to confirm, deny, elaborate, or adjust your sense of how things went. You may have designed it, but they did it.

Try to fix it before you toss it – This is good advice even if student feedback confirms your sense that it didn't go well. Sometimes a few minor changes can make a big difference. As with most everything else in teaching, the second time through is better—whether it's a new course, new content, or a new approach. Here's another situation where student involvement benefits them and you. Students are usually quite articulate about what didn't work. They should be challenged to help you figure out what could make it more effective.

Finally, loop back to the beginning – Start planning what you'll do differently the next time you implement this approach.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; "Trying Something New? Seven Things that Boost Success Rates;" Faculty Focus; August 10, 2016; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/trying-something-new-seven-things-boost-success-rates/] August 12, 2016.

Labor Day Holiday- September 5

What You Are Teaching?
What Are They Learning?

CONSIDER THE LESSONS we learn without being fully aware they are taking place. Take something simple, such as walking into a new building for the first time. With everyone and everything you observe, your mind is giving you feedback based on a multitude of judgments. These impressions, while sometimes incorrect, come to us with little effort. Yet they could loosely be considered teaching and learning without calling it either. I have found this to be a fruitful concept from a pedagogical standpoint. How many of us actively question this point to ourselves, "What am I teaching students, and what are they learning?"

Student engagement and active learning can lead to increased understanding and retention of the content. How educators promote interaction with and among their students and the content varies, but regardless of the methodologies—class discussions, group projects, or others—the challenge is in addressing how much time educators allocate for students to engage fully in their learning.

One could suggest that we should question the correlation of two aspects in our classes on a daily basis. The first question is, how efficient do we expect our students to be in collaborating, active listening, and making their own inferences? The next question is, what amount of time do we use for lecturing alone, essentially teaching students to do none of those skills necessary for enhanced learning?

The trend toward student-centered learning continues to improve. According to a 2014 report from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, lecturing on a large scale has continued to drop since 1989 when the institute began recording its use among full-time faculty at four-year colleges. However, the 2013-2014 research cites a decrease only to 50.6 percent of the faculty surveyed nationwide, meaning a slight majority still rely on lecture to a significant degree. The data show improvement, but not necessarily at as fast of pace as one might assume. Although there is a place for lecture in college classrooms both large and small, most would argue it is not as effective as facilitation, where the instructor guides the conversation and infuses necessary knowledge when and where necessary to spur dialogue among students. While we are aware that we are teaching content through lecture, we may be unaware that we are also teaching students to forgo desired skills, such as critical thinking, speaking, and arriving at conclusions. (Eagan, et al. 2014)

Many educators, myself included at times, feel as though they cannot cover enough content without integrating lecture at least proportionately with class discussions or similar activities. It is a valid concern. That being said, if research proves effective those pedagogical and andragogical strategies that call for student interaction among peers, do we forgo quality for quantity all in the name of "coverage"? The goal should be to achieve both, and through adapting curriculum as well as assessments it is truly an attainable goal.

In my history courses, the relevance of the material to my students' lives is, in most cases, sufficient in generating student discussion. I could be simply lucky in that, and no doubt every discipline has advantages and disadvantages in terms of finding the right balance of active learning and lecture.

Nevertheless, if you've ever wondered why students struggle with group work or other activities that ask them to do more than sit passively while we talk, the reason may be very simple. We do well at what we practice. As educators, we should challenge ourselves to break down into percentages, what degree of emphasis and time is realistically allocated to the skills at which we wish our students to become proficient. Are we teaching our students how to be active learners when we have classes with limited collaboration or student input? If we forego opportunities for student-centered learning, then perhaps we are unwittingly proliferating confusion and minimized confidence when our students are asked to practice critical thinking in a context outside of the classroom. Aside from content, let us take note of what we are teaching our students, even when we don't realize we are indeed teaching them.

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Reference:
Eagan, M.K., Stolzenburg, E.B., Berdan Lozaon, J., Aragon, M.C., Surchard, M.R., and Hurtado, S. (2014). *Undergraduate Teaching Faculty, 2013-2014 HERI Faculty Survey.* Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

Dale Schlundt; "What You Are Teaching? What Are They Learning?" Faculty Focus; August 4, 2016; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/what-you-are-teaching-what-are-they-learning/] August 12, 2016