Reducing Course Content *Without* Compromising Quality

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In our work at the Teaching Center, we frequently encounter faculty members who are struggling to cover all the content for their courses in a world where many classes are only 50 minutes, and coverage expectations are growing. They often feel frustrated and stuck between a rock and a hard place. A quick review indicates many instructors are simply trying to cover too much. The solution is simple – content must be cut. But, this solution is often met with resistance. We all feel everything in our syllabi must be covered. However, research indicates that this belief is rarely true, and often rooted in misconceptions.

The common misconceptions about streamlining course content often fall into several predictable categories. First, "all of my content is necessary". Second, "the more content I cover, the more my students will learn". And, finally, the ever popular, "students' lack of success is due to lack of effort; cutting content is pampering them". But, none of these ideas are supported by the evidence (Ambrose et al., 2019; Nelson, 2010).

So, what is an instructor to do? How can we break down these misconceptions and reduce course content without compromising quality? Here are some tips for best-practices that will tighten your syllabus while improving educational outcomes of your courses:

1. **Start cutting down the amount of material you cover when planning your course.**

    Many instructors fall into the trap of "content tyranny" – letting content topics drive their course plan. This often results in coverage that is a mile wide, but an inch deep (Antonelli, 2004). Students absorb less information and gain only a superficial understanding of material (Nelson, 2010).

    Instead, begin by defining your learning objectives for the course. What do you want your students to learn in terms of both knowledge and skills? How will you assess their success? What learning activities will help develop this knowledge and skill set (Ambrose et al., 2010)?

    Make general content decisions based on your answers to these questions. This alignment exercise should serve as your course content filtering process. If a content topic doesn't directly support your learning objectives and plan – remove it.

2. **Determine the essential content by focusing on teaching the analysis of issues or problems, rather than on simply conveying information.**

    After #1 above, you will have a solid content outline. But, you still cannot teach everything you want! Instead, go through your content list item by item. Mark each item as either "essential" or "helpful" with respect to student understanding. This will require discipline. You do not need to cover every theory, concept, or example. Guard against slipping in some topics simply because they are your favorites. This is not a loss of rigor, but the gaining of

focus. The research shows that less truly can be more (Nelson, 2010). Use the following rules as a helpful guide to what is essential:

- Focus on key ideas and general principles or themes.

- Teach process and skills over information.

- Include material not covered elsewhere.

- Make room for clear examples and illustrations.

- Include material of high interest/relevance/value to students.

Then, remove every item marked "helpful" from your list of topics to be covered in class! Some of these items may be appropriate for readings or homework. Others will just have to go. Students can learn facts from their reading. Devote your class time to more in-depth discussion and analysis. Value process skills – like problem solving – over basic information. Stay disciplined and focused on understanding as you edit.

3. **Know your students and adjust your content accordingly.**

One of the first rules of effective communication is to know your audience. This is just as important when teaching a class full of students. Being cognizant of your students' level of familiarity with the course material, as well as their relative intellectual capabilities is key for evaluating course content. In general, for example, first year undergraduates will need to approach content very differently than upper-level students. The more you know about your students' academic backgrounds and abilities, the better able you will be to help them learn what you would like them to learn (Ambrose, et al., 2010).

How can you best know your students? Ask questions and listen to what they say. For example, ask probing questions about the content. How do they handle them? What kinds of questions do they ask you about the material? Even better, consider administering diagnostic tests or informal first-day surveys. These can be done at the start of the course, but also during the semester before beginning new content areas. These types of instruments will allow you to adjust your content as needed.

In addition, consider getting instant feedback on your students' comprehension of a concept by using tools such as Top Hat. A quick anonymous poll can help you to judge whether a concept was understood, or if your teaching approach was effective. This can save you time spent on concepts that are already clear and allows you to spend more time where needed. Keep students engaged by asking 1-3 thoughtful questions. Then ask the class to respond to the collective results. Consider making one of your questions, "What was the most difficult or murkiest point of this topic?".

Take time to evaluate and adjust your plan after EACH class. This will allow you to catch issues and adapt quickly and effectively. This is an important practice whether it is your first time teaching a course, or you are an old pro.

4. Ask for help!

Remember you are not alone. Share your experiences with colleagues and ask them for advice. Also consider making use of the resources of the Teaching Center. Consultants are available for individual or group consultations, syllabus reviews, and classroom observations. For more information, visit the [Teaching Center](#) website.

References:

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