Innovative and Collaborative Ways to Escape the Required Course Rut:

A Roundtable Discussion

Abstract

For anyone who has struggled with or is seeking new methods for teaching a required course, this roundtable discussion will focus on innovative and collaborative solutions to engagement (both student and instructor) and course content problems.

Key words: required courses, engagement, course content

Introduction

It can be tough to engage students in a course they are required to take. They may be uninterested in and unfamiliar with the subject matter, resentful about the requirement, and anxious about how their grade for the course will impact their GPA. It can be tough to engage ourselves as instructors of required courses, as well. Perhaps we are bored with the often foundational and poorly integrated content, resentful about having to teach a required course (again), or anxious about how student evaluations of the course will impact our bids for tenure or promotion.

Targeted to instructors who are currently either struggling with or seeking new methods for teaching a required course, this session aims to generate a productive discussion around solutions to not only student but also instructor problems with required course content and motivation. While "tried and true" tactics are always appreciated, this discussion will be geared towards innovative and/or collaborative techniques to reflect the conference theme. Here, *innovative* includes experiential, technological, or simply counterintuitive learning activities, and *collaborative* incorporates all combinations of student and instructor groups, both in and outside of the classroom. Ideally, participants will walk away with both a refreshed attitude and new instructional tools to bring to their required courses.

Theoretical Foundation

While student engagement can be challenging in any course, required courses are particularly difficult because students do not choose them. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), a complete lack of self-determination is connected with amotivation, an impersonal perceived locus of causality, and non-valuing and incompetent behaviors. While instructors may be extrinsically motivated to teach required courses, their attitudes and behavior may also suffer,

particularly if their perceived locus of causality remains external. The goal is for both students and instructors to internalize the locus of causality (i.e., feel like they are choosing what they already must do), so that regulatory processes become self-identified or even self-integrated. Interestingly, these outcomes still fall within Ryan and Deci's (2000) definition of extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is not essential to valuing a required course and aligning it with one's core values. Hence, a key objective of the roundtable session is to discuss how to extrinsically motivate this internalization process for ourselves and our students.

Required course content presents challenges, as well, because the curriculum, textbook, and even assessments may be dictated by the department, division, or school. Instructors may wrestle with covering all the mandated topics so that students can demonstrate their newly acquired *domain knowledge*, "the concepts, facts, and procedures explicitly identified with a particular subject matter" (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991, p. 13) and typically described in textbooks. In contrast, *strategic knowledge*, "the usually tacit knowledge that underlies an expert's ability to make use of [domain knowledge]" (Collins et al., 1991, p. 12), is developed through experience.

Among the three types of strategic knowledge, *heuristic strategies* are those "rules of thumb" or "tricks of the trade" used to more efficiently complete tasks. *Control strategies* are metacognitive activities that include monitoring, diagnosing, selecting, deciding, evaluating, and remediating what one is doing in any situation. *Learning strategies* relate to learning how to learn (i.e., acquire content knowledge) and enable the transfer or adaptation of the other forms of content knowledge from one context to another. These strategies may be only selectively emphasized in a required course due to curriculum, time, and cognitive load constraints. Unfortunately, infrequent and isolated experiential learning activities may add to the student and

instructor engagement problems. Thus, a second objective for the roundtable discussion is to consider a more integrated intersection of self-determination and required course content.

Teaching Implications

Required courses, often the bane of instructors and students, present fundamental challenges related to engagement and content that may be less salient in elective courses. In particular, large, introductory, required undergraduate courses where the risk is high of students' earning a grade lower than a C (known as *gateway courses*) exacerbate these problems (McMurtrie, 2019). Moreover, research indicates that these high-risk students tend to come from low-income, first-generation, and historically underrepresented populations, tying the instructional challenges to social equity issues (Gardner Institute, 2018). Although not all required courses are gateway courses, a discussion focused on how to innovate and collaborate within the context of required courses will provide participants with concrete learning tools for the classroom, notwithstanding the size or level of the required course. As a *high-impact educational practice* (Kuh, 2008), the collaborative problem-solving that occurs within the discussion will energize participants and stimulate their own knowledge construction.

Session Description

To open the discussion, I will relate a short anecdote about required course issues from my own teaching background and then ask participants to share their own experiences: their own challenges with required courses, tactics that worked, and those that did not. Second, I will ask participants to examine a one-page brief of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory and Collins et al.'s (1991) types of content knowledge, so that all participants can share language to contextualize the generation of solutions. We can spend a few minutes explicating the theory, if desired, and we can create a shared understanding around *innovation* and *collaboration* in the

context of our discussion. Third, I will initiate a think-pair-share activity centered around these three questions:

- How can you facilitate the internalization of locus of causality for your students?

- How can you internalize the locus of causality for yourself?

- How can you create more integrated intersections of self-determination and your required course content?

Participants will (a) reflect and make notes on how they might apply the theory to the problems articulated, (b) pair with one or a few others in their vicinity to discuss their ideas, and then (c) bring the ideas and/or concerns that came out of the pairing back to the larger group. While I will be prepared to share my own experiences (grounded in instructional design theory) should the discussion lag, I anticipate that I will be a learner as much as a facilitator. Still, I will write all the ideas on the board or a flip chart, so that everyone can take a picture before leaving the session.

Timeline

Opening discussion of participants' experiences with required courses	5-10 mins
Examine the theoretical frames and define key terms	5-10 mins
Think/write	about 10 mins
Paired/small group discussion	about 15 mins
Plenary sharing of ideas and/or concerns	15-25 mins

References

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