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Caring for Lawns and University Courses: Fixing Common Problems with Deliberate Treatments for Good Growth

May 9, 2017 | By Matthew Barclay
Instructional Design
Teaching Effectiveness

It is springtime and that means lawns are growing. What do you do to help your lawn along in the spring? Many people just start mowing. They also rely on spring rains for water. A lawn might look okay for a while with just this treatment. However, a minimalist approach does not usually result in a green, healthy lawn for the whole season. While mowing and watering are necessary, leaving out additional intervention puts a lawn at risk for various weeds and other problems. Grass needs added nutrients, aeration, grub prevention, mowing with a proper blade, water in correct amounts and at proper intervals, and weed control, among other things.

In some respects, learning situations are like lawns. In particular, educators often treat university courses the way some people treat their lawns – with a minimalist approach. Not that professors intentionally neglect their courses – but many university classes suffer from common weaknesses that can hinder student learning. Here are four common weaknesses in university courses and how to correct them.

Weakness #1: Content-drive courses. Content-driven courses are like mowing without giving consideration to the condition of the mower blade, the grass, or whether there is anything on the lawn that needs to be repositioned or removed before proceeding. Such courses are designed around the layout of topics, usually as prescribed by a textbook. When an educator uses content to drive the structure of a course, problems can arise. Have you ever been in a class where the instructor was so focused on getting through the material that he or she failed to adequately address students' questions, concerns, or even simple comments that would have enriched the experience and deepened the learning?

Fix for Weakness #1: Focus on learners and outcomes. Rather than beginning the design of a course by turning to the content and mapping out weekly topics to align with textbook chapters, start by identifying who the instruction is for and the skills those people need to learn. Leading participants to see what is in it for them is a key principle of adult learning (Stolovitch & Keeps, 2011). Choose a textbook or other materials that best support effective instructional

strategies.

Weakness #2: Pure lecture. Lectures typically go hand-in-hand with content-driven courses. Relying on pure lecture to teach students is like waiting for the rain to water the lawn. The rain may bring enough water for a time but drought and weeds are likely to win out. Also, watering is necessary but insufficient for a healthy lawn. Lecturing has its place in instruction but straight telling as an instructional strategy is usually insufficient (Merrill, 2002, 2013). For an instructor to simply lecture leaves the experience open to boredom, misunderstanding, and even a disdain for learning (Mager, 2012).

Certainly, some lectures are very effective. I have participated as a learner in lectures that were profoundly engaging. However, it is my experience that such courses are the exception rather than the norm. Moreover, engagement is only one piece of the learning equation (Merrill, 2013).

Fix for Weakness #2: Demonstrations, discussions, and examples. It does not take a lot to go above and beyond a straight lecture. Providing demonstrations and using engaging discussions, both as an entire class or in groups, increases student interaction and can do much to improve learning (Merrill, 2002, 2013). Encouraging students to share their own examples helps to engage them and make the learning more meaningful.

Weakness #3: Shallow sequence. Another related weakness in university courses is the sequence of instruction that I call read-listen-assess. This is a shallow learning sequence. In lawn care, it is essential for nutrients to get deep into the soil to feed the root system of the lawn. Dethatching and regular aeration are helpful and sometimes required for nutrients to adequately penetrate the soil. In a shallow sequence such as read-listen-assess, the student is expected to complete assigned readings, listen to a lecture, and then be tested without much or any experimentation of the content.

Multiple-choice formats are commonly employed for testing, sometimes only after several weeks of reading and hearing lectures. This process efficiently moves students through courses but it often drives learners to rote review and cramming to recall complex subject matter that they soon forget.

Fix for Weakness #3: Practice, feedback, and integration. Making sufficient provision for students to practice skills with feedback and integrate those skills into their lives is needed for deeper, more effective learning (Merrill, 2002, 2013).

Weakness #4: Teaching in the abstract. University professors are sometimes guilty of teaching concepts and principles simply by describing them and emphasizing their importance in relation to other principles. Or the professor illustrates with an example or scenario that is meaningful to the instructor but less so to the students. This is like treating a lawn with a standard fertilizer rather than one with the proportion of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium that the condition of the lawn requires (This Old House, 2014). Rather than helping students relate ideas to their own circumstances and aspirations, learners are left to make their experiences fit to the abstract instruction or potentially less-than-relevant examples of the professor.

Fix for Weakness #4: Use relevant and engaging contexts. Using realistic and relevant contexts puts the instruction into meaningful terms for the learners and helps them see the usefulness of what we are trying to teach (Allen, 2017). This is another way to help students see what is in it for them.

Not all university courses suffer from all or even any of these weaknesses. There are exemplary courses that engage students and facilitate learning deeply. But it is worthwhile to take adequate measures, such as those suggested here, to increase the likelihood that courses will be healthy and provide optimal instruction for the whole season of the semester.

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