Intentional Pedagogy: Setting the Stage for Enhanced Teaching and Learning

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As a trained teacher educator, I have always valued reflective practice in my own teaching and among the prospective teachers in our undergraduate elementary and special education program. My teaching load for the past 18 years has regularly included a course on collaboration that is required of all majors. Since this course includes special education law, policy, and practice as well as thoughtful engagement with families of students with disabilities, it has been important to keep course content current by integrating new concepts or approaches and making adjustments to best address the needs of the undergraduate students in the course.

During the spring 2015 semester, several weeks of winter weather dropped over 50 inches of snow on the northeast and forced me to implement contingency planning with the collaboration course, which missed 3 weeks in a row of once weekly class meetings. My fear at the time was that, in addition to missing out on important course material, the 18 students enrolled in the course would not get to build the relationships with each other and with me that I had found to be essential in exploring the benefits and challenges of collaboration and working with families. When we finally convened as a class during week five of the semester, I realized that my assumptions about engagement with the material and peer-to-peer relationship building were wrong. I experienced students to be thinking and interacting on a deeper level during in-class discussions, and my sense was that the out-of-class work that they had done during our missed class meetings had better prepared them for meaningful and sustained engagement during class. Moreover, I realized that my own reflective practice had improved through contingency planning. With each weekly class that was missed, I crafted online and out-of-class assignments that were designed to immerse students in course material and dialogue with others about what they were learning.

In an effort to learn from my experience, I embarked on an in-depth exploration of my instructional decision-making and student learning since 2014. My review included

consideration of course design, pedagogical decision-making, student learning, and feedback, and is mapped onto a conceptual framework comprised of research on flipped learning, course design, culturally responsive practice, and student engagement. My journey within this course during the past several years is a story of pedagogical transformation and rejuvenation that can serve as an example for faculty across the disciplines.

Context

The undergraduate elementary and special education major at Providence College is unique in that it is a merged program where graduates are eligible for both elementary and special education teaching certification. Students in the program take a range of courses that address topics such as teaching methods, literacy learning, assessment, and disabilities. There are also several field experiences where future teachers develop and hone their craft. One course required of all students in the major, Collaboration: Home/School/Community, focuses on providing the best educational opportunities for children with disabilities through collaboration and productive engagement with families. The course description in the college's undergraduate catalog reads as follows:

> "Provides students with knowledge about special education and its relationship to general education. Includes an overview of disability history, special education laws, and inclusive education. Another focus is analyzing strategies to improve communication and collaboration among home, school, and community resources. Requirements include opportunities to work with diverse populations of families and children."

Until 2014, students typically enrolled in the collaboration course during their junior year, once they had a substantial background in content and pedagogical aspects of teaching. The primary purpose of the course was to consider the application of special education law, policies, and practices and explore their impact on children with disabilities and their families. School climate, community, and collaboration were also significant components of the class. With a background in bilingual multicultural special education, it was natural for me to integrate culturally responsiveness into the course as well.

In the fall of 2014, the teacher preparation program structure at Providence College shifted significantly when the student teaching experience expanded from one full semester to two full semesters, per the mandate of our program accreditor. This change meant that students

would take the collaboration course while they were completing their special education student teaching during their senior year. Much of the content could remain the same, but the perspectives of students in the course would be informed and shaped by their day-to-day experiences in the public schools. While this transition in program structure was underway, our college's undergraduate student demographics began to shift, resulting in small but noticeable differences in the social, cultural, racial, linguistic, and economic identities of our students. As I taught this newly configured course, I began to realize that exploring culturally responsive practices with a diverse group of undergraduate students is fundamentally different than considering the same approaches with mostly white, middle-class students who hailed from the suburbs. It was time for my thinking about the course to evolve.

Within this context, while the teacher preparation program and the course were shifting, we had an especially snow-filled winter in 2015, resulting in college closings and missed classes three weeks in a row early in the semester. I counted on contingency planning, which occurred just-in-time during the days leading up to each class cancellation, and I communicated with students via email and our college's learning management system. In-class learning activities and associated discussions moved online, and I incorporated creative approaches that required students to connect with others outside of class in order to complete each assignment. Thoughtful course design and planning had always been important to me, and I had relevant experience: I trained in pedagogy through my teacher preparation graduate work, and I served as director of our campus center for teaching and learning. Planning during the spring of 2015 semester, where I thought deeply about the objectives of each task and created out-of-class assignments that attempted to replicate the depth of engagement and discussion that I expected during face-to-face meetings, felt different. As I reflected on the experience, I began to describe my evolving practice as intentional pedagogy, and I realized that my teaching transformation was potentially instructive to faculty from a range of disciplines. While contingency planning was a challenge because I was unsure whether the students would learn all that they needed to in the course, in retrospect it was an incredible opportunity that demonstrates the value of making small but meaningful pedagogical changes.

Literature Review

My teaching journey with this course involved a shift from reflective practice to intentional pedagogy. Through a reflective approach, I considered the information at hand

following the completion of the course as I determined what changes I might make for the next iteration of the course. As I experienced intensive contingency planning in the spring of 2015, I realized the importance of intentional pedagogy - a thoughtful, forward-looking approach characterized by grounded step-by-step planning and constant recalibration within a pedagogical framework that draws from three distinct areas: course design and essential questions, flipped learning, and culturally responsive practice.

In a backward course design approach, relevant student learning outcomes and corresponding assignments and assessments that demonstrate learning are identified first, followed by the planning of learning experiences and instructional activities (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). When desired outcomes serve as the building blocks of a course, all pedagogical decisions are filtered through a lens that ensures alignment of teaching and learning activities with student learning outcomes. To take this model a step further, when backward course design is driven by essential questions, there is potential for deeper and more significant learning. Essential questions (a) are asked to stimulate ongoing thinking and inquiry, (b) raise more questions, (c) spark discussion and debate, (d) are asked and re-asked throughout the course, (e) demand justification and support, and (f) reflect changing "answers" as understanding deepens (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). Essential questions provide a meaningful foundation for backward course design.

Flipped approaches to pedagogy are described by instructors, instructional designers, and researchers in various ways, sometimes using terminology such as “flipped classroom” and “flipped learning” interchangeably. The Flipped Learning Network specifically focuses on the learning (rather than the teaching) as flipped, and it consists of four pillars: (1) flexible environment that allows for a range of learning modes, (2) learning culture where students are actively involved in knowledge construction, (3) intentional content as a means of maximizing classroom time, and (4) a professional educator who is a reflective facilitator (Flipped Learning Network, 2014). In a flipped learning approach, independent learning outside of face-to-face class time prepares students for dynamic, interactive group learning during class where concepts are tested and explored in depth (Flipped Learning Network, 2014). In order to achieve the goals of flipped learning, a blended course design may be adopted. In a blended model, technologies are selected to support learning objectives, 30-79% of the content is delivered online through

self-paced independent work, and pedagogical approaches build on a combination of online and face to face experiences (Linder, 2017).

Changing demographics and concerns for the educational success and thriving of all students in K-12 schools have prompted the call for teacher preparation programs to embrace, model, and teach culturally responsive practices to all prospective teachers (Baumgartner, Bay, Lopez-Reyna, Snowden & Maiorano, 2015; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Gay, 2018). In a culturally responsive approach, teachers understand and respond to the diverse worldviews, experiences, cultures, languages, and needs of students and their families (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). Teacher preparation programs that adopt and model culturally responsive approaches emphasize the role of teacher and student identities in teaching and learning and the importance of student-centered decision-making while addressing the importance of cultural considerations in all aspects of pedagogy (i.e., classroom climate, curriculum, assessment). Finally, prospective teachers need to see themselves as change agents within an educational system that is in need of reform (Baumgartner et al., 2015).

Faculty from a range of disciplines can adopt the pedagogical framing of essential questions, flipped learning, and culturally responsive practice. We had the good fortune of having Grant Wiggins on our campus for a one-day workshop in 2014, and the experience prompted some of my faculty colleagues in the humanities to introduce essential questions into their course design. Flipped learning may not feel like a good fit for all courses and instructors, but it is a model that challenges us to focus on student learning as we reconsider engagement across face-to-face and online pedagogical venues. We all benefit from the integration of culturally responsive practices that contribute to inclusive learning environments on our campuses and in our communities. While I had always integrated culturally responsive practices into my teaching, it was the snowy winter that prompted me to realize the value of essential questions and flipped learning as meaningful pedagogical approaches that had the potential to transform the teaching and learning experience.

Methods

This in-depth case study is based on my examination of information from four years and five iterations of my teaching of a teacher education course on collaboration. Enrollment during the five-year period ranged from 12-19 students, mostly seniors, who were student teaching in special education environments. The 2014 section of the course was taught prior to substantial

pedagogical changes, and I included it in my analysis for additional context and comparison. Sources of evidence included syllabus review, description of instructor behavior, and student feedback.

Syllabus Review and Course Design

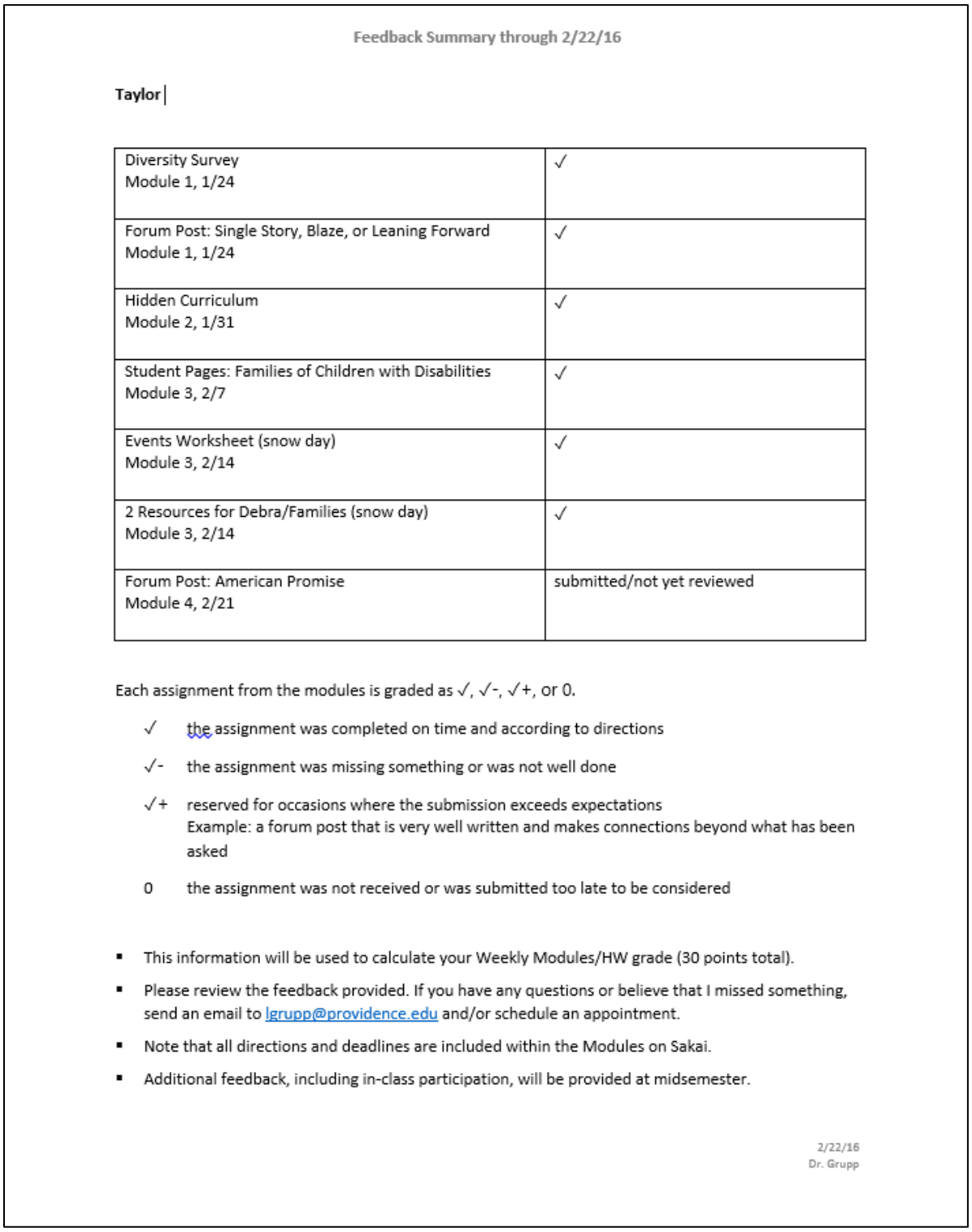
Prior to each semester that I taught the course, I reviewed my notes, course assignments, and student feedback as I considered potential revisions to the syllabus from the last semester. This approach resulted in incremental changes to my teaching and student learning. Over time, as indicated by my syllabus review for each of the five semesters that I taught the course, these pedagogical moves accumulated, resulting in more apparent substantial changes in course design and assignments. For example, during the first two iterations of the course included in this case study, my course syllabus began with a list of standards developed by our teacher education program's accreditor and relevant professional organizations rather than course-specific student learning outcomes. In contrast, the syllabus for my first time teaching the course, following the snowy winter where I had modified several assignments, demonstrates a substantive shift in course design. The list of standards at the beginning of the syllabus was replaced with three essential questions and four student learning outcomes. One of the essential questions, which I developed according to guidance provided by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), was, "What is family?" with a related sub-question, "How are family structures defined and influenced by schools, society, culture, language, and disability?" A sample student learning outcome that is aligned with this question is, "As a result of full engagement with this course, students will reflect on their roles as teachers and change agents within school and community settings."

With essential questions as a starting point for course design, student assignments as described in the syllabi and corresponding documents lead to meaningful student engagement. In one of the tasks that I assigned when class was canceled, students listened to a podcast about a young man who was blind. His family raised him as though he had vision, so he played outside, climbed trees, and rode a bicycle with other children. Through this powerful story, students in the course were introduced to different ways that individuals and families experience disability. After listening to the podcast, each student in the course was required to contact a friend or family member, summarize the podcast, and discuss the ways that the family's approach to raising their son influenced his experience with a disability. The response to this modified assignment was impressive, with some students encouraging family and friends to listen to the

podcast, and students reflecting on the depth of their conversations. Listening to the podcast on their own, and then coming to class to discuss it, may not have yielded such in-depth engagement with the material and concepts. In the spring of 2016, I added a personal history project as a course assignment as a means of encouraging students to explore the experiences and identities that would shape their work as teachers. My decision to add this assignment flowed from the essential questions and student responses to other in-depth tasks that I had created.

Instructor Behavior

My intentional pedagogy began as a result of implementing contingency plans to address class cancellations, where student engagement with about 35% of the course content shifted to an online platform. While I have always been a reflective teacher, I had to think more carefully about each task as I shifted from plans for face-to-face class meetings to assignments that could be completed outside of class. My objective was to engage students meaningfully and collaboratively with the content; doing that through virtual class meetings and assignments required additional thought and creativity, as well as regular communication with students. I provided updates via email, Google, and announcements within the learning management system, and I began providing Feedback Summaries to students every few weeks when we met face-to-face (see Figure 1). I found that with more content moved to the learning management system, it was important to provide students with regular feedback on their performance and learning. These summaries were shared with students at the end of a class meeting so they could stay after class or come to my office to discuss any concerns. These feedback summaries also modeled the value of a feedback loop, where students and teachers communicate with each other to enhance the teaching and learning experience. Finally, I introduced midsemester one-on-one conferences with students, which provided a means of sharing teaching and learning feedback as well as an opportunity to check in on progress on individual and collaborative projects.



Feedback Summary through 2/22/16

Taylor

Diversity Survey Module 1, 1/24	✓
Forum Post: Single Story, Blaze, or Leaning Forward Module 1, 1/24	✓
Hidden Curriculum Module 2, 1/31	✓
Student Pages: Families of Children with Disabilities Module 3, 2/7	✓
Events Worksheet (snow day) Module 3, 2/14	✓
2 Resources for Debra/Families (snow day) Module 3, 2/14	✓
Forum Post: American Promise Module 4, 2/21	submitted/not yet reviewed

Each assignment from the modules is graded as ✓, ✓-, ✓+, or 0.

- ✓ the assignment was completed on time and according to directions
- ✓- the assignment was missing something or was not well done
- ✓+ reserved for occasions where the submission exceeds expectations
  Example: a forum post that is very well written and makes connections beyond what has been asked
- 0 the assignment was not received or was submitted too late to be considered

- This information will be used to calculate your Weekly Modules/HW grade (30 points total).
- Please review the feedback provided. If you have any questions or believe that I missed something, send an email to lgrupp@providence.edu and/or schedule an appointment.
- Note that all directions and deadlines are included within the Modules on Sakai.
- Additional feedback, including in-class participation, will be provided at midsemester.

2/22/16
Dr. Grupp

Figure 1. Student performance feedback summary.

Feedback from Students

In order to complete the feedback loop, I gathered formative student feedback through occasional Google surveys or email prompts about specific course assignments or expectations. In one survey, I asked students to reflect on the task of completing the personal history project. One student responded, "Once I figured out how I was going to present the project, it was very easy to complete!" This type of feedback helped me to think about future assignments within that semester and provided me with ideas for setting up the personal history project during subsequent semesters.

Summative student feedback was gathered at the end of the semester through SIR II, a student course rating tool developed by the Educational Testing Service. Because of the small number of students across iterations of the course and the nature of the feedback, SIR II results can be used to identify general trends in student perceptions of the class. The five-year trend for the overall course evaluation mean on SIR II shows a range of 3.67 to 4.92. Interestingly, the lowest overall course evaluation mean occurred during the spring 2015 semester, which was when significant changes to the course were first made. For the purposes of this case study, means for the following scales are reported: overall evaluation, course organization and planning, communication, faculty/student interaction (see Table 1).

Table 1

SIR II Student Course Ratings, 2014-2017

Semester	Spring 2014 (n=18)	Spring 2015 (n=18)	Spring 2016 (n=17)	Fall 2016 (n=12)	Fall 2017 (n=14)
Overall Evaluation (comparative mean = 4.01)	3.89	3.67	4.53	4.92	4.57
Course Organization and Planning (comparative mean = 4.31)	4.11	4.09	4.64	5.00	4.74
Communication (comparative mean = 4.37)	4.43	4.46	4.81	5.00	4.83
Faculty/Student Interaction (comparative mean = 4.37)	4.41	4.28	4.84	5.00	4.87
Course Outcomes (CM = 3.75)	3.76	3.67	4.14	4.25	4.41
Student Effort and Involvement (comparative mean = 3.74)	3.41	3.44	3.63	3.64	3.71

The trends in each of these scales indicate improvement in each area over time. During the spring of 2016 offering of the course and in subsequent semesters, all scale area means were higher than the comparative means provided by ETS (see Figure 2).

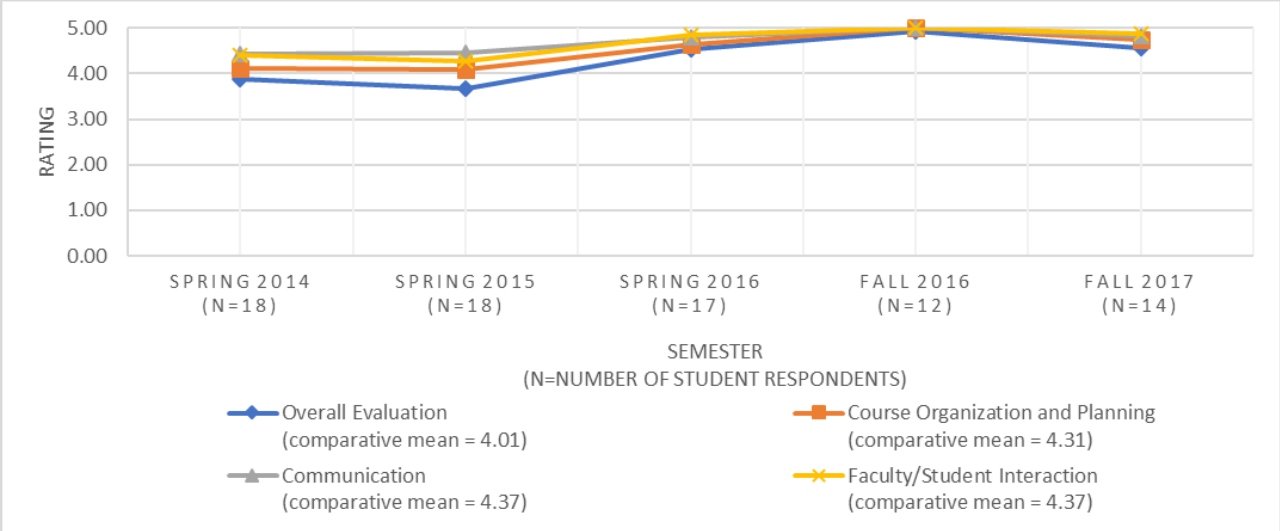


Figure 2. SIR II Student Course Ratings, 2014-2017

Student responses to open-ended questions included in the end-of-semester course evaluations provided additional context, and show an increasing depth of reflection over time:

How has this course helped you develop your skills as a teacher?

- "Better understanding of how to communicate with parents and establish a productive relationship." (spring 2014)
- "Made me more aware of myself both in and out of the classroom, allowing for a deeper understanding of the person I am today and how to be the most effective version of myself tomorrow." (fall 2016)
- "This course helped me find the confidence, skills, and importance to maintain open communication with families of students. It has shown me the value of getting to know the backgrounds, the cultures, and the stories of each of my students in order to maintain a welcoming and safe learning environment for all." (fall 2017)

The evolution of this course is evident in syllabi and course design elements reviewed from spring 2014 through fall of 2017, demonstrating a shift where I introduced more in-depth

work for students to complete outside of class. Feedback and communication with students increased and improved over the five iterations of the course, representing thoughtful attention to student learning and engagement. Student evaluations of their experience in the areas of communication, faculty/student interaction, and course organization and planning provided me with further evidence of the positive impact of pedagogical changes to the course.

Results: Effectiveness of Solutions and Broader Applications

Adopting a pedagogical approach where students were presented with learning opportunities outside of class presented me with the challenge to think more deeply and intentionally about my own teaching and student learning. Updating the course each semester with current events and new readings had sustained me over several years, but my experience in the spring of 2015 was a game-changer. Rather than completing busy-work in place of missed classes, students engaged in a range of independent and collaborative activities that facilitated deeper consideration of concepts and content, leading to more productive and meaningful in-class discussions and learning activities. My shift from reflective practice to intentional pedagogy lead to positive results for me and my students.

Backward course design is an approach that I had embraced, but I did not consider identifying essential questions until after my experience with contingency planning in the spring of 2015. The essential questions approach can be adopted across the disciplines. In fact, I know of faculty in theology, history, and philosophy on my campus who feel that the use of essential questions positively impacts course design and student learning. Once I added essential questions to the syllabus for the collaboration course, I found that they served as a positive and affirming guide for all of my decisions about the course. Rather than feeling locked in by content that needed to be covered, I focused on deeper learning and experiences, resulting in more engaging learning experiences and in-class discussions and activities. I found that the content and sustainability of student learning were enriched by the use of essential questions.

My intentional pedagogy expanded beyond decisions about course content and learning activities to include consistent communication and feedback that was designed to promote deeper learning. The feedback loop that resulted was helpful as I made pedagogical decisions about content and learning activities. An added benefit was my own deeper engagement with the course material and student responses to it. I found myself looking forward to reading their

discussion forum posts or assignments so I could see how their understanding of concepts was unfolding.

Student ratings of their learning experiences within the course improved during the five teachings of the course included in this case study, demonstrating that my pedagogical changes made an impression on students. While student course ratings cannot tell the whole story, they provide a standard measure of specific indicators from one semester to the next, and the results complement my observations of student learning, engagement with the material, and overall positive experiences.

As this case demonstrates, intentional pedagogy is an approach that enriches the experiences of students and instructors and provides opportunities for deeper student learning. The steps that I took to improve this course on collaboration are supported by research and can be adopted across courses and disciplines. Based on my experience and review of relevant research, I recommend consideration of the following prompts:

- What are the essential questions for the course?
- How might I make pedagogy more intentional?
- When are students most engaged in their learning?
- How can I use assessment information and feedback to reflect on my own teaching and student learning?
- How might I re-structure course assignments and learning activities to promote deeper learning and higher-level thinking?
- What steps can I take to implement discussion and dialogue as a means of developing understanding?
- How do the learning activities in the course promote student engagement (with course material, each other, and you)?

Responses to these questions serve as a starting point for enhanced teaching and learning and can set teacher and students on a path toward enriched experiences.

Conclusion

The pedagogical evolution of this collaboration course over the past four years, brought on initially by the reflection and intention required by contingency planning, has been part of my own transformation as a teacher and learner. After more than 20 years of teaching in higher education, I now approach each semester with fresh perspective and energy as I seek to engage with students in deeper explorations of learning through my own reflection and intentionality. While this case study touched upon some of the content and learning activity changes that I made within the course, these are areas that I would like to examine more closely as I continue to grow in my understanding of student learning and engagement.

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