

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

“Necessity is the mother of invention.”

-William Horman. Or Richard Franck. Or Plato. Or Alexandre Dumas. Pick one...

“Necessity is the mother of stealing someone else’s invention.”

-Sarah Cummins-Sebree

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These statements kicked off my acceptance speech for the UCBA Innovative Teaching Award in 2015. At the time I felt it necessary (pun intended) to be clear that I was being honored for using a teaching technique that may not have been routine at my college, but that was definitely not of my own design. I simply found myself in a weird predicament, and I needed a solution that would work best for my students, an adjunct instructor, and myself. Let me explain.

Leading into Fall Semester 2012, I was pregnant. **Very** pregnant. At the time, we did not have a coherent maternity leave policy – each professor had to propose a plan to the Dean as to what would happen to her courses for the term during which she would have her baby. As I was due in late September, my Dean and I worked out a plan such that I would start teaching my assigned courses in August, but then hand over my courses to an adjunct instructor to complete the remainder of the semester. It also just-so-happened to be our first semester-based term after spending decades on a quarter-based system, so many courses were basically brand new, having been spliced together from quarter-based components or created from scratch.

I tend to go out of my way to try to set up situations that minimize workloads for adjunct instructors (I mean, really – they get paid inadequate wages, so I might as well make life a little easier on them), so the thought of dumping the newly-spliced Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology course onto an adjunct a third of the way into Fall Semester made me ill. How could I, in good conscience, do this to the poor guy?

Luckily, I also tend to go to numerous workshops on pedagogy. At the time, one of the latest techniques getting a lot of attention was the “flipped classroom.” When employing this technique, all (or at least the bulk) of lecture is provided online or through some other means outside of the classroom. Time in class is then spent discussing material, answering questions over the online lecture, working on practice problems, doing assignments, etc. Basically, students watch or listen to lecture material as their homework, and traditional homework items are done in class.

At these workshops, the virtues of this method seemed to know no end. Students can go back to the online lectures as many times as they need to in order to internalize the material. Providing the lectures online opens up class time for discussion and practice problems, options that tend to be limited when one lectures to PowerPoint slides. Doing assignments in class means that students can ask questions of the instructor and get immediate assistance instead of sending an email at 2 AM the day an assignment is due. Requiring students to be in class to complete assignments means increased attendance rates. Everybody wins.

But leading up to Fall Semester 2018, the flipped classroom design meant I could work with my adjunct replacement to design the course such that I could continue doing the heavy grunt work of lecture while on leave, and he could take on the face-to-face aspects. I developed the PowerPoint slides and recorded lectures for them as MP3 audio files, then posted them on

our LMS based on our course schedule. We collaborated on creating in-class practice problems, assignments, and exams, as well as the framework for the research project students would do. He ran the classroom sessions during which he answered their questions, made sure they understood the material, graded the assignments and exams, and ran the last week of the course as an open-lab session for students to get immediate assistance on writing their APA-style research papers. We split the work so that he did not get overwhelmed with a newly-structured course that required more prep work than was worth the adjunct pay rate, while I was able to participate in the lecture prep I would need the following term and not feel guilty about handing off a labor-intensive course (pun intended again).

Because we were flipped classroom “newbies,” we surveyed students at the end of the term to get their perceptions of the technique. More than two-thirds in each of the two sections of the course not only enjoyed the format, but also felt that it helped them learn the material in a way that a traditional format would not. Many commented favorably on all of the benefits I heard about in those workshops. True, not all students loved it – a few thought that one was not actually “teaching” when using this design. But, overall, feedback was incredibly positive. We took those survey results and presented it at a teaching conference, then published a manuscript on it (Cummins-Sebree & White, 2014).

Since then, I have used the flipped classroom design in all of my face-to-face courses, and frankly, I do not plan on returning to a more traditional format. Though some freshmen taking Introduction to Psychology struggle with being responsible for doing the online lecture material, the more well-prepared freshmen and upperclassmen tend to appreciate the format. I get to answer questions in more detail when they are working on practice problems or assignments, which is when they really need it. Attendance is better, and they are not zoning out

or playing on their phones as much because they know they have to complete the assignment before class is over – no take-homes allowed. Some students tell me they listen to the podcasts while driving to campus on exam days as a review, and being able to listen to them repeatedly for it to “stick” is a big deal to them. It’s not all rainbows and sunshine and unicorns, but the benefits greatly outweigh the costs.

To accomplish this, though, certain puzzle pieces had to fit into place. First, my Dean supported this crazy idea of flipping the classroom and doing a more collaborative effort in transitioning my adjunct colleague into the classroom. The adjunct instructor, being the laid-back guy that he is, embraced working together on the construction of the course and learning the extent to which students would appreciate the design. Third, our LMS is flexible and easy-to-use, making it a cinch to load online lecture material and organize the course content in a way that students can access with little to no trouble.

Most importantly, though, is that one can decide how “techy” they want to be in developing their online lectures and in-class work. Some professors dive in the deep waters with video lectures that are edited to create professional-looking movies; a variety of software exists for this, and our LMS has imbedded software that is capable of this to some extent. I, however, am fairly low-tech and managed to develop memorable lectures with basic PowerPoint slides and separate MP3 audio files created with Audacity®. Though Audacity can also allow one to edit recorded audio clips, I took the lazy route and left in the occasional cough, ringing phone, and even my older child knocking on my bedroom door, yelling “Mama!” until her father took her downstairs. It may not seem “professional” to do this, but my students found it refreshing, if not downright hilarious, and a few indicated that they served as an unexpected memory prompt when they were answering questions on exams.

Even if I had not had the initial support and tools that I did in 2012, I am certain I would have made this move between then and today. More professors are looking for ways to incorporate more engaging technology and classroom activities while veering away from traditional lecture styles – this does just that. Now that we have access to Google Docs and other file-sharing sites, plus default audio recording programs that come with many PCs (e.g. Voice Recorder for Microsoft), we do not even have to ask for expensive software to develop our online lectures for the flipped classroom. We are only limited by how much of a push is required to make the change. It just so happened that my push was a pregnancy (pun trifecta).

Feel free to steal it for next semester.

References

- Cummins-Sebree, S. E. (2015). Killing multiple birds with a single stone: Using the flipped classroom structure to go beyond course content. *It works for me, Flipping the classroom*. New Forums Press.
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