

More Content Doesn't Equal More Learning

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With access to a world of information as close as our phones, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by all there is to teach. New material continues to emerge in every academic discipline, and teachers feel a tremendous responsibility not only to stay current themselves, but to ensure that their learners are up to date on the most recent findings. Add to this information explosion the passionate desire by faculty members to share their particular areas of expertise and it's easy to see why content continues to grow like the mythical Hydra of Greek legend. And like Hercules, who with each effort to cut off one of Hydra's nine heads only to have two more grow in its place, faculty struggle to tame their content monsters.

The two most common strategies for managing course content rarely yield positive results. Cutting back or trimming content leads to agonizing decisions but does not produce substantive changes. Adding content to an already jam-packed syllabus puts us in a race to the course finish line—talking a mile a minute and leaving exhausted students in the dust. Learners in these scenarios liken the experience to trying to drink water from a fire hose. Hoarse, exhausted faculty and drowned, resentful students are not representative of the type of deep and meaningful learning that most of us aspire to.

Perhaps it's time to rethink the role of content in teaching and learning. A fresh perspective on this problem includes thinking about our role as faculty and that of our students, as well as reconsidering the nature of curriculum design.

The role of “content expert” is a familiar and comfortable one for most of us, and the many years spent gaining expertise in a discipline may make us reluctant to relinquish this position. Yet a narrowly defined role as content expert invariably leads to a “content coverage” model of teaching that puts information transmission at the heart of what we do. And while accessing knowledge is essential in learning, it is not the end of learning.

What our students need from us is assistance in navigating the waters in an ocean of information. We can become “content curators” who judiciously select the best “artifacts” for learning, much like the museum curator analyzes and documents all of the materials available before selecting the best representations for any given collection. Our students also need to learn the skills necessary to review and evaluate various sources of information—and be able to differentiate what's relevant, accurate, and reliable, and why. If we teach research and critical thinking skills, our learners will develop the capacity to cope with information overload, a problem that is unlikely to disappear in the near future.

With a shift in focus from covering content to using content, curriculum design also becomes less a matter of determining “what” to teach and more a matter of “how” to facilitate learning.

A realignment of our role from content expert to content curator also puts content itself into a new perspective. Rather than “covering” content, we use carefully selected content to help students develop the skills of their discipline or their profession. So, for example, students of history learn how to use primary sources to think like historians, or biology students use a scientific approach for testing a hypothesis.

With a shift in focus from covering content to using content, curriculum design also becomes less a matter of determining “what” to teach and more a matter of “how” to facilitate learning. Critical decisions about content still need to be made, but from a different perspective. One approach is to consider the scenario that Maryellen Weimer suggests in her piece [“Diversifying the Role Course Content Plays.”](#) Imagine that you meet a student five years after he or she took your course. What would you like to have that student remember from the course? Rather than being able to cite specific facts or information, I think we'd all much rather prefer that our former students remember

key concepts, ones that transformed their thinking. Often referred to as “threshold concepts,” these critical ideas can become the cornerstones on which we organize our curriculum.

In addition to recognizing the importance of understanding threshold concepts, students might also look back and recognize that it was not knowledge itself that had the greatest impact, but the ability to apply that knowledge. They might remark on the capacity to utilize a formula to solve a problem or adopt a theoretical model to produce a finished product. If we begin with these demonstrated outcomes when designing our curriculum, then content becomes a vehicle by which we help students apply what they have learned.

This forward-thinking, backward-planning approach to curriculum development that incorporates an understanding of threshold concepts is a vital tool in the battle against content dominance. If we look to the future and carefully consider what we want our students to understand deeply by the time they successfully complete our course, then we can take a backward-design approach to create the learning experiences that will help them achieve that. If we continue to view content as that which needs to be covered rather than the fuel for meaningful learning, then we are destined to fight a losing battle.

Are you and your students drowning in too much content? In [Taming the Monster: Rethinking the Role of Content](#), Nicki Monahan explores the true mission of content in the classroom and how to use it most effectively to provide high-quality instruction. [Learn More »](#)

References:

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