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The One Question to Ask Before Using Any Teaching/Learning Method

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We are early into this novel and challenging COVID semester and starting to get feedback on the (for many) new modes of teaching and learning—namely, online/virtual experiences. One message from students is that they are feeling overwhelmed with keeping up or “figuring out” the LMS or the online course.

I’m sympathetic. . . somewhat. Student reports of feeling overwhelmed is not new; some may say it’s a defining characteristic of students. I remember the response from so many of my professors: “You think you’re busy now, wait till you start working in the real world.” Admittedly, they were right.

I suspect part of the problem of students feeling overwhelmed is the result of online courses being too “packed” with activities, methods, unnecessary assignments, and anxious attempts by instructors to cover content. While those happen in traditional classroom courses, the liabilities are exacerbated in the online environment.

The One Question to Ask

Instructors and course designers can achieve greater effectiveness and elegance in their courses by asking one question before using a method or student learning activity. That question is: “What pedagogical function does this method or activity serve?”

By that we mean,

1. Will the activity help students achieve the learning outcome?
2. Is the method worth the effort related to student learning outcomes?
3. Is the method or learning activity directly aligned with a course learning outcome/objective?

Pedagogical Functions

The pedagogical functions of methods and student learning activities fall into four categories. If a method or activity does not clearly serve these functions, don't use them. The four functional categories are: (1) orientation, (2) transition, (3) evaluation, and (4) application.

Orientation. Orientation methods or learning activities are used to create motivation for learning. Creating "interest" is insufficient for meaningful learning. Motivation goes to meeting an unrealized need. An orientation activity may involve helping students become aware of or identifying why they need to learn what your course offers. Orientation methods can also provide a structure for interpreting or visualizing the course content. Finally, orientation methods help introduce the course or lesson learning outcomes.

Transition. Methods that provide the function of transition are those that help students go from the known or previously covered material to the new, novel, or next content to be covered. They provide a bridge to help make connections for more efficient learning. These are methods or learning activities with which the student is familiar and often use examples and analogies.

Evaluation. Evaluation methods or learning activities are used to help students, and you, the instructor, evaluate previously learned content before moving on to new material, or, prior to an application activity. These activities are more effective when they are student-centered or student-developed. They help students give evidence of understanding and help instructors uncover misunderstandings. One rule to remember: if you are not going to evaluate it, don't teach it.

Application. This one is self-evident. Application methods or student activities are those that provide students opportunity to actually apply what they have learned. Student attainment of learning should be "demonstrable." Therefore, choose application methods that facilitate ways students can *demonstrate* their learning. Students demonstrate application by using what they have learned in new or novel ways and/or in real-world situations (and sometimes in simulated situations). Application methods should be directly aligned with the published course learning outcomes.

Can you identify how your teaching/learning methods or student learning activities serve one of the four pedagogical functions? Here's a challenge: to avoid overwhelming your students in your online course *choose one method or learning activity* for each of the four pedagogical functions. That can be sufficient to achieve your course's learning intent without overwhelming your students.

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