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When it comes to teaching, is there a universal law that you cannot save time or use it differently?



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This blog post is about teaching, and time, a topic that we briefly discussed during one of our ASCN Working Group 2 meetings.

We begin with time. Throughout history, people have pondered it in many ways. One way is to study the **quantities** of time required for specific **tasks** in order to find ways to improve overall results. This can be helpful because time is a limited resource that is best spent wisely. For example, when this approach is applied to manufacturing, it can yield significant benefits for companies and their customers. In situations like this, efforts to save time and improve

efficiency make sense. Not all situations have that character. In a second category of situations, most people don't find it appropriate to quantify and optimize time and results. Consider, for example, social interactions. We can't really measure them, and even if we could, who would want to? Many seek social interactions but very few wish to measure them or be so measured.

This brings us to teaching. For many, the improvement of teaching and learning falls in that second category – possibly because they are deeply personal activities. Furthermore, teaching and learning stir deep emotions, possibly because human survival has long depended on their success. In these situations, it makes sense to use time differently in order to deepen learning and improve student outcomes rather than focus on how to save time. There are sensible arguments for applying evidence-based optimization to the teaching and learning enterprise. The cost of a college education has continued to rise while the rate of successful completion of a degree has remained unacceptably low. These trends have persisted even though we now know much more about how people learn and what conditions create the motivation and ability to learn. This knowledge is only very slowly shaping how we approach teaching and learning and the design of educational experiences. Aren't these sound reasons for getting more **analytical** about optimizing teaching and learning?



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It is difficult to reconcile these different perspectives. But why? In *A Battle Won*¹ by Thomas Russell, a distinguished Admiral muses on the realities of human nature. He says, "What serves us best today will not do so tomorrow, yet we will attempt to continue as we were, not casting aside the things that once served but no longer." How do the thoughts of a fictional Admiral relate to our efforts to adapt our colleges and universities to a new era and to a different mix of both students and faculty members who often see the world differently from their mentors? What makes change difficult? And if change itself requires effort, which in turn requires time, where can we find the required time?

Making matters worse, we all have trouble absorbing new realities and responding to those changes effectively. In his text *Don't Even Think About It. Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*², George Marshall explains why we respond so slowly to change. There are many reasons, two of which are especially relevant to the challenge of improving undergraduate education.

1. **We attach greater meaning to things that are immediate, concrete and indisputable.**
2. **We are more sensitive to definite short-term personal gains or losses than to less certain, longer-term, shared gains or losses.**

These observations translate into the academic culture of higher education, because we think about our role as scholars and teachers in very personal terms. Are the criticisms about how we prepare our graduates valid? Are the cost and outcomes of an education appropriate? Do we really need to change how we work with students? If we *are* convinced that the undergraduate curriculum can and should change, what will this change mean for us personally and how we use our time? What would it mean for what and how we teach and how our students learn and demonstrate their learning? Where would we find the time to

do any of this and what would that cost us? After all, most of us feel overworked and unable to make any additional efforts.

It is definitely true that any change in the curriculum **does require** some additional personal up-front special attention and time. Faculty members who feel overcommitted are not inclined to make that investment. This is a shame, because using time differently can provide the capacity to address many areas in education where improvement is badly needed.

An especially compelling example is engaged learning - high-impact educational practices in which students help members of society **outside** the classroom in ways that reinforce the learning that happens **inside** the classroom. If teachers could save time in their teaching inside the classroom, they could enable much more engagement of this type, and everyone could be better off. However, if teachers dismiss the very possibility of saving time or using time differently, understandably it will be difficult for them to get on board.

Perhaps the best way to engage faculty who feel that they do not have any more time to give is to simply avoid speaking of time reallocation at all, by building engagement activities into the courses that faculty already teach. Most teachers have an intuitive sense of how much of their time they normally allocate to a given course, so it may be more acceptable for them to keep that fixed while incorporating engaged learning activities into the context of that course. True, this could require pruning some course content, adding new approaches to student engagement and focusing on better ways for students to demonstrate their learning. However, if these adaptations are made within the context of existing courses, this would avoid the need to tally time saving or ask faculty to spend more time.

In summary, why not put the available time already spent by faculty members and students to more effective use? Why not simply use time differently? Surely there is no universal law that prevents such adaptation and improvement. And surely we can frame these ideas in ways that are convincing and also highly respectful of the wisdom, humanity and individuality of teachers and students.

References

1. Russell, S. T., (2010). *A battle won*. Penguin Group (USA), New York, NY.
2. Marshall, G. (2015). *Don't even think about it: Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

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Students from 30 universities attend NYU's Courant Institute's Hackathon. During this 24-hour coding event, NYC startups present their technologies and students build original applications based on them. Photo credit: Elena Olivo. Copyright: NYU Photo Bureau

