

LESS CAN BE MORE:
SACRIFICING COVERAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING
UNDER THE NEW ACADEMIC CALENDAR

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Let us assume that summer students have been disadvantaged under the current calendar consisting of two semesters plus two summer blocks. Presumably, with the new calendar three equal semesters will make better use of university resources and improve the quality of the educational experience for summer students. The rub, of course, is that fall and winter semesters will be shortened by two weeks. On the surface, it looks as though the benefit to one third of our students will come at the expense of the other two thirds. Equality always has its price.

In order to compensate for the shortened semesters, under the new calendar the length of class meetings will increase from 50 to 60 minutes. The added ten minutes will result in an actual increase in total contact hours, from 2,150 minutes (winter semester 2006) to 2,280 minutes (winter 2007)—an increase of 130 minutes, or the equivalent of 2.6 traditional 50-minute class periods. The big question is, will the students experience a net benefit, or at least break even, from the longer class periods spread over a shorter semester, or would they be better off with the marginal two weeks? Obviously, not all subjects are equal in this respect. Students learning skills such as music, dance, or weightlifting probably will not benefit much from the longer class periods, since there is a limit to how much a person can attentively and safely practice in a given day; moreover, strength and agility can only be developed gradually over extended periods of time. Also, students in courses involving lab experiments or other types of practica might suffer from the shortened semester: it takes time to train the rats or track the investment or stage the play. On the other hand, are fourteen weeks enough fewer than sixteen to make a difference? I teach Spanish—mostly literature classes—and I entertain hopes that the shorter semester with longer class periods will turn out to be generally advantageous to my students. The shorter semester means we will cover less material, but the longer class period will allow me to employ more powerful pedagogies for a deeper level of understanding.

One might ask, why would you want to cover *less* material, given the 130-minute *increase* of contact time? Why not simply carve up the existing syllabus to reflect the longer class period?—just add ten pages to each reading assignment and lecture ten minutes longer. That would be the obvious solution, but would it result in an equivalent amount of learning?

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In my experience there is a practical limit to how many pages of information a student can assimilate in a day. No doubt there are ideal increments imposed by the structure of the brain, with an inevitable point of diminishing returns. I do not pretend to know what these optimal increments are. I do know that our students are busier than ever with full course loads, jobs, family responsibilities, and extra-curricular activities. Students are inclined to spend only so much time per day studying for a class session, regardless of an increase in session minutes. Extreme case in point: during the summer of 2005 I taught Masterpieces of Spanish Literature for the first time in an eight-week summer block. The double-length class periods most certainly did *not* mean that my students read and learned twice as much as they would for a normal 50-minute class, although I naively assumed that they would when I designed the syllabus. While conventional wisdom supposes that students study two hours outside of class for each hour in class (in my experience this is rare), there was no way these summer students were going to study *four* hours to prepare for a double session. Even an unusually diligent student can only assimilate so much at a time. Rather than simply double up the reading assignments, I now believe it would have been better to engage students in a greater variety of assimilation activities covering *somewhat less material*. The upshot is that I would rather *reduce* my reading list by two weeks, than add pages to each day's reading assignment for the sake of coverage.

Decreasing coverage for the sake of better assimilation and a deeper level of understanding is not much of a sacrifice. I will happily give up something good for something better. Coverage is overrated anyway:

Certainly, the greatest enemy of understanding is coverage—the compulsion to touch on everything in the textbook or the syllabus just because it is there, rather than taking the time to present materials from multiple perspectives, allowing students to approach the material in ways that are initially congenial to them but ultimately challenge them, and assessing understandings in as direct and flexible a manner as possible. To the extent that various schools, ranging from English boarding schools to French *lycées* to John Dewey's progressive schools, have adopted a less frenetic and more thoughtful approach to the curriculum, the opportunities to educate for understanding can be seized.¹

I therefore intend to accomplish more with less. The students will be exposed to a bit less material, but what they do encounter will have potentially greater impact. Ten minutes of added class time, if utilized wisely, can make a difference. It can be just the right amount of time for the students to reflect on what they have learned, to make connections, to reformulate the main points in their own words in journals or orally in small groups. Rather than simply lecture ten more minutes, I can

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have the students tie in what was taught that day with a previous lesson or invite them to anticipate subsequent developments in terms of an essential question.

The key, I believe, is to structure the lessons not around the works and authors, but rather, around key concepts exemplified by the works. My students will read roughly the same amount per class session as they would under the old calendar, with a corresponding decrease in the number of authors or texts covered. I doubt this will matter all that much in the long run. It could actually help. The key, I believe, is to structure the lessons not around the works and authors (coverage), but rather, around key concepts exemplified by the works. Rather than have my students read all of the sonnets in the textbook by Garcilaso and Góngora and Quevedo, why not have them read just two or three representative poems and invite them to write one of their own? Or perhaps I can divide the class into groups, assign a different sonnet to each group, reshuffle the groups, and have the new groups discover the baroque elements common to all of the poems. This way the students will be actively teaching each other rather than simply listening to me talk ten minutes longer.

A conservative assessment suggests that making the summer semester equal to fall and winter will result in a more equitable academic experience for all students: summer students will benefit, and fall/winter students probably will not be harmed all that much. In my opinion, this expectation, while certainly reasonable, is too modest. I believe the shorter semester in conjunction with longer class periods not only will *not* hurt my students to any measurable degree, but will in fact result in better assimilation. Coverage will decrease slightly, but the level of understanding should actually increase under the new calendar. ☺

NOTE

1. Gardner, Howard and Veronica Boix-Mansilla. "Teaching for Understanding in the Disciplines—and Beyond." *The Development and Education of the Mind: The Selected Works of Howard Gardner*. (New York: Routledge, 2006). 145-58.