

“This is Going to Hurt: Re-Designing Courses with Previously Enrolled Students – Supplemental Handout

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## The Problem

Student feedback, even detailed written student feedback, and can only help so much in making useful changes to a course. Additionally, courses that have been taught for years can sometimes feel “stale” and uninspired. And lastly, courses that have taught for many years may feel fragmented or uneven since some lessons may have been updated since the course was created... while others have not.

The short video presented proposed a new approach to course re-design that involves a small group of hand-picked students and a process for approaching the course re-design.

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## The Process

### Picking the Right Students

Picking the right students to participate in this process can be difficult. Aside from navigating 4-5 different schedules, the students who contribute the most to this process are generally those that are:

1. As passionate about the material as the instructor
2. Creative problem solvers who like big ideas
3. Are willing and able to give negative feedback to their instructor (in the presence of that instructor)
4. Willing to spend another semester diving into the same material they just covered.

The students chosen do not need to be individuals who previously earned an “A” in the course. If the course is going to be re-designed to work for all students, having the perspectives of individuals who are less academically driven can be helpful, provided they meet the rest of the criteria.

### Setting Up the Group

I typically set up, what I called, my “re-design group” as an independent study for the 3-4 students who participate the semester following the completion of the course. This is a for-credit course (so students will need to have room in their schedule and an elective slot open in order to participate).

This process should be a win/win scenario for the students and the instructor. To be very clear, these students are not paying for a course in which they are being used as workers. They are a “brain trust.” They are not creating the lecture slides, quiz questions, etc. They are assisting the instructor in thinking through all aspects of the course and

providing incredibly useful feedback. However, there is work to be done. As we will later see, this process leads to the identification of issues that need to be addressed.

As such, the students stay busy when not meeting to discuss the course. For example, my students:

1. Collect, interpret, and summarize new research
2. Provide examples of the best ways to visualize concepts
3. Search for real-life case examples to use in the course
4. Read about teaching and learning strategies
5. Set up, record, and edit interviews with professionals in the field of study (the interview clips are later integrated into lessons or assignments).

Many of the students participating in my groups have gone on to graduate school (to date: 2 doctoral programs, 5 masters programs, 1 medical school, 1 Army Special Forces, 2 landed dreams jobs at government agencies, and 1 is still “finding their way”). For these students, the benefits of this experience are worth noting:

1. They get the experience of working in a (hopefully) well-functioning group focused on a single mission as opposed to the “group projects” often completed for other courses.
2. They dive deeper into material they enjoy and may study in graduate school (after all, the final summary of the research that is presented in class is a fraction of the information reviewed to create that material).
3. They learn how much hard work and preparation it takes to teach material effectively (something that will not only be useful in graduate school, but also in other professional experiences).
4. They get a lot of practice providing critical feedback, finding common ground between disparate ideas and opinions, and working with limited time and financial resources.
5. They get a chance to feed their passion on a particular topic without working or volunteering in a lab.

### Establishing the Guidelines

With respect to the instructor, this process will require the ability to ask for critical feedback in a way that allows the students to freely speak their minds. This can be difficult and is the “hurt” referred to in the title of the presentation. I’ve heard that people tend to avoid objective feedback about their personal health and finances. I would respectfully add “teaching” to that list. However, I wanted a better course more than I cared about my feelings getting hurt.

With respect to the students, they were provided with four rules that always needed to be followed. The course we ultimately create must:

1. Have a predictable and easy to understand format
2. Have many opportunities for student feedback and grading (preferably twice a week)
3. Involve lessons and assignments that integrate factual information with self-reflection
4. Ensure that no concept stands alone... all concepts in the course must link to others in meaningful and understandable ways.

Somewhat obviously, you are free to create your own rules that coincide with your own teaching philosophy.

## Creating the Course Learning Objectives

Learning objectives are the foundation upon which all courses are built. They serve as filters, allowing the relevant information in and excluding those topics that are interesting, but not relevant.

The first week (two meetings) were spent understanding, debating, and refining the learning objectives. This process can start by introducing the students to Bloom's Taxonomy and having them create, what they viewed as, the learning objectives for the course. Then debate, edit, refine, and repeat until you are happy with the product.

## Deciding on Themes

Themes can be a useful way of making all the course information come together in a long arc or narrative. Not every instructor feels as though they are required, and all course material easily lends itself to the use of themes. However, they help students tie ideas together and give the information purpose. Since these were psychology courses, individual case presentations were used as themes. These were not used once, but instead there were 5 different cases that we returned to over and over again as the semester continues.

Each class, a bit more of one (or more) of the individual case studies were revealed as time progressed. For us, chronology and personal narratives were themes, but themes can be anything you want, as long as they link the information from week to week and provide the course with an easily recognizable arc.

## Dividing the Course into Smaller Pieces

We choose to divide the course up into 210 ten-minute segments since this course was going to be taught online as well as face to face (I generally try and keep all online activities around 10 minutes in length). This meant that the material from the previous course also needed to be divided into 10-minute segments. This can be an incredibly eye-opening process. As stated in the video, we only had 104 10-minute segments once the old version of the course was divided up (and even less when we removed segments that did not fit the learning objectives).

Divide up your own class however you see fit. However, the segments should be shorter than a single class session. Otherwise you are not re-designing a course, you are editing a syllabus.

This process is tedious, but worth it. You may learn:

1. That your course was not as dense with information as you thought it was
2. That your old course wasn't as interesting as you thought it was
3. That you are not making the most of your time in the classroom (tangents, irrelevant material, etc.)

Since this process highlights the use of classroom time and shines a light on wasted time, we found that our "newly discovered" time could be filled with:

1. New information (that thing you always wanted to discuss but never thought you had time for)
2. More in-depth explanations of concepts in which the concepts are broken down into smaller, more manageable and understandable parts
3. Better instructions for assignments
4. New activities in the classroom (or online)
5. New discussion topics, debates, etc.
6. Anything else you want to add... the sky is the limit and you have creative help.

This can feel a bit like putting together a puzzle... but you are not quite sure what the final picture is going to look like. Segments get moved around often. A segment that was in one place one week, gets moved the next... then gets moved again to a completely new place two weeks later. This is a good thing and helps the course material follow the themes and order itself in a way that makes learning the material easier and more logical. It just takes time, discussion, and multiple points of view.

## Simultaneous Tasks

During this process two other things are happening simultaneously: Evaluating old presentation material and brainstorming assignment ideas.

Re-designing a course isn't just about adding, deleting, or editing material. It also involves the way the information was presented in the first place. A focus should be placed on what methods of presentation worked, which did not, and how things can be improved. For example, I have my re-work group look through every presentation and evaluate the PowerPoint slides I used (this part may also "hurt").

- Those that were engaging and explanatory were marked in green
- Those that didn't work well or were boring were marked in yellow
- Those that were hopelessly unclear, total junk, or no longer relevant were marked in red (many slides I considered creative and explanatory were marked red... which broke my heart a little each time it would happen)

This kind of feedback is eye opening and useful if you make the necessary changes. Again, the students are not editing the presentation materials, they are simply providing feedback and ideas for how the presentation material can be improved (pictures, graphs, flow charts, the addition of more slides, and activity instead of a lecture, etc.)

The other simultaneous task involved the creation of assignments. This naturally happened as the semester progressed. When anyone has an idea for an assignment, those ideas should be written down for use at a later time. When all the other material in the course is settled (and close to the final form), the assignments can be created.

Since my students were required to have many opportunities for feedback and grading, we created many assignments. However, you make the decision for your course.

As promised in the video... Some assignments my student have created include:

- Internet scavenger hunts (looking for new headlines, images, etc. the highlight the material). For example; my students search for news headlines that emphasize the humanity of White *perpetrators* of gun violence as well as news headlines that de-emphasize the humanity of Black *victims* of gun violence... making an obvious point about the portrayal of race in the media.
- Reflective journal entries that are graded for participation only.
- Completing a fictional "stalking evidence log" in which they need to complete a form (as a victim of stalking would), and screen shot the communication, every time they are contacted in any way (text, phone, social media, etc.) by a particular person over a two-day period. In this case, the students use their best friend. It gives the students a sense of how invasive and draining being a victim of stalking can be, but without the fear.
- Several assignments that involve taking positions that are the opposite of what the student believes (or believes they may do in a given situation). These include statements advocating for the right to own

military style assault weapons (written after hearing the story of a victim of the Las Vegas mass shooting) and writing a letter explaining why they did not report child abuse they suspected was occurring next door (again after listening to a survivor's story).

- Creating a (generally poorly drawn) children's book to explain a complex academic concept to a child in a way the child would understand.
- Debates that involve pre-recorded "persuasion" videos that are posted online and voted on by classmates to determine the winner.
- Anonymously peer-graded papers
- Etc.

## Wrapping It Up

My re-work groups and I have never completed everything that needs to be done during the semester... but we get as close as we can. When it is over, all my groups have been really proud of what they created. I make a point to thank them on behalf of every student who will take the class in the future.

Afterward, there is more work. The editing of presentation materials, the creation of assignment instructions, the revising of the syllabus, etc. But once it is done, it is all worth it and you will be really excited to teach that course in the next semester.

Again, please feel free to contact me with any questions at: [jramsde2@gmu.edu](mailto:jramsde2@gmu.edu)