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ADJUNCT'S CORNER

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What Makes a Good Teacher?

In this regular column, Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. discusses the important contribution that adjuncts make in professional degree programs in his article, "What Makes a Good Teacher?"

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

"What makes a good teacher?" At some point, every academic department or another asks itself that question. Particularly in natural sciences and engineering, the response to the question may focus on educational expertise and research competencies. However, when the department or program is a professional degree program, the answer is more complicated. Educational expertise and research competencies tell only part of the story.

Aristotle famously noted two and half millennia ago that some things must be *observed and experienced* to be understood. He was talking about ethics and ethical behavior, but I think the comment is equally pertinent to a range of organizational and interpersonal relationships. Therein lies the issue for those looking for "good teachers" for MPA programs. For certain types of courses that are often at the core of MPA curricula (budgeting, personnel, intergovernmental relations, management), expertise is as likely to be the product of equal parts education and experience.

For many years, MPA programs, especially those that recruit "mid-career" students, have relied upon working professionals who teach part-time. Some in universities (especially those not in professional degree programs) view this as detrimental to the quality of the programs and degree. Even those in those professional programs view the use of nontraditional faculty as more of a budgetary necessity than as a key to enhancing the quality of the academic training. Yet that is what I am suggesting; the use of skilled and experienced working professionals may be the key to enhancing the quality of the academic experience of the students. This moves adjuncts closer to the center, not the periphery, of the learning process.

To more fully understand this assertion we need to, first, step back from the question of the adjuncts per se and look at the question of *understanding*. In a work written a few months ago on discretionary judgment, I explored the topic of understanding. It is worth exploring here.

Discretion represents the judgment as to what activities in an agency are to receive priority. The exercise of discretion *presumes* both the need for and the capacity to exercise judgment, which is not about simply implementing the "routine." The situation and circumstances drive the decision to exercise discretion. The fundamental question is how to ensure that the discretionary decision-making by bureaucrats is done "rightly." The capacity to exercise discretion *well* is not merely the result of thinking or wanting to do things well. The exercise of discretion is the result of *judging* events and circumstances at a moment in time and then acting on that judgment in a way that makes progress.

The exercise of discretion is preceded by three interrelated and intertwined *prerequisite* activities: experiencing or sense making, (which involves thinking and knowing), judging, and acting. In other words, understanding (whether organizational or individual) is the result of the three activities. First, we make sense of a situation by thinking about it in the abstract and then knowing the situation by defining the current situation. Second, we judge (and, therefore, decide) based upon our understanding, all in order to take the third and most critical step—action.

Arendt (2003) asserts that thinking and judging are interrelated but separate. Thinking is the result of forming abstractions. Judging is the first step toward deciding (deciding to decide as it were). It is the product of understanding the situation in its fullest sense. She goes on to posit that some individuals are better

at one activity than the other. Therefore, one could do well at abstract thinking and another could be better at judging. Judging follows thinking and knowing and emerges from understanding. It is the capacity to understand that is the key aspect of judging.

Successful organizational decision-making is predicated upon what Arendt describes as the capacity to think to conclusions. As Arendt would explain it, we must think about our work, before we can do our work. But also, without a particular focus, abstract thinking cannot become tangible work. The obvious dilemma for organizations is in recognizing these different capacities and assigning persons roles that fit those capabilities. The "problem" of the exercise of discretion is embedded in this dilemma--we need those with the capacity for judging, not those with the capacity for thinking, to exercise discretion. It is a problem precisely because the need for discretion is when the situation is not-routine, i.e., when the situation and circumstances, not the abstractions such as SOPs, dictate. Those with the capacity to think can (and will) develop appropriate standards of performance and behavior, those with the capacity to judge will understand when it is time to step outside the routine.

In a commentary about policy analysis but focused on the application and utility of tacit knowledge, Dror (2004) notes:

…a more advanced type of professional knowledge, which can be used with significant benefits for the benefit of public decision-making is needed in today's policy analysis process. There should be an extensive reliance on tacit understanding, Gestalt-images, qualitative models and qualitative methods (instead of main emphasis on explicit knowledge and quantitative models and tools). This involves imaginative thinking, systematic integration of trained intuition into policy analysis, development of qualitative tools and construction of broad qualitative models of complex issues in cooperation with social scientists and other professionals (p.253).

Who better to guide students (even the experienced, mid-career student) to understanding than those *doing the work*? What adjuncts offer is the understanding that they have gained through their experience. Nothing will substitute for that experience (though the student will have to *experience* the workplace before the lessons will be fully understood). Professional knowledge, as Dror asserts, helps foster "imaginative thinking, systematic integration of trained intuition." In calling upon those with that professional knowledge, we are affirming the value of imagination and intuition in making public decisions. When working professionals share their stories and their insights, then students are one step closer to developing the understanding needed to be a "professional" themselves.

All of this is a long way around to suggesting that adjuncts are critical to our teaching mission. Their frequent lack of academic "credentials" might be a problem inside the academy. But their knowledge, judgment, and *understanding* makes them an important and vital resource. Student evaluations often comment positively on how much they learned from the 'professional' teacher.

What makes a good teacher? For a professional degree program, it is having faculty (whether full- or part-time) who can translate their own experiences into living examples of how to understand the nature, culture, and rhythms of the workplace.

OCTOBER 1, 2007

How to Get Started as an Adjunct

In this regular column, Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. gives tips on how to get started as an adjunct.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

Often when a city manager decides to explore part-time teaching, the manager stumbles over the likely first question—what can/should I teach, i.e., what do I have to offer a department and university? If the person being asked that question were a budget or finance director, or maybe a former law enforcement officer, this question might not arise. However, city managers are of necessity generalists. The narrow focus implied by experience in a government department and implied by courses in a university department does not logically match with that generalist background. But also, you may never have consciously thought how the knowledge and skills developed over your career fit within an academic organization. During the workshops that the Advisory Board on Graduate Education sponsored, a short exercise was presented to help address this question. This seems an appropriate forum for repeating that exercise.

What we want you to develop is a list of your special skills and competencies. Think of this as though you were writing a job description in reverse. As with a job description, we start with the KSAs; what knowledge, skills, and abilities do you have? Based upon this list, you will then explore how those relate to what might be taught in the classroom.

Exercise: Prepare two columns. In the first, list your KSAs. In the second, list what subject matter/course relates to those KSAs—at this point you don't need to think about specific courses and programs. Simply think about topical areas that you think might relate to college courses. Take no more than 15 minutes to develop this two-column table. If you take more time than 15 minutes, you may be over-thinking this process.

If you are doing this exercise, then you should have a list of skills and education topics. This represents a list that reflects how the knowledge and skills you have gained through your work-life might fit in the classroom. The list so far has more of the flavor of topics that you would be willing to present as a guest lecturer. We did NOT look at actual programs and courses. It is time to do so now. But before you determine what you might teach, you must determine what is available in relation to the "topics" on your list. The first step is to cluster or reorganize the topics lists into identifiable groupings that may constitute an actual class. As you cluster the topics, remember that academic subjects may be interrelated. Thus, you may repeat topics in more than one cluster or grouping. It will be these clusters or groupings that will be used to compare to actual courses.

The next step then is to explore what offerings exist and at what academic level. This is easily accomplished by going to the local college or university Web site. Generally under the heading "Academics" you will be able to examine a list of all the colleges and departments in a university. Click on "Academics."

Based upon the "topic groupings" list that you derived from the KSA analysis, you must first determine how those topics fit within the potential departments that exist at the colleges and universities near you. I urge you to think broadly about both your experiences and the topic groups and how they might relate to academic departments. Maybe there is no MPA program at the colleges near you, but there may be a business program and the political science department may offer public administration classes at either the undergraduate or masters' levels. Click on any and all departments you think might fit. Go to the "programs" and/or "curriculum" list. Review the actual courses in the program.

When you look through the department or program-level of the university Web site, you will be able to

identify courses (by number and title only at this point) that come close to your topic groupings. Make note of these courses by number and title. These represent the potential courses you might teach. From here you need to back out of the department or program level and return to the university or college level and search for the undergraduate and graduate catalogs (many universities no longer print catalogs—the Web site is the only place to find these documents). Using the course number and title, go to the catalog site and review the description of the courses (these are generally brief, but better than having only a title). Based on these descriptions you can make a more informed decision about whether the courses are a good fit.

You are getting close, but there remains another question: When is this course taught? Again, the Web site is invaluable. By a combination of university and department sites, you should be able to get information on both past and present class schedules—how often the courses on your list are taught and when—and potentially an actual syllabus. If it is always taught M-W-F at 11 a.m., it may not work. If it is often taught at night or is taught in a single block of time, it may work.

If it still fits, then we can look at one final issue: What level are these courses?

Generally, you will be allowed to teach only at a level below your highest academic degree. The significant exception is where you have extensive work experience that is directly related to the topic of the course (such as, the course is Introduction to City Management and you have 5-10 years as a manager, or the course is HR Management and you have held the position of HR Director). And, also there are a couple of things to remember from your own academic work. Required courses are often broader and less detailed. Also, some electives presume knowledge from required courses. You will only be asked to teach an elective course if the department knows you have had the basic, required course as a student and/or you have particular knowledge that is germane to the elective. For example, if the course is the introduction to city management course, it will have no prerequisite. You would be hired based primarily on your practical knowledge. However, if the course is Labor Relations, that will likely have a prerequisite of Human Resource or Personnel Management. At least until you have experience with the basic course, i.e. Personnel, they are not likely to ask you to teach the advanced course.

Your task has been to match your experience, education, and the level of the course.

What you will end up with is a list of courses that you think you can teach organized by academic department and academic level. Review the list to determine what you might be interested in teaching. It is this list—those courses which interest you that you focus on in discussions with the pertinent academic department. In a future issue we will discuss how to begin preparation for that first course.

OCTOBER 31, 2007

What's a Syllabus, and Why Should I Care?

In this regular column, Adjunct's Corner, Ray Cox III, Ph.D. gives tips on developing a syllabus that reflects the learning outcomes you desire for the course.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

Last month, we talked about getting that first teaching assignment. Even if you have been a guest lecturer or even team-taught a course there are a number of things that are going to be new once you have your own class. The first thing you will be asked to do is think about books for the course. At some point in another discussion we will come back to that topic. For the moment we will look at the first responsibility that is truly yours—designing *your* course and developing a syllabus that reflects the learning outcomes you desire in that course. The commentary that follows we look at the lessons you wish the students to learn; the order and format of those lessons and then informing students of those lessons in the syllabus.

The first question is what do you/department think the student should learn from the course? Stated another way, what is the lesson plan for the course? This is really four questions and then four corollary questions that go with those four.

- What do the students need to know to achieve the outcomes (3-5) that will be listed in the syllabus? (What are the 3 or 4 key lessons within each outcome?)
- How do the learning outcomes relate to the weeks in the term and the chapters in the readings assignments? (How much time to cover how much material?)
- Are the "lessons to be learned" accumulative or distinct? (Some overview or intro course have distinct lessons and outcomes, but most do not)
- If they are accumulative, what is the best order of presentation of those lessons? (What in your judgment makes sense for the student to learn the lessons?)

I have found that thinking strategically about the lessons is best. Critical to strategic thinking is knowing the end point or outcome of the activity.

The first matter to be addressed is; where do you want them to end up? You have some guideposts—there will be a brief catalog description of the course and you may have access to old syllabi which include a description of the learning outcomes set by someone else. But you must also consider several factors such as the length of the course (quarter, trimester or semester), the level of the students (undergraduate or graduate) and the nature of the course (is it introductory or a specialized course). Thus you start by working backwards from the 3-5 outcomes you expect for the course (this is the same technique as what I refer to as "backward mapping" in strategic management). Then work back to where they are in terms of knowledge at the start of the class (this will later be written into the syllabus as the expectations at the start of the course). Fill in the time factoring in the lessons within each outcome, space (class time) for examinations and other class exercises (presentations, etc.).

I think you will find that, as with many of us, the first time you do the backwards map you will find that the semester needs to be 20 weeks long to get in everything you intended. This is your first lesson, because you must now scale back the number of outcomes, or simplify the lessons and discussion within each outcome to fit the length of the term. It is important that you consciously reduce the lessons and outcomes before you put it into the syllabus.

Murphy's Law applies no less to the classroom than any other activity; it is quite likely that you will not get to everything in your syllabus even if you trim it after the backwards map. If you do not design this outcome revision or lesson simplification into the syllabus you run the real danger of getting well off-track, which not

only jeopardizes the learning outcomes but may make assessment of student progress (grades) problematic. Once you have revised the learning outcomes and the lessons associated with the outcomes you can move on to prepare the syllabus.

First things first; what is a syllabus? The simple answer is that it is a *written* description of the course. It offers an explanation of how the course will be organized, the timing of the class, what students will learn, how they will learn (reading, exercises, projects), the criteria by which their performance will be judged (grading format and methods).

The syllabus is generally agreed to be a *binding agreement* between the students and the instructor. If there is a dispute over grades or classroom practices, the syllabus is the first place that the arbitrator will turn. Therefore, when in doubt put it in the syllabus.

Secondly, what is a typical format? Over time I have found that a good syllabus has three components and seven or eight sections.

- **Component One – Introduction to course, including:**
  - Course name
  - Faculty teaching course, with contact information
  - Introduction (overview and purpose of course)
    - Knowledge at start
  - Grading System
    - Achieving the grade
    - University policy on plagiarism
- **Component Two – Expectations, including:**
  - Objectives and Outcomes
  - Learning expectations at conclusion
  - Grading Scale
  - Weight of various outputs (papers, examines, participation)
- **Component Three – class and reading schedule, including:**
  - Reading assignments
  - Class/discussion schedule
  - Other information may be required or added
  - Department policy/forms for late submission of assignments

Component one needs little elaboration, though I urge you to give consideration to how you write the introduction. It should not only provide a synopsis of the course it should offer a précis of the learning outcomes you have chosen to emphasize. Learning outcomes specify the new knowledge or capacity gained from the course.

The core of a good syllabus is in component two. *Everything else is built upon this foundation.* In fact, a typical question in student evaluation forms is whether or not the learning outcomes of the course were achieved. If the outcomes are unclear, or not in the syllabus, then the students will find it difficult to judge this question. Because, as the instructor, you are required to judge performance you are obligated to provide the student with an explanation of the basis for that judgment. These range from homework assignments, to examinations, to papers, to presentations to class participation.

Three things are important to keep in mind. First, the relative weight of the graded elements tells the students what to concentrate on (including the amount of time expected). Second, the more and varied methods of "judgment," the better it is for students. Students are not equally adept at different testing styles and methods. Varying the methods "levels" the playing field. Third, the grade is for work done based upon the performance measures, no matter how much students complain it is not about time and effort. It is *exclusively* about results (younger students and those with high GPA's are the worst at pressuring faculty for higher grades).

A caveat about grades– as we will note about reading assignments, grading is a product of the norms and culture of the individual department. This is often as much a judgment of the students as it is grading criteria. Be fair, but don't be "soft." Ask the chair about grades. Part-time faculty often are at the poles of a department—either the easiest or the stiffest graders.

NOVEMBER 29, 2007

What Should Your Students Read?

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D., helps you with the difficult task of deciding on reading assignments for your course.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

Last month we discussed the development of a course syllabus. One aspect of any properly organized syllabus is a section on readings and discussion schedule. Deciding what reading assignments to give students to reflect the lesson plan is a difficult task, regardless of your experience. The "problem" of reading assignments is three-fold; first is to gauge the volume of readings, second is to the types of readings, and third is integrating the readings into the discussion and lesson plan.

I think it is pertinent to remind ourselves why we give reading assignments. Simplistically, the purpose of the readings is to convey two types of information: that which will be discussed in more detail in the class and that which will not. We sometimes forget this—if the students have been asked to read materials you may not need to discuss it in class (unless there are questions). The readings are the starting point, not the end point of the lesson. We will return to this topic.

How many books (and other readings) should you assign? This is often the toughest question facing any new faculty member. Students face two pressures. First, in most states, tuition is spiraling. While the students may get support through loans or reimbursement for tuition, they still pay fees ($600 a semester is not unusual) and they must buy books. The *good students* keep their books so the cost to purchase them is critical. Those who are ticket punching don't care—they intend to resell them at the end of the semester, or won't bother buying them in the first place. The more books assigned the greater likelihood that the good students will not be able to purchase some of the books and the less committed students will buy "selectively."

There is only one rule: cover the course topic as you have defined it. But also, as noted above, the readings are the starting point. The key to learning is in what happens in the classroom (if you are teaching a web-based course then the supplementary materials such as PowerPoint slides, short exercises, and other media replace the lecture and the discussion, not the readings). No class stands upon the readings alone; though often we think of the readings as doing exactly that. For this reason I favor a minimalist strategy in basic courses.

Get advice on this. This is one of those topics that is subject to departmental norms. If you are told that the cost of books is not an issue, then proceed accordingly. On the other hand you must recognize that your reading assignments are not the only activity in a student's life. Full-time students are taking three or four other classes and possibly a part-time job. Part-time students are probably only taking one or two other classes, but are juggling a full-time job. The readings are but one tool in the learning outcomes of a course. Assigning too much reading reflects both an unrealistic expectation of the students and too high an expectation of the learning that comes from the readings (as opposed to the other elements of a class).

Some general rules…

In an undergraduate class and even many required MPA courses try to find a single text book (these will cost upwards of $80). In the master's class, try to supplement the textbook with a selection of readings that the department or University can package and sell—there are copyright restrictions, but that is secondary for now. Three or four chapters from various books and an equal number of journal articles provides an excellent supplement, permits you to give special attention to those items most important to you and will cost much less than a book—possibly as little as $20 or so. If appropriate, these books or materials can be placed on reserve in the Library reducing the cost to zero. In advanced MPA classes, two, three or even four books and certainly a much more substantial prepared readings packet is always in order.

The readings are to reinforce and supplement the lessons you wish to convey in the class. Ideally you should design the lesson plan before you think about the readings. The reality is that you may well have been asked to "order" the books long before you have developed the lesson plan. Your task is to make the text (and especially other readings) fit you and your lesson plan. The first thing you will find is that textbooks are never written in the order you wish to discuss topics. Never let this get in your way. Second, the course and term schedule will dictate when readings will get done. The first reading assignment need not be in week two—there is nothing wrong with expecting them to have started reading before the first class. *Arrange the readings to fit your needs (including the topics and timing of examinations, the length of the course, and what you expect them to learn).* On the other hand, also, don't be afraid to have no reading assignments some weeks. If the topic is complicated, give yourself time to discuss it.

If there is one common attribute of all text books is that in trying to reach a broad audience they will not fit the goals and learning outcomes of all those teaching the course. Because of this, book publishers (with the obvious exception of ICMA) prefer generic, national discussions to specific and local concerns. The presumption of the publishers is that the best way to reach a broad audience is to use broad, national imagery and examples.

If you will be using an introductory text book, or one on policy analysis (the Urban Institute books are an exception, but are old), or one for intergovernmental relations (which seems to be defined as the federal government writing checks to states and large cities), or teaching a course on management, you can expect discussions and examples drawn from the federal government. This is a particular problem for part-time faculty with local government experience. The development, organization and politics of decision-making for a city and the federal government are similar in superficial ways but fundamentally different. The *challenge* of teaching the course is in trying to explain the federal process in terms and language that you (and the students) find realistic and meaningful. Earlier, it was suggested that the readings are a starting point. Your responsibility as the instructor is to convert those generic readings into local examples. This is where your own experiences and the other readings (local forms and procedures) serve to enliven the discussion. I have a colleague (a county worker who teaches budgeting), who has, in effect, created a wholly new text book by assembling articles, papers and documents that relate only to local government budgeting. Few have the patience to do this. For better or worse, many of us will use the generic, national-oriented, text book, but play off the text as a teaching strategy.

TO SUMMARIZE:

- Reading assignments are designed to provide basic lessons and to supplement class-room discussion
- Most texts will be too generic to serve as the basis for detailed learning
- It is easy to assign too much reading
- If you can prepare the lesson plan (and, therefore, the learning outcomes), before deciding on the readings do so
- There is nothing magic about the order of chapters in a text, change them to reflect your lesson plan, not the reverse.

2008

ARTICLE COLLECTION

JANUARY 3, 2008

Seasoned Advice for Tackling Teaching's Most Difficult Task

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. gives you advice on handling your most difficult task as a teacher: grading student performance.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

One of the most difficult things we do, whether as teachers or as managers, is evaluate the performance of others. As much as we struggle with employee performance appraisals, at least we have a variety of tools and a growing volume of research on the effectiveness of those evaluation tools. While we know a great deal about how students learn, we have a very limited range of tools to evaluate and assess that learning.

That is the conundrum—the evaluation tools are not very precise. Furthermore, the tools often are directly linked to specific learning styles. Grading can simply be a process of identifying those who are comfortable with the assessment tools you have chosen. That is why managers who have often done guest lectures or even been part of a teaching "team" find having their own course much more daunting—they are confronted for the first time with the inexact process of grading student performance. I have known managers who have chosen not to be adjuncts because of their unease with the grading process.

The purpose of grading is to determine how much a student has learned against the learning outcome criteria set out in the syllabus. Grades and grading can be divided into four components:

- Evaluating students
- Grading criteria
- Grading styles and methods
- Assessment forms (tests, papers, etc.).

It is important to reiterate that you are evaluating the performance of the student in your class. You are not evaluating the student as a student in general. You are not judging how hard the student worked, or the amount of time spent on the course. Each individual performance in each course must be judged on its own merits—no matter how much students plead.

You will find that some students will contest their grades. Especially among younger students there is a tendency to expect the grade they *wish for*, rather that the one *they earned*. As the saying goes, "if I had a penny for every time x happened, I would be wealthy." Inevitably you will get a student who will earnestly tell you that they have never gotten a grade below A and that is why they should get one in your class. This is the time to resist the temptation to "help" the student. I don't pretend it will be easy, but you are doing a disservice to all the other students when you succumb to this plea.

It must be acknowledged that grading is highly subjective. It is subjective in two senses. First, we are asking you to make *judgments* that can never be derived simply by a reference to a number. But there is a more fundamental sense in which grading is personally subjective. The type of grading instruments used in a class (tests and papers, etc.) and the nature of the course (a relatively straightforward course requiring the acquisition of specific content knowledge versus a course in which the goal is to enhance "critical thinking") affect how you grade. Furthermore, all tests are not created equal. Testing and/or the frequency of the testing needs to match the learning outcome. Six forced choice "quizzes" do not make sense in a "theory" class, but may make sense in a large introductory class in which most of the students are not "majors' in the subject matter.

Second, how "hard" or "easy" a grader you will be is a personal choice. What you must remember is that not only are you making a personal choice, but also there are norms and expectations in every academic depart-

ment that are based upon department history, experience and classification of their students. Especially in business schools grading norms are highly inflated—getting less than a 3.5 at graduation is near impossible. On the other hand in many law schools getting above a 3.0 is reserved for the top 5 or 10 percent. Learn what the norms are at the school where you teach before grading.

Grading changes for both the individual student and the class in general, depending upon the level of the course. Also, the overall level of engagement of the student in the course changes depending upon whether the class is open to all students or limited to those in the major or graduate degree.

A simple rule of thumb I have, rightly or wrongly, always used is that lower level courses (freshman, for example) will have many more students who *have to* be in the class rather than *want to* be in the class. The level of engagement of the students will vary greatly—as will the range of grades. In these course there truly should be close to a bell-curve distribution of grades from A to F.

In advanced undergraduate classes and especially in graduate programs, the students are in the class for a purpose. Also, grade expectations and requirements change. In many graduate programs a student can be dropped from the program if they receive too many grades of "C" or below. To graduate, the student generally will need a grade point average of 3.0. Under these circumstances (more committed students and narrowed grade expectations) then the range of grades assigned will, in most cases, also narrow.

For example, even a "C," and especially a "D," should be rare because both are tantamount to an "F". While I have colleagues who do not agree, I do not think that you should grade a class based upon a pre-determined expectation. You should expect some variation in the results, even when you teach the same class to different students (grades should mirror the *differences* in students). The goal is not to create a standard outcome (grading on a curve) or to be so difficult or lenient that all the grades are the same.

The only way to achieve a fair and accurate result in grading is through varying your grading style and method. To the extent possible, you should use multiple methods of evaluation for the simple reason that different students often perform differently, depending on the type of evaluation.

For example some students write good papers, but do not do so well on in-class essay examinations. Others shine in doing oral presentations. If you use only one of these tools, some students will be judged because of the tool, not the lessons gained from the class.

I always use the requirement of class participation as my "fudge factor" to help a student who is weak in one evaluation technique to get his/her grade up. The best rule is to mix the methods of evaluation to level the field for these students. While I am a strong advocate of using as many evaluation techniques as possible, this is another thing that you need to review with the chair—sometimes group projects or in-class presentations are frowned upon. In other programs such practices are found in virtually every class. Certain classes will have norms. More "technical" courses such as research methods often use traditional examination processes to assess students. More theoretical courses such as organization theory or ethics tend to rely upon papers and/or essay examinations.

TO SUMMARIZE:

Grading is the single most difficult task we undertake as a faculty member. The tools we have available to us are not well suited to an accurate assessment. This is a subjective process; there is no way to avoid that reality. If there is a magic formula, I do not know it. I simply offer a few suggestions:

- Use multiple evaluation tools and types to produce a fair assessment of each *individual* student
- Not all tools are created equal; match the style of assessment to the class (tests versus papers, etc.)
- A simple way to know if you are too lenient or too harsh in your grading is to find out whether or not your grades are markedly different for *individual* students.
- The best you can do is to strive to be fair.

FEBRUARY 6, 2008

Secrets to Creating Interactive Classroom Experiences

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. tells you how presentation style makes a difference in learning outcomes.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

Don't get pulled into the stereotypical dry lecture format in your presentation style. The form and substance of the classroom experience is important to learning outcomes—and presentation style makes a difference. The first one or two classes are the most critical for any course. It is here that classroom expectations are developed, the class personality is established, and the interactive patterns for the rest of the academic term take form.

One way to develop good interactive patterns is to get students talking in the first class or two by digressing into course-germane topics that are provocative and controversial. Many instructors like to ask students at the beginning of each course what they expect from the class. The responses can act as a guideline for the instructor to make last-minute modifications to meet such objectives.

Like your own employees, students respond differently to different forms of communication. That said, no one really likes to sit through 2+ hours of lecturing— and you probably don't want to talk for that long, anyway. The secret is building into your syllabi both alternative presentation methods and different presentation "voices."

The first thing you need to do is to learn about yourself. To do this you need to analyze your knowledge and capability. In an earlier *Adjunct's Corner* column, it was suggested that you think through those areas in which you have sufficient expertise and experience to be a good instructor.

Now we need to reanalyze that knowledge and capability for purposes of conveying to another that knowledge and capability. You have two kinds of knowledge–explicit and tacit.

Explicit is easy: it is the product of training and education. Tacit knowledge is harder to convey. It reflects the capabilities and capacity to respond to the world without thinking. The academic books often illustrate this capacity by talking about having a "feel" for the job or transcendent ability that we see in great athletes and skilled "craftsmen."

You need to think about how to explain how you act without thinking…. It is not easy. Sometimes the best you can do is to tell a story as a way to illustrate the ability (this is a war story with a purpose).

The secret is to work from the explicit knowledge (the information in the book) to a story that illustrates tacit understanding. While this works best with experienced, mid-career students who have tacit knowledge of their own, it can help even the least experienced of students. The key is to always connect the tacit back to the explicit.

STYLE AND DELIVERY METHODS

The style used to conduct the class is a function of several variables. The class size affects the choice of lecture or seminar style as well as the use of oral reports. But student participation can be evoked even in large lecture halls. Some classes, such as courses in accounting or budget preparation, lend themselves to student exercises or simulations. Case studies are always a popular method of stimulating class participation. They can be modified for use in simulations, small group discussions, and similar mechanisms to draw students into active participation.

Presentations by students are essential to developing oral communication skills. The use of guest speakers is still favored by many instructors as a way of enrich-

ing the learning experience. Guests might be asked to make presentations or to participate in class discussions or evaluations of student reports or projects. Think of a guest lecturer as the embodiment of tacit knowledge. Give them clear information about the lesson plan and learning outcome from that class but also give them license to tell stories. You control the explicit knowledge through the readings. A guest is a chance to make the lesson "live."

Most important, your chosen style and delivery method should be one with which you are comfortable. Again, people teach most effectively when they teach from their own strengths—pedagogical as well as subject matter. New instructors should experiment with different methods until they find the techniques that work best for them.

CLASS FORMAT

The two most significant changes over the last 20 years are the shift to longer classes and the increasing use of web-enhanced and web-based instruction. A generation ago, most classes were 50–75 minutes in length, meeting two or three times a week. Today, a growing number of classes, including most classes taken by part-time and commuter students, are two-and-one-half to four hours in length, meeting once a week.

Such classes need to be broken up, not only by breaks from the work routine but also by changes in the pattern of instruction. Movement from lecture to in-class exercises, to seminar discussion, to case study exercises helps keep students alert and learning. Regardless of the pattern used, student participation and attention fall off over time, especially in the evening. Changing the "pace," rhythm and even substance of a class is critical.

Structure the learning outcomes accordingly. Prioritize the lesson so that you cover the most important points early in class when both you and the students are "fresh." If you don't get to everything, cover it in the next class.

TEACHING ON-LINE

Teaching "on-line" is, in some ways, not unlike teaching a traditional class—the learning outcomes, assignments and expectations are the same. On the other hand, on-line classes are very different in presentation. Depending on the electronic format and medium, you may find some combination of

PowerPoint slides, film clips, electronic bulletin boards and chat rooms replace the lecture and face-to-face discussion. Teaching "on-line" is very much "in vogue," but do not mistake the role of the electronic media for an easier time teaching. On-line courses require far more advanced preparation, especially as you prepare PowerPoint slides and bulletin boards. In effect, you are preparing electronic responses to student questions and concerns *before* the class rather than *during* the class. This is not easy. Many seasoned instructors find this medium intimidating. In most circumstances, we suggest that you teach a course "on the ground" before attempting it on-line.

TO SUMMARIZE, HERE ARE A FEW TIPS:

- Remember to incorporate your tacit knowledge into your presentations.
- Let the students ask questions—often it is best to start class by asking the students if they have questions about the reading assignments. Often you will find that the questions match what you wanted to say. That means that much of your lesson plan is out the window, but will probably serve as a great summary just before dismissing class.
- Mixing activities is important. Talk with students, ask them questions, let them ask questions, tell stories, let them tell stories, and invite colleagues in as guest speakers. The best classes are those in which many voices are heard.
- Change the forms of presentation. Try to avoid being a talking head. Use PowerPoint and video.
- Change the pace. Except for the old-fashioned 50-minute and 75-minute classes, every class has an implicit 10+ minute-break planned. Avoid taking the break at the same time. Finish the discussion. Break at the change of topic, not in the middle.

MARCH 5, 2008

Methods of Evaluation: What Tests Tell You (and Don't Tell You) About the Student

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. discusses the elements and merits of testing, and gives you tips on types of tests.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

There was a time when many instructors were abandoning tests and relying on other evaluation instruments. That time is past, and testing is again viewed as an important evaluative tool. But in keeping with the edict to use multiple methods of evaluation, traditional "testing" should never be the only evaluation tool. Furthermore, the number and kinds of test should vary widely.

Simplistically we think of testing as two forms; objective and subjective tests. While the distinction has more to do with the method of grading, these styles also are related to the size of the class, the level of the class and the character of the knowledge to be learned. For example, large undergraduate courses often rely on objective (forced choice) tests; multiple choice, true-false, and matching kinds of questions. This is both a matter of time to grade the tests and the type of knowledge to be acquired. Smaller classes and certainly most graduate classes rely to a great extent upon subjective (essay) tests. This is primarily an issue of the type of knowledge to be acquired.

The general rule of thumb is that objective tests take a long time to prepare and are easy to grade; subjective tests are easy to prepare but difficult and time-consuming to grade. The key distinguishing factor, however, is quite different: essay tests evaluate the student's ability to think and communicate about a subject—key skills in the professional world. Objective tests, for the most part, evaluate one skill—recognition knowledge—and have a relatively high chance element (every student has a 50-50 chance of getting a true-false question right).

Personally, I find objective examinations problematic. I recognize the importance of foundational knowledge. Without the mastery of certain fundamental knowledge, more complex learning cannot occur. Testing of such fundamental knowledge is important. However, objective test formats that are so frequent in lower level undergraduate classes and are seen again in "standardized" tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), sometimes end up becoming a "game" in which the "right" answer is masked by "near right" alternatives. It is an examination style that rewards "black and white" thinking. Over-thinking and over-analyzing the question often leads to poor choices.

With few exceptions, graduate classes use essay examinations and other assignments to grade a student. As noted above, essay tests evaluate the student's ability to think and communicate about a subject—key skills in the professional world.

There is no single format for an essay examination. Some tests are what might be characterized as "short-answer questions," in which an acceptable response is possible in a couple of paragraphs. At the other extreme certain comprehensive examination questions may require a couple of dozen pages to adequately answer. Essay questions can be very narrow, testing the specific information that the student is expected to supply. Other questions may be broad, seeking to test both the student's knowledge and ability to think.

A good essay examination usually gives students some choice in the questions they may answer. Thus, for example, a student may be asked to answer four questions, but will be given five, six, or seven ques-

tions from which to choose. Essay examinations are not "track meets." Remember to factor in time for the student to review, digest and organize before putting pencil to paper. About a third of the time allocated to responding to a question should be devoted to organizing an answer. For a "standard" essay examination for an undergraduate student, a good estimate is 20-30 minutes to produce a two- to three-page answer. Graduate students are expected to provide longer and more sophisticated answers, so a time allowance of 30-45 minutes per question is reasonable. Using these quick rules of thumb, the number of questions to be asked of a student can be determined.

The best method of fairly grading essay questions is to grade all such questions at the same time. For example, in a class of 12 students taking an essay test requiring each student to answer three of five questions, the instructor should grade all answers to the first essay question at the same time, comparing the answers to each other and rank ordering the answers from best to weakest. With all the answers read together, the instructor can assign grades based on a composite of an absolute standard of what the instructor expected, together with a relative standard that takes overall class performance into account.

Responses to essay questions should be evaluated on the basis of both content (information, organization, analysis, and creativity) and articulation (clarity and quality of the writing). Given the time constraints of the examination process, content should be the primary consideration, with some allowances made with respect to writing quality. However, poor writing skills will be a hindrance in the professional world (even good ideas lose their impact if they cannot be communicated effectively) and thus, should be reflected in the grade. Instructors should never yield to the argument that writing skills are taught and graded only in English classes. Practitioners/instructors who buy into that argument deserve their fate when they employ college graduates lacking in communication skills.

Students usually appreciate instructor notations or comments regarding their performance on examinations. Some teachers mark tests extensively; others make fewer notes and discuss the exam questions in class. In either event, instructors should encourage students to visit with them outside of class to discuss their exam performances. Most students do not take advantage of that opportunity, but it is still important that it be made available to the students.

Providing a study guide for students prior to an examination has two benefits: first, in a broad subject, it draws attention to what the instructor wants students to focus their efforts on; and second, by listing a number of issues or questions, it helps to ensure that students will undertake more than an unstructured review of the semester's work.

MAY 1, 2008

How Did You Do? Assessing the Experience

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. gives you tips on assessing your teaching performance, and making future classes better.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

The class is finished when the grades are turned in, but you are not. Some time in the 10th week of a quarter-based class or the 14th or 15th week of a semester-long course you likely will be given an evaluation form for the students to fill out. While some of these forms are so generic that they are useless, others, especially those with department or program specific questions, can provide good data about the course and the instructor (for reasons of accreditation reporting many MPA programs have their own student evaluation forms).

Take time to review the results (you will most likely get the student evaluations back 2-4 weeks after the term). You may get feedback from the program director, or department chair at some point, but the key is that the primary debriefing should come from a *self assessment*.

If you are anything like me, you end classes with questions. How could the class have been done better (beyond the simple reality that, with experience, I will get better)? Would I use the same texts in the future? What lecture and presentation techniques worked well and which should be altered or replaced?

How might one systematically conduct a debriefing of oneself? Start at the beginning:

- Review the learning outcomes
- Review the grading criteria
- Review the grading methods
- Review the readings

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Did you accomplish what you intended to accomplish in the class? Especially for new instructors the learning outcomes are overly ambitious. This should not be surprising. The expectations, norms and traditions of the students and of the department may not yet be well understood. New faculty often tries to do too much. It will be reflected in stiff grading, multiple and long reading assignments and, therefore an *expectation of learning* that may be unrealistic. This is not a plea to ease off, but rather an assessment of what can reasonably be expected to be learned in the time allotted (this shift is complicated for those who become used to semester courses, but suddenly find themselves teaching quarter-length classes. Over time you will learn to adjust on the fly—changing expectations as classes (especially spring classes) are lost because of snow and other weather situations or when you find that the 16-week fall semester often morphs into a 15-week spring semester. The end of the semester is a time to ask whether the learning outcomes are realistic. Remember that the lesson plan is built off the learning outcomes. Therefore, if you adjust the learning outcomes, then everything else must be adjusted.

GRADING CRITERIA AND METHODS

In an earlier discourse I offered the following suggestions concerning grading:

- Use multiple evaluation tools and types to produce a fair assessment of each *individual* student
- Not all tools are created equal, match the style of assessment to the class (tests versus papers, etc.)
- A simple way to know if you are too lenient or too harsh in your grading is to find out whether or not your grades are markedly different for *individual* students.
- The best you can do is to strive to be fair.

These are a good starting point to assess how well you did in the classroom. You will note that the word

fair appears twice. This is a standard and judgment you must make about yourself.

The criteria that others (especially the students) use to judge fairness will be based upon individual and self-centered views. Students might label a grade "unfair" because they *want* a higher grade, not because of any action or judgment on your part. You should establish an internal definition of fairness and *consistently apply* that standard. Were you fair (and consistent)? If the answer to that question is yes, then you can go to the other standards. Even if you encounter complaints, are your grades for students similar to the grades for those students in other classes? If a student complains about the "B" but you then find that the student gets a "B" in most every class, then you are consistent and you can feel more certain that you are being fair. On the other hand if your grades are significantly higher or lower than that of other instructors, then that "consistency" is a detriment. Fix it. Lastly you need to make sure that you mix your grading criteria to account for different learning styles.

READINGS

Getting reading assignment right is a constant struggle for us all. Few part-time faculty have control over the readings when they first begin teaching (some never have much control). After the term you need to rethink the readings as though you did have control. You will not likely have that control, but by starting with the "what if" scenario means that you can reshape the readings to fit your style and learning goals. Also, books, much like people, have strengths and weaknesses. Don't treat every word and every chapter as equal. Let the strengths of the book serve you and realize that you will have a much greater burden of "teaching" to get through the weak elements of the readings. It is useful to return to the suggestions made earlier about reading assignments:

Reading assignments are designed to provide basic lessons and to supplement class-room discussion

- Most texts will be too generic to serve as the basis for detailed learning
- It is easy to assign too much reading
- There is nothing magic about the order of chapters in a text, change them to reflect your lesson plan, not the reverse

If you take those to heart, even readings that are "imposed" can be reshaped to better fit you. We sometimes use the readings as a crutch. If the book is inadequate to what you want as learning outcomes, then don't assign it. But lacking that, you can (and should) shape what you do in the classroom to compensate for the inadequacies of the assigned readings. You were hired because of the skills and experience you possess. Lead from that strength. If that means downplaying or even critiquing the readings then do so. Again the books and reading should never be more than the framework for learning, not the actually learning. If the learning outcomes could be accomplished simply by reading, then there would be no need for classes. The readings should be the starting point for learning, not the totality of learning.

THE STUDENTS' VIEW

Just as grading expectations vary by course level and from program to program, so do student expectations regarding the amount of work they will be expected to do. This applies equally to the amount of expected reading, the number of oral or written assignments, and the number and kinds of tests. Again, it is perfectly acceptable for new instructors to ask questions regarding these expectations. Student feedback, however, should not be the sole source for this kind of information. Some level of student complaint is common, and that level may be higher in classes enrolling predominantly part-time students whose lives are complicated by a large number of daily obligations.

Meaningful learning occurs most frequently when students are exerting effort beyond their comfort level; that is, when they are being seriously challenged. Good teachers challenge students to learn. It is hard to discern when student complaints about workload are routine and when they should be seriously considered. Again, this is a matter on which the part-time teacher should seek advice from the experienced (both full-and part-time) members of the faculty. Ultimately, the greatest measure of good teaching is the level of respect shown by former students who have tested their education in the real world.

IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

Before beginning a new class (whether the same class or a even a new class), you begin to build the course based upon the four inputs you have received: the student evaluations, the supervisor's evaluation, your self assessment and the facts of your experience in the class. To the extent you can, you should think of the next class as an opportunity to correct the missteps

and ill-considered assignments. On the other hand, it is equally appropriate to use the successes of that earlier class as the building block upon which to construct a "new" syllabus and a "new" course. You never fully start with a clean slate. Yet, you may find that classes are never really alike. It is a matter of both experimentation and conscious redesign. The core—the learning outcomes—may not vary much, but most of the other elements of the class—the grading criteria and methods and readings—may change significantly. Every class is a perpetual work in progress. You should never be completely satisfied with how things go. This slightly skeptical stance about your own performance will make each new class a little different, hopefully a little better, and never dull!

A CLOSING COMMENT OR TWO

- While you will get other feedback, there is no substitute for a comprehensive self-assessment of a class.
- You are probably doing things "right" when the class changes each term.
- Make the course fit you—the students will benefit from your experiences and the course will be more interesting for you.

JUNE 4, 2008

Back to the Beginning and Then Forward

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. asks compelling questions about teaching as an adjunct, and solicits your feedback and ideas for more in-depth discussions.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

Nearly a year ago we began this monologue on managers as teachers. While I have been pleased with the positive feedback I have received on a couple of the presentations, I wonder whether what I am saying is what you want to know, or if what I am saying is generating questions, which have generally gone unanswered. Has this been for the most part too simplistic, or is the reverse true—is there a need for more depth and detail on some topics? I thought I would go back and review some of what I have discussed to try to stimulate new topics or at the least requests for more detailed discussion of certain topics.

Last summer we began this series by asserting the importance of *understanding* as the basis of teaching. I asked, "Who better to guide students (even the experienced, mid-career student) to understanding than those *doing the work*?" In the article, I wrote:

When working professionals share their stories and their insights, then students are one step closer to developing the *understanding* needed to be a "professional" themselves.

All of this is a long way around to suggesting that adjuncts are critical to our teaching mission…. their knowledge, judgment, and understanding makes them an important and vital resource. Student evaluations often comment positively on how much they learned from the 'professional' teacher.

What makes a good teacher? For a professional degree program, it is having faculty (whether full- or part-time) who can translate their own experiences into living examples of how to understand the nature, culture, and rhythms of the workplace.

I might ask now, *"How do we encourage more managers to "translate their own experiences into living examples of how to understand the nature, culture, and rhythms of the workplace?"*

The second discussion focused on suggestions on how to get started—helping you address the question: "What can/should I teach, i.e. what do I have to offer a department and university?" I suggested an approach that required a self-conscious analytic approach to reviewing how the knowledge and skills developed over your career fit within an academic organization.

I might ask now *"What are the barriers that prevent you from seeking opportunities to teach?"*

I would like feedback on those two questions. In addition I have a couple of others. *First, would a second career as an academic be attractive? What are the barriers to pursuing such a new career?*

Most of the *Academic Matters* discussions have focused on the nitty-gritty of teaching. Writing syllabi, settling on reading assignments and grading are not the most glamorous aspects of teaching, but they are the core competencies of the profession. These topics did not produce much feedback. Were they on target, or were they unhelpful? What aspects of these functions were not addressed? Are there details or nuances that you would like covered? For example, in the article on grading, I wrote:

To summarize, grading is the single most difficult task we undertake as a faculty member. The tools we have available to us are not well suited to an accurate assessment. This is a subjective process; there is no way to avoid that reality. If there is a magic formula, I do not know it. I simply offer a few suggestions:

- Use multiple evaluation tools and types to produce a fair assessment of each *individual* student

- Not all tools are created equal; match the style of assessment to the class (tests versus papers, etc.)
- A simple way to know if you are too lenient or too harsh in your grading is to find out whether or not your grades are markedly different for *individual* students.
- The best you can do is to strive to be *fair*.

Would any of the above suggestions be worthy of a more in-depth discussion in an Academic Matters article?

The remaining articles centered on students, often in context of issues such as testing and grading.

Would a closer examination of the nature and character (actually multiple characters) of today's students be of interest? In my presentations on this topic we often have interesting conversations that focus on "generational" issues. This is a topic that is particularly pertinent to professional graduate education. Our classes look much like your workplace; there are three *generations* in most workplaces, just as there are three in many classrooms (even undergraduate classes often have two generations). There are also the differences in expectation and outlook between full-time and part-time students. *Are these of enough interest to be a topic for a future Academic Matters presentation?*

I would like to make the next round of discussions and presentations to be based upon topics you, rather than I, select. Give me feedback, please. *What have I left out in terms of topics? What topics have been discussed incompletely? What new direction would you see these discussions going?* For example, we did not discuss in great detail the influences of changing technology. *Would that be a pertinent future topic?*

To conclude, these discussions have been driven by my choices of topics. It is time for the topics to be driven by what you would like to learn. Help me shape future presentations by providing feedback. You can email me directly at rcox@ukron.edu.

SEPTEMBER 3, 2008

Five Tips for Teaching Graduate Versus Undergraduate Students

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. gives adjunct instructors tips for teaching graduate versus undergraduate students.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

We have touched upon the topic of the student in the classroom in several of our discussions. To some extent those reviews took for granted that we understand how and why undergraduate and graduate students are different. Many of my colleagues who have had traditional academic careers would have had their first classroom experience as a teaching assistant, most probably in an lower-level (freshman or sophomore) undergraduate class. Their first full-time teaching position was probably in a department with only undergraduates or maybe undergraduate and masters' students. They learned the differences in teaching approaches based upon their experiences teaching at both levels.

On the other hand, part-time or adjunct faculty teach courses based upon their work experience and the teaching opportunities available to them, which are likely at one level or the other. The differences in techniques in teaching undergradate and graduate students are worth exploring.

For example, does the "more advanced intellectual" level of a graduate course necessarily mean different textbooks? How does the difference affect class preparation? Or how do you adjust teaching techniques or student assessment methods based upon those differences?

Assign more readings of higher complexity in graduate classes than in undergraduate. The core text may well be the same in both the undergraduate and graduate classes. The differences will be in the supplementary readings in the graduate class and to some extent in the depth of analysis of the key questions and topics raised in the text. The ability of the student to see the nuances and complexity of a topic is often based upon those additional readings, but the details and the depth of knowledge required may vary in how the textbook material is presented. For example, you might use the textbook chapters as the basis for lectures and adhere fairly strictly to those topics. In a graduate class you might assume that the students need only read the material to comprehend it and you are free to use the readings as background and foundation for other topical discussions.

Realize how little undergraduate students know–and stay within the boundaries of the textbook. Your preparation for a graduate class is decidely different from that of an undergraduate class. The first time I went into an undergraduate class after more than a decade in government service, I had to remind myself how little the students knew and how much, even after the course, they still would not know! It is in this sense I think that the undergraduate classes are harder to prepare for. The students, quite frankly, know relatively little about government processes and activities. Other than a basic American Government course (though that may be what you are teaching) they will know very little about government and much of what they do know is the product of their experiences—what they read in the press or learned from their social circle. To put it most starkly they have a firm grasp of stereotypes, but little actual knowledge.

The challenge is to break the lessons into small enough pieces that the students can learn. That is why I suggest staying within the boundaries of the course as defined by the textbook. Much of what they will learn in the course will be gained by how you re-present the readings. This is not about critical analysis. It is about basic concepts and understandings. You cannot push to get them to see the complexities. In reality they are

not in the class to see the nuances; they are in the class to learn (quite possibly for the first time) basic ideas and basic processes.

Make the discussion simple. The challenge for most adjuncts is to realize how simple (and, therefore to some extent how unrealistic) they must make the discussion. The mistake is to introduce a level of detail and complexity that will confuse rather than enlighten the students (though you will also get students in those classes who "get it" and will want more). For those who spend every day in the swirl and cross currents and administration and politics, the ability to step back from those realities and focus on more straight-forward and simpler "truths" is going to be critical. Maybe the first lesson is to avoid many of the "war-stories" that contribute to our understanding of events and activities. To a large extent undergraduates are not prepared intellectually to understand the lessons of the stories.

On the other hand war stories, when offered to illustrate the lessons form the literature work well in a graduate class. The students are much better grounded in both the theory and practices of governing. They can relate the story to the lesson and learning outcomes in a way the proto-typical undergraduate cannot.

Keep in mind the different learning outcomes for undergraduate versus graduate courses when selecting assessment tools. The starting point for acknowledging the difference between student assessments in an undergraduate versus a graduate class is to keep in mind the very different learning outcomes for those courses. Those outcomes are based in acquiring fundamental knowledge and basic principles rather than the capacity to analyze complex and nuanced circumstances. To affirm the acquisition of basic knowledge, fairly traditional and straight-forward testing techniques such as multiple choice or short answer examinations will serve. To affirm understanding of more complex knowledge may require essay examinations and other testing.

Use a seminar-style classroom technique in the graduate class; a lecture technique in the undergraduate class. For example, the difference between a lecture course and a seminar is presumed to be in the level of interaction and participation in a seminar. Graduate classes are more amenable to the seminar format because of the importance of exploring complexity—which is best done as a discussion. The more straight-forward character of the lessons of an undergraduate class is conveyed in a "lecture." Grading student participation should be part of every class. The difference is that participation will involve more direct questions and responses in the undergraduate class, whereas the seminar-style of the graduate class should encourage more "story-telling, analysis and critical examination of topics.

There may be more to discuss here. We may return to this topic in the future. For the moment, I would summarize by noting

- The differences in the classes are based upon the lessons to be learned
- Especially in an undergraduate class you must remember to keep it simple—there is much they do not know and is beyond the purview of the course
- Undergraduate classes are more focused on the acquisition of basic knowledge
- Graduate classes need to focus on the details and complexity of the workplace—"war stories" can be effective in illustrating complexity.

NOVEMBER 5, 2008

Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Millenials: Managing Students' Expectations in the Classroom

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. gives adjunct instructors tips for teaching graduate versus undergraduate students.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

Earlier discussions have focused on how we, as instructors, look upon our teaching environment. This month I want to turn the tables by offering comments on the attitude and perspectives of students as they experience university-level education. In some respects this is not unlike discussions you may have had about the generational differences among employees. We are all now well versed in the different attitudes toward work among boomers, Gen-X and millennial employees. The classroom is no different. Especially in MPA programs and other career-oriented degree programs, you will have students from all three groups in your classroom. Even more than in the day-to-day workplace, the worldviews of those generations affect how the students behave in the classroom and what they want and expect from their education.

In order to see how the student views the classroom, we must first note the differences in the attitudes about work among the three generations in the classroom (though, increasingly, there are fewer boomers in the classroom, with the exception of the instructor). An article published in boston.com (retrieved September 29, 2008) discusses what different generations look for in a job - giving us insight into what they value:

BOOMERS VALUE:

- Location (a shorter commute)
- Loyalty and work ethic
- Financial security and stability
- Opportunities for post-retirement employment
- Ways to mentor other generations and pass the torch

GENERATION XERS VALUE:

- Employer stability
- Forum for questioning authority
- Flexible work arrangements and work-life balance
- Personal growth and workplace flexibility are more desirable than status

MILLENIALS VALUE:

- Free agency attitude and work arrangements
- Socially conscious employers
- Independent contributions within a team environment

MEANINGFUL WORK

- Cutting-edge technologies and companies
- Education
- Forums to provide input
- Flexibility in roles and schedules, casual attire, and a comfortable environment

What might the above characteristics tell us about the type of student these people will be? The first thing that jumps out at me is that the boomers' "desire to mentor another generation" is what is feeding the interest of managers (particularly those who are within a decade of retirement) in going into the classroom.

This column, or the various iterations of the "Managers as Teachers: A Practitioner's Guide to Teaching Public Administration," which began about a dozen years ago, might not have been deemed necessary by an earlier generation of managers (or faculty).

Only time will tell if future generations of managers feel the same pull of "legacy."

BOOMERS AS STUDENTS

The boomer, as a student, seemingly is looking for stability in the classroom (a learning environment that is controlled and structured), possibly a link between performance and outcome (loyalty), and a classroom in which there are opportunities to demonstrate (teach) the knowledge won through experience. These will be both good and problematic students. They will be concerned about the structure of the class—is the syllabus accurate, did classes start on time, were discussions focused and "on point," was the grading equitable. They will be comfortable in the "communications" elements of a class—presentations, discussion, and discursive essay examinations. Those elements fit their experiences and knowledge of the complexity of work life. They will also strongly endorse the value of experience over "texts." On the other hand these are students who will have less tolerance of tangential discussions (they will want to stay "focused"). They will have relatively little tolerance for teaching methods and styles that don't fit them—emphasis on web-based coursework and team activities (many have been the boss too long for this).

GENERATION XERS AS STUDENTS

The dominant group in the graduate-level classroom are those in Generation-X. Their desire for stability is manifest in a concern about the "credentials" of the program and faculty. NASPAA accreditation is important to this group, as are the experiences and background of the faculty. They will readily seek courses in other departments and other universities to construct a more personalized education. They are also the group that is most likely to challenge authority. They will be more dismissive of faculty (especially those whose experiences don't match their own) and of textbooks. They will be more confrontational in classroom discussion. On the whole they will be less patient with their classroom experience than those older and younger than themselves. This is the group for whom the modern class schedule of evenings and weekends and the web-based curriculum was invented. They want the advanced education available from a graduate program, but they will also wait for a schedule and format that suits their schedule. In its most extreme form there is a "you are here for me, so I am in charge" attitude that may make both faculty and administrators shake their heads.

MILLENIALS AS STUDENTS

The millennial generation is one seen more often in undergraduate classes and/or are the full-time students in masters' programs. This is a generation that grew up as the first in which the expectation was that nearly everyone would go to college. Their life experience is that is being educated. They value education, but it has primarily instrumental value. They had both service-learning and community service requirements in high school and college. Classes must lead to some outcome (a grade, a degree, a job). This is the group that we have the most difficulty attracting to traditional MPA programs. They are the ones driving the emphasis on non-profit management (seemingly it is more meaningful work, than the public service). They value their own vision of the future and have difficulty relating to the vision of earlier generations. The past is not prologue. They envision themselves doing things differently (more socially conscious, more direct, less fettered by rules and structures). They are inquiring students (the importance of critical thinking has been part of the mantra since they were in grade school), but they must be convinced that they are wrong. They are more comfortable in environments that they can dominate (web-based classes, classes of their peers and not those with older students with considerable work experience). Their life has revolved around the evaluation tool of the grade – they will protest even the slightest deviation from their own expectation of a grade.

MANAGING THE CLASSROOM OF THE THREE GENERATIONS

What does the above suggest about the approach to teaching a class? I think it is obvious that just as it is in the workplace the presence of the three generations (in the classroom) requires the instructor to manage the class as he or she would the workplace. Circumstances and combinations of generations will change the dynamic of the classroom. This is another affirmation of the often observed phenomena that no two classes (even two sections of the same course taught in the same semester) are ever alike. A class of full-time students will be very different from an evening class with three generations, in part because the three generations have different expectations of the class. They may want different learning outcomes, they very likely will desire different formats and teaching styles and they will judge the course (and the instructor) by different criteria.

There is no way around the problem of the differing expectations of students. You cannot be all things to

all people. On the other hand, going into the classroom knowing the generation mix in the class will help you prepare for the class, and may even require some adjustments in readings and testing. For example, if you have a class in which you know virtually all the students are full-time, younger students then you can place a greater emphasis on readings from traditional texts and team exercises. The class "lectures" will focus on ensuring that the lessons of the texts have been learned. Your "war stories" will have the least value in this class; the students simply do not have enough work experience to appreciate the lesson of the stories. In contrast, a class of generation-X students (with a few boomers) would be one in which the readings are drawn from work-specific writings and are supplemented by real-world materials (government reports and documents) and the exercises are drawn from work. There probably needs to be a mix of individual and team exercises. Discussions and lectures in the class would be based upon relevant, work-related, experiences with the assigned texts serving as background information. You will not be able to hit the mark for every student, but just as you mix the testing and assessment styles, you change the structure and teaching techniques to reflect the varied student body. The goal is fairness in the use of teaching approaches.

In an earlier discussion I suggested that you build a syllabus upon the foundation of the learning outcomes and then structure everything else—readings, testing and grading—from there. That suggestion was made in part to ensure that your course stays on point, but also to ensure that the course is "your" course, that it reflects your goals and desired outcomes to take greatest advantage of your academic and experiential strengths. My suggestion here is that you include assumptions about who will be in the class to that list. The learning outcomes do not change, but the path by which you arrive at those outcomes will be influenced by the students and their expectations of the class. It will enhance the teaching experience for you and for the students.

The lessons of the generational differences are four-fold:

- The interests and perspectives of students in your classes will probably cross generational lines
- Different students work better in different environments and settings
- Being conscious of who is in the class permits you to restructure the classes to best reflect the students
- Be yourself and focus on learning outcomes, not student reactions.

2009

ARTICLE COLLECTION

FEBRUARY 3, 2009

Updates from ICMA Press

Here's a brief overview of the status of new textbooks from ICMA Press and other updates of interest.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

Electronic Versions of Articles from The Municipal Year Book 2009 Available Online

The Municipal Year Book 2009 includes timely, interesting articles, including an examination of how local governments are facing budget shortfalls, rising costs, and retirement issues during a recession, and how the economic downturn has exacerbated ongoing concerns about state authority and lack of fiscal support. These are great articles for student reading and class discussions. Students can download these individually for a small fee, or you can download and pay a copyright fee for the number of copies you plan to make. Click here to see a listing of the articles, and click on the individual articles to get ordering information.

ICMA Press Publishes All-New Edition of Planning "Green Book"

Local Planning: Contemporary Principles and Practice is the all-new edition of the popular book, *The Practice of Local Government Planning*. This new edition is packed with photos, graphics, and other design elements that increase readability and eye-appeal. The book focuses on emerging issues and future challenges, offering useful, current examples of leading planning practices. The organization and content of the book will help planners and nonplanners who manage the work of planners apply well-reasoned strategic thinking to their planning challenges, and will help students of the profession bridge theory and practice. Click here to download an excerpt from Chapter One.

New Edition of Case Book Complements Popular Local Government Management Book

Managing Local Government: Cases In Effectiveness, which was just released in January, provides actual cases and ties them into the teachings of ***The Effective Local Government Manager, 3rd Edition.*** Click here to download FREE the teaching supplement, ***Cases in Effectiveness: Outcomes.***

Instructor's Materials Available FREE on the ICMA Press Web Site

Get FREE instructor's materials, including an 8-page document that provides tips on using simulations and case studies; a syllabus, discussion questions, and Excel exercises for use with ***A Budgeting Guide for Local Government***; and case study supplements to provide you with the "aftermath" of cases.

FREE Shipping and Half-Price Examination Copies; FREE Desk Copies

ICMA Press sends hundreds of examination copies out to professors who want to examine our books. The cost of postage, labor, and paper has risen exponentially over the years—so many publishers charge for examination copies or provide a small discount. ICMA Press will continue to provide FREE desk copies when professors adopt a textbook their course. And we now offer a 50% discount on examination copies and FREE shipping/handling. If you adopt the book for your class, you can use your examination as a desk copy, and be refunded your book fee. Or, you can request a free desk copy, and keep your examination copy for your teaching assistant or personal library. Click here to order either an examination or desk copy, and to get more details on the policy.

MARCH 3, 2009

Part-Time Students Need a Different Teaching Approach

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. shares insight into why the part-time student is more challenging to teach than the full-time student, and gives you alternative approaches to use.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

While you might expect that students in a professional program, such as an MPA, will be older and attending part-time, the same is increasingly true for undergraduates.

How does this affect you in the classroom? Are part-time students different? While I object to the stereotype that the best students are the younger, full-time students, there are pedagogical and social reasons that full-time and part-time are different.

In many ways the part-time student is the more challenging student; not for academic reasons, but because they have other obligations that mean that the time available to devote to studies may be less. They are often more critical "consumers" of education. The "let's cut to the chase, tell me what I need to do" attitude may be less a judgment about the quality and importance of the course than it is a judgment of scheduling.

These students are also demanding about the long-term schedule of classes. Again, questions such as "how long will it take to finish my degree" may not be a statement of self-absorption and a ticket punching mentality as it is a question of "how do I explain this to my boss or my spouse?"

If you think about it, you will realize that the question, and the concerns that form the basis of the question, are not unlike what you have or will go through before you take on the additional assignment of teaching part-time.

Beyond the very human concerns about how going to school part-time affects other parts of one's daily life, there are academic and pedagogical issues. Contrary to what is generally said, part- time students need to be treated differently. It is not about capability, but it may be about capacity.

In the broad scheme part-time and full-time students are equally capable. However, part-time students often have "holes" in their academic experience that may simply be the product of time and distance (who of us remembers much about a class from ten or twenty years ago, even if you apply the lessons every day). Those holes may be the product of lost opportunities (the electives you take, especially as an undergraduate, may be driven more by scheduling than academic interest_. Those holes may be the product of the market-driven choices that universities make that favor job- and career-oriented classes over a broader educational focus.

More and more curricula are in the mode of training—not education. The classic "liberal arts" education is increasingly rare. The students who have these "holes" are as capable and committed as those in other times or their full-time peers. Nevertheless, and especially at the graduate level (the MPA), the instructor must account for what the students do not know, as much as what they do know.

The background and experience in education may well be as varied as the work experience of the students. The only assumption to make is that the instructor can make no assumptions. More and more class time is devoted to "leveling the playing field of academic knowledge" than might have been the case in other times. That is often what strikes any of us who are of a particular age—how often our own educational experience is not a valid guide in defining what needs to be covered in a course.

It is not that the courses are to be simplified or "dumbed-down," but rather the length of the path

to reach the lesson goals is often longer, with more detours and tangents than we expected. This is before we factor in new knowledge to be acquired and skills to be mastered. The number of standard contact hours has not changed in many decades, but what we try to cram into those 33 or 40 "hours" of standard quarter or semester-length classes has grown.

The above presents three problems for you in the class. The first is that you may not know until after the class starts the background of the students and, therefore, how far "back" you must go to establish the starting point for lessons.

Secondly, students' backgrounds will vary greatly; some will be quite knowledgeable in the topic area (especially in established functional areas such as personnel or budgeting) and others will have no background at all. And third, the holes in the students' backgrounds will change the expectations of how to approach topics, not merely the subject matter itself.

The approach you take can follow several different paths. I don't pretend to have answers here, but I can suggest two general approaches.

The first approach is what I might call the "go with the flow" approach. This involves accepting the narrowed fields and training methods more common in universities today as a given and, therefore, simply present the course as "this is all you need to know to get the job done," thus cutting the lessons back to basic skills and behaviors. The course is more hands on in that it will emphasize skill development and work related knowledge.

The alternative takes the "work is a giant puzzle and you need to learn to put the pieces together" approach. This approach emphasizes critical analysis and organizational relations abilities more than task-based knowledge.

The differences in the choice may have more to do with the time and resources available to support you and also the norms of the department that hires you. For example, you need to check with the department to make sure that the approach fits departmental expectations. Also, a more hands-on approach may require different physical arrangements to facilitate simulations and group activities.

TO SUMMARIZE:

The background and age of students is important

- Part-time students are different in every way except in capability
- The instructor must account for what the students do not know, as much as what they do know.
- It is not that the courses are to be simplified or "dumbed-down", but rather the length of the path
- to reach the lesson goals is often longer, with more detours and tangents than we expected.

APRIL 2, 2009

Beyond Test Taking: Assessing Student Learning

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. gives you advice on the use of three more assessment tools: homework, presentations, and group assignments.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

In this monthly column, I wrote an article on the need for diverse methods of assessment, noting that the only way to achieve a fair and accurate result in grading is by varying the grading styles and methods. I urged the use of multiple methods of evaluation for the simple reason that different students learn best from different forms of presentation. Student often perform differently depending upon the type of evaluation.

For example, some students write good papers, but do not do so well on in-class essay examinations. Others shine in doing oral presentations. If you use only one of these tools, some students will be judged because of the tool, not the lessons gained from the class. I always use the requirement of class participation as my "fudge factor" to help a student who is weak in one evaluation technique to get his/her grade up.

The best rule is to mix the methods of evaluation to level the field for these students. While I am astrong advocate of using as many evaluation techniques as possible, this is another thing that you need to review with the chair—in some programs, group projects or in-class presentations arefrowned upon. In other programs such practices are found in virtually every class. Certain classes will have norms. More "technical" courses such as research methods often use traditional examination processes to assess students. More theoretical courses such as organization theory or ethics tend to rely upon papers and/or essay examinations.

The article emphasized the two most common assessment tools—examinations and papers. The central theme was on grading students. The theme for this month's column is in the "other" evaluation tools that are available: specifically homework, presentations and group assignments. While these are "graded" activities as well, these three are rarely major elements of a final grade.Rather these are more likely to be milestones or benchmarks toward assessing "lessons learned." Also, I want to add the twist that I will try to integrate these three assessment tools into that increasingly more common format; the on-line course.

HOMEWORK

The idea of homework is misunderstood. Student complaints about the volume of homework assignments, by which they generally mean reading assignments, but may also include short assignments due weekly or at least regularly. In all higher education classes and particularly in graduate classes, the homework assignments are the foundation of learning. Homework is where basic knowledge is acquired; the classroom is where such knowledge is refined and thought processes are sharpened.

A common question is whether or not some courses are more amenable to the use of homework assignments to stimulate learning. While the simple answer may be that "technical" course such as statistics, research methods or policy analysis seem to fit the traditional "homework assignment" style, I believe we undervalue this tool. It need not be a series of "mathematical" research manipulations (calculate the Chi square for this table of data or do an analysis of variance) that are called for. It may be simply to ask students to prepare one page summaries of specific articles, or to collect from published sources (the newspaper) information on a current topic and then critique the story (great ways to see how much they have learned).

The point is that homework is an invaluable assessment tool to see if the students "get it" between more formal assessments such as papers and tests. In online courses, such "homework" and other assignments substitute for the assessment that would be done by observation and listening in the classroom.

PRESENTATIONS

Relatively few courses require an oral presentation from students, but MPA programs and, more importantly, those such as yourselves who hire those students upon graduation, expect students to develop reasonably good oral communication skills. Thus an increasing number of classes include presentations as a key element of the course. The nature of the assignment varies; oral reports can be based on research, literature reviews, class problems, case studies, or similar materials. Also, and especially for web-based courses, it is the complementary materials such as PowerPoint slides that are important.

Oral presentations do not have to be lengthy; a two-minute briefing exercise (so-called "elevator speeches") can be very effective. As is the case with written reports, students need and deserve written feedback, and not just a grade, on their work. It would not be unusual for students to be asked to "present" the results of their homework assignment. Role-playing and other simulation exercises are commonly used to develop skills in areas such as budgeting and planning. Some case studies, such as those published by ICMA, are also usable as simulations. The point is that presentations serve the same purpose as homework—to assess progress toward intended learning outcomes.

How might one incorporate presentations into an on-line course? At first blush this might seem impossible. In reality it can become a lesson in presentation organization and planning no less than for an oral presentation. One of the ways that the instructor substitutes for the "oral presentation" that is a lecture is to use the visual of PowerPoint slides and other media. There is no reason why students should not be expected to be similarly adept using such media (many are far more adept that many of my colleagues or myself). There is as much of "art" in properly preparing PowerPoint slides and related peripherals as there is to an oral presentation.

GROUP ASSIGNMENTS

Group assignments are not everyone's "cup of tea." From a mechanical standpoint they are simple. The instructor can plan even before class to divide the class into groups of three to five students and give each group an assignment that must be prepared and presented, in written or oral form, either to the instructor or to the whole class. Such assignments teach students to work in collaboration with others, particularly others not of their own choosing. This, too, is seen as a simulation of real-world administration. Instructors who use such groups should require a work product that allows for an evaluation of the input and performance of each individual student; for example, a written report might require an identification of the contribution of each student.

While some instructors favor the use of group activities or assignments, such tools are often rejected by students. The inevitable complaint is that not every student contributes equally to the final result. Students who have typically been assessed for individual work find this lack of control over their grade frustrating. As we are wont to respond—this is real life. There will likely never be a time when all members of a team make equal contributions. It is a focus on results, not credit that will make that person a success. Both the cynics and the skeptical will find such an assurance naïve.

Yet for all that, a student, no less than a worker, truly places his/her fate in the hands of others by not cooperating, even in the face of uneven performance. As Ben Franklin said in much more dire circumstances "we must hang together because surely we will hang alone." Refusing to "participate" might well guarantee failure, while participation may rescue the project. That choice is a lesson best learned in the classroom because the inability to reconcile results with individual credit will doom work relationships.

There are no particular barriers to using groups or teams for projects in on-line courses. This may well be the most common form of engagement in such courses. The one thing that you must be sensitiveto is that in a truly asynchronous environment, the students may be in different time zones. It shouldn't prevent you from requiring joint efforts, but it needs to be a consideration in how much lead and preparation time you give groups.

SUMMARY

Alternative assessment tools such as group projects presentations and homework are tools that provide key information for faculty about the lessons being learned. I would go so far as to suggest that their value as peda-

gogical tools outweighs their value in determining grades. Things to remember:

- Oral presentations are an invaluable assessment tool for judging learning toward outcomes
- Emphasis should be on the inclusion of media, such as PowerPoint, to complement oral presentations
- "Homework" should not be limited to "doing the math" and/or technical subjects
- Despite student misgivings group projects are valuable object lessons in how people "work" in organizations

SEPTEMBER 30, 2009

Managing the Classroom

This month in Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. discusses dynamics in the classroom, specifically group dynamics and the instructor-student dynamic.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

One of the challenges of teaching is holding together or "managing" a class of students with disparate interests. In a 2008 commentary on the three generations and their learning styles and interests, I commented:

I think it is obvious that just as it is in the work place, the presence of the three generations in the classroom requires the instructor to manage the class as he or she would the work place. Circumstances and combinations of generations will change the dynamic of the classroom. This is another affirmation of the often-observed phenomena that no two classes (even two sections of the same course taught in the same semester) are ever alike. A class of full-time students will be very different from an evening class with three generations, in part because the three generations have different expectations of the class. They may want different learning outcomes, they very likely will desire different formats and teaching styles, and they will judge the course (and the instructor) by different criteria.

There is no way around the problem of the differing expectations of students. You cannot be all things to all people. (October 2008 *Academic Matters*).

In this commentary, I want to drop down another level to talk about "managing" the actual class. In other words, how do I plan the activities and practices that make up a "live" class. The generational elements are relevant here, but there are factors that are intrinsic to the dynamics of a classroom that transcend the generational elements. Equally important to the dynamics of the relationship between the instructor and the students as a group are two competing dynamics: the relationship and dynamic of the students among themselves and the relationship and dynamic of the instructor and individual students as individuals.

GROUP DYNAMICS IN THE CLASSROOM

While I have no empirical data to confirm what I will say, there are a number of assumptions that instructors make about group dynamics. The first, and most important, is that conversations and discussions in the classroom are dominated by (and may even be exclusively among) five or fewer students. This number varies little whether the class is a small seminar with 8-10 students or a much larger class of 30-40 or more. Part of the reason for this is the simple reality of time and "space;" there is only so much opportunity for anyone to participate.

The dynamic of the group is such that the students generally fall into a pattern whereby those with the greatest interest in the subject and who are also the most garrulous control the direction, amount, and quality of discussion. Especially in required courses where it is likely that the same group of students will be in a series of classes together, the discussion in the classroom will be controlled by the same small group of students. They assume the role of group leader, crowding others out. The problem here is that the group leaders must be in some way "representative" of the learning needs of the broader class (thus their questions and their answers serve even those that are quiet). If the group is not representative in this sense, then it is up to the instructor to encourage a temporary expansion of the group to achieve that representativeness. This might be where recognition of the generational differences could be helpful. Depending on the nature of the deficiency in the discussion, it may require the introduction of someone from another generation into the discussion (which can be achieved by the nature of the questions asked), or by adding another from within the generational cohort to broaden the conversations.

The larger problem is when one or more among the "leaders" is also disruptive. We will discuss this in more detail below in the examination of the dynamic between the instructor and individual students. The point here is that the dynamic within the leadership

group must be changed or the focus of the class will shift to the disruptions by the student, not the lessons to be learned from the class. To the extent that there is a consistent leadership group, then this problem can be brought to them to resolve from within. If the leadership group is a temporary group, then this is an issue for the instructor to address on a one-on-one basis with the disruptive "leader." This is not easy. I have engaged in such conversations with individuals only to produce periods of silence, which lessens the quality of the class discussion, or at its most disastrous, hurt feelings that cause more disruption.

While the dynamics within a class can be benign, there are times where the relations between and among the students causes a problem. This is beyond the expected intergenerational conflicts. It is when there is some level of personal animosity between students. Especially in programs that use annual cohorts who attend classes together for most of their time together, it is also one to which the instructor may mercifully be oblivious. When that animosity spills over into the classroom, it is best to think like a manager with a disciplinary problem to be addressed than an instructor with a class problem. Nip it in the bud.

THE INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT DYNAMIC

From the perspective of someone who has not yet taught, or has only been a guest lecturer, there is a tendency to think of the individuals in the classroom as "students" (much the way we think of bureaucrats). Very quickly you learn that this group is composed of likeable and not so likeable persons with quirks and foibles just like any group. Unless you have a large class (40 or more) the students will be *individuals*. Again, just as in the work place, it is necessary to create a barrier of impersonality between yourself as instructor and the class. This distance exists for many of the same reasons it does in the work place—you must avoid even the appearance of bias in assessing performance (grades) and the mission of class demands that equal opportunity for learning and growth occur. I say this not because it is something new instructors do not think about, but as a reminder that the relationship between the instructor and the student is more intense (a semester is only 16 weeks, yet the amount of interaction is greater than you would have with all but one or two employees in the work place; more demanding (our assessment tools of performance are much more distant and controlled at work); and more personal (students are paying for this opportunity to learn and may be staking career decisions on the outcome) than similar experiences in the work place. I say this also as a reminder that your responsibility as the instructor is to the department that hired you and the students in your class, not to the individual student. Yes, we all strive to help everyone learn the lessons of the course, but we also must remember that if a student is struggling or disruptive, that you must turn that student over to the department, rather than sacrifice classroom time.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Much of what has been discussed should be familiar, if slightly out of context. The group dynamics of the classroom are not all that different than the dynamics within a department or team. This commentary has sought to explore how those dynamics play out in a classroom. Intergenerational elements are relevant here, but there are factors that are intrinsic to the dynamics of a classroom that transcend the generational elements. We focused on two subsets of the relationship between the instructor and the students: the relationship and dynamic of the students among themselves, and the relationship and dynamic of the instructor and individual students as individuals. The lessons to be gleaned from this discussion are:

Students generally fall into a pattern whereby those with the greatest interest in the subject are also the most in control of the direction, amount, and quality of discussion.

Conversations and discussions in the classroom are dominated by (and may even be exclusively among) five or fewer students. Part of this is the simple reality of time and "space"; there is only so much opportunity for anyone to participate.

Group leaders must be in some way "representative" of the learning needs of the broader class.

The larger problem is when one or more among the "leaders" is also disruptive. The dynamic within the leadership group must be changed or the focus of the class will shift to the disruptions by the student, not the lessons to be learned from the class.

Just as in the work place, it is necessary to create a barrier of impersonality between yourself as instructor and the class. This distance exists for many of the same reasons it does in the work place—you must avoid even the appearance of bias in assessing performance (grades) and the mission of class demands that equal opportunity for learning and growth occur.

The relationship between the instructor and the student is more intense, more demanding, and more personal than similar experiences in the work place.

NOVEMBER 4, 2009

On Being Fair

In Raymond Cox, Ph.D.'s commentary on grading some months ago, he suggested four standards by which to judge the quality and appropriateness of your grading process. In this issue, he focuses on how can we be fair in our grading/student assessments.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

In a commentary on grading some months ago, I suggested four standards by which to judge the quality and appropriateness of your grading process. At that time I wrote:

- Use multiple evaluation tools and types to produce a fair assessment of each *individual* student
- Not all tools are created equal, so match the style of assessment to the class (i.e., tests versuspapers)
- A simple way to know if you are too lenient or too harsh in your grading is to find out whether or not your grades are markedly different for *individual* students
- The best you can do is to strive to be fair.

It is that last line in particular that I want to discuss today: how can we be fair in our grading/student assessments? A partial answer is contained above in suggesting that multiple evaluation tools are generally more equitable because they balance out the individual strengths and weaknesses across the range of the class. But I want to venture a little beyond this structured answer into the murkier and possibly more controversial waters of fairness as a goal in itself rather than as a result of a process. Why do we need to be fair? Certainly the cynical among us will assert that nothing in our work or social existence is truly *fair*. Why then is fairness, as something other than a procedural standard, something about which we should be concerned? From an ethical standpoint we expect to be treated in a way that correctly and accurately judges us within a context or in a specific circumstance. Standards of conduct do not exist apart from the circumstances under which the conduct is enacted.

Student performance is a by-product of the actions of that student as viewed through the lens of the experience of the entire class. This is not "grading-on-a-curve," but rather is an acknowledgement that what happens in the classroom and *what happens outside the classroom* are part of the assessment of performance. If you have ever taught two sections of the same class in the same term, you probably have noticed something I have seen often: even with time, place, and instruction held constant, the two classes are different. The pace of the classes are different because of the questions asked; the lessons of the class are shaded by those questions and by the capacity of individual students to learn from the interactions among students and the interaction between the instructor and the students. No two classes are alike even when the context suggests they *should be*. We should not *judge* the performance of students the same unless we know that the circumstances are the same. Therefore, the subjective element that is part of every assessment should differ even when things are nearly the same. While basic factual and foundational information will be the same in a course, each class is a unique learning experience. The assessment tools for the class should be different. While both classes might use an essay examination format, you should consider asking different questions, and expect different answers, in each class.

What goes on outside the classroom affects the quality of the learning no less than the experience in the classroom. *Real life* does intrude on the classroom; students have problems at home or at work, students (or the instructor) get sick and any number of other issues come up that divert an individual student or a whole class from a focus on the learning outcomes of the class. These are problems that bedevil every instructor. There is no one right answer on how to handle these

circumstances. Som faculty believe that the student committed to taking the class and therefore must devote the full measure of attention to the class that the faculty member defines as necessary. Some faculty have very strict "attendance" policies, which do not acknowledge any circumstance for exceptions. For most of us, low attendance is adjudged through participation or the use of questions that are best answered by drawing upon class discussion rather than the readings.

But this begs the question, "Under what circumstances should classroom absences be tolerated?" To be fair, the circumstances for both the individual *student and the other students in the class* must be examined. Issues such as class structure (i.e., is this a straight lecture with little interaction, or a class with required group activities) must be explored to determine what is fair. This is not to suggest that the general lesson plan should be amended because of the absence of a single student, but the instructor can adjust expectations for both the student and the class. For example, if there is a group project, a separate assessment of the performance of each group member, rather than the more common practice of a single grade for all members of the group, would make sense. The most straightforward adjustment is, of course, giving the student an incomplete. On the other hand, unless there is no graded participation requirement for the course, a student who is absent more than would be expected generally should not be graded more highly than those who regularly attend. It is not fair to those who attend and participate to be judged at the same level as a student who does not attend regularly, regardless of participation when present.

More problematic than attendance is the disruptive student. These are often the most difficult students to assess, because their very presence is the issue and their behavior may divert you, as instructor, as much as it diverts the other students. At one level the issues are the same; how to be fair to both the disruptive student and the class. A poor classroom experience often correlates with poor learning outcomes. Therefore, unlike the issue of attendance, this is a problem that must be addressed quickly. A disruptive student can negatively affect the learning outcomes for an entire class. Having said that, be warned that most disruptive students do not see themselves as disruptive.

To resolve the disruptive student problem, the first task will be to convince the student that some of his or her contributions are negative rather than positive. Negotiating specific behavioral benchmarks and standards are the second step. If these efforts fail, the third step is to separate the disruption in the classroom from the performance on tests and papers when grading the student. A student who does not conform to the request for a change of behavior can and should be penalized (the logic of the assessment for frequent absences would apply). I should add that the disruptive behavior may not always be verbal; it may take other forms, such as cheating and plagiarism. These represent the most extreme forms of disruption. Interventions should be the same for other disruptive behaviors.

Fairness in grading requires a balancing of concerns about the circumstances and situation for the individual student and the expectations that certain lessons and learning outcomes will be achieved for the entire class. Except in very rare situations, simple equality of treatment is myopic and unfair. For the same reasons we criticize "standardized" examinations, classroom equality—even of the grade on a curve variety—does not sufficiently take into account the unique circumstances of an individual student or an individual class. On the other hand, a unique situation does not mean that the final assessment ignores the negative aspects of that situation.

IN SUMMARY:

- The ultimate goal of student assessment is to be fair.
- Standards of conduct do not exist apart from the circumstances under which the conduct is enacted.
- Each class is a unique learning experience. The assessment tools for the class should be different.
- Fairness requires a balancing of concerns about the circumstances and situation for the individual student and the expectations that certain lessons and learning outcomes will be achieved for the entire class.
- The existence of a unique situation does not mean that the final assessment ignores the negative aspects of that situation.

2010

ARTICLE COLLECTION

MARCH 3, 2010

The Act of Grading

In this month's Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. offers suggestions on ensuring consistency in the grading of students on the same assignment in the same class.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

In an earlier discussion on grading, we looked at the topic from the standpoint of how to develop a fair grading system. We have discussed various types of assessment tools and the mix of assessment within a course to ensure fairness across a group of students with varied strengths and weaknesses. Those assessment techniques and tools are important because they must be part of a course syllabus. For this discussion, let's explore more fully the approach to grading itself, or more specifically, how to think about the grading system at the time you are grading. The emphasis on fairness remains important, but for this discussion the emphasis is on the issue of comparability of the grades; in other words, how to ensure consistency in the grading of students on the same assignment in the same class.

In many ways, this is the most difficult thing we do as instructors. Whether by education or experience, we are well prepared to present the material in the classroom. We may also have a good idea of how to structure the grading system. But implementing the grading system is different than the structure of that system. In earlier discussions, it was suggested that you may have both objective and subjective elements in the grading scheme. We also examined how the mix of assessment tools will change based on the level of the students in the course. But that is not the same as the act of grading: the process by which we judge the words, figures or calculations that the student gives in response to test questions or in a paper. Whether we acknowledge it or not, implementation of a grading scheme is more subjective than objective. Even nominally objective tests (multiple choice, true-false, etc.) are subjective in that we choose what questions to ask and how to phrase those questions. The objective grades from such examinations are the result of the subjective choices with regard to the questions asked.

Grading is the great unknown. When I hire a faculty member, my greatest concern is how that person will grade papers and examinations. This is less about how easy or harsh a new instructor is in grading. We can discuss department expectations and grading formats before the course begins. With few exceptions, I have found that new instructors and new faculty are relatively lenient in their grades. That is a problem that can be addressed in a debriefing after the course is complete, and it often takes care of itself with experience. Rather the problem is that the internal consistency and comparability of the grades in a class are even more important. But until grading actually takes place, there is no way to know how well the instructor understands this contextual question. The question is not whether there are too many A's or too many C's, but rather are those grades an accurate assessment of the performance of the students.

I am fairly sure I have no good answers for this, but I'll throw out a few ideas for reaction. My approach to grading examinations and papers involves a four-step process:

- Envisioning the potential array of right answers to the questions.
- Defining the key elements in all of the potential answers and then ranking/prioritizing them as a means of differentiating among marginal, acceptable, very good, and high-quality answers.
- Grading the papers/examinations, preferably in one "sitting."
- Double checking by going back through to make sure that similar answers get similar grades or to make sure that the "surprises" (the answers I had not anticipated) are properly evaluated.

For me, the first step is the most critical. It does two things: it helps me focus on learning outcomes and it prepares me to see more than one answer that is wor-

thy of a high grade. As I have suggested before, students "process" information differently, and therefore, they make different connections to their own experience and work-life. That may mean somewhat unique responses to questions. Except under very narrow circumstances (true-false examinations), there is likely to be more than one answer that properly addresses a question, especially because the students will try to relate the answer to their own possibly quite distinct backgrounds. Just because a student approaches the answer from a unique perspective (or unique in that I had not thought of it) does not diminish the validity of the response. By starting from an assumption that the answers will be diverse and by anticipating many of those answers, I can better prepare myself to judge equally those diverse answers. This may not be as difficult as it appears. Based on answers to questions in the class and comments about background and experience, you can fairly easily anticipate how diverse (and in what ways) a particular class might be.

It is not enough to anticipate the answers, it is also necessary to define the proper components of those answers and then assign weights or relative value to those components. In another context, this is a process that is somewhat akin to benchmarking. Out of habit and personal preference, I typically define the high-quality answer and then deduct from there based on missing components and the relative weight of those components. It may be equally appropriate to define the "middle ground" (the satisfactory answer) rather than the high-quality answer. The analogy here is to rating systems for performance appraisal. Personnel specialists often suggest starting in the middle and defining the boundaries (exceptional and unsatisfactory) against that middle. The key point is that this must be done for all potential answers, not merely the one you initially expected.

At this point, grading can begin. My preference is to find a block of time to get as much of the grading for a class done at once. I have found that my grades "drift" because I redefine my expectations of a quality answer based upon the actual grades. The longer the time between grading the first to last paper or examination, the greater the drift. By trying to complete the grading in one sitting, I can avoid some of that change in my own assessment standards.

Before I "finalize" grades, I look them over to confirm that they are comparable. While the changes are likely to only be a "half-grade" (B to B+ or B-), this change is critical. Students are never happy when they see a grade that has been changed downward, and the explanation of comparability is never a satisfactory answer. There are interesting lessons in this process for me as the instructor. If the changes made are because I got answers I did not expect and did not properly assess them in the first run through, it tells me a lot about what the students have learned as opposed to what I thought they had learned. It also gives me additional background information about the learning style and connections students are making between their own experiences and course lessons. The lessons are invaluable in both the construction of future examinations in the class and as a reminder that there are always many paths to the same lesson.

NOVEMBER 3, 2010

Creating a Syllabus

Raymond Cox, Ph.D. provides tips for things you should ask yourself as you put together a syllabus: what is its purpose, what to include, and what you should know about the course you will be teaching.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

One of the first commentaries that I wrote for this e-newsletter addressed how to prepare a syllabus. Each year, at the ICMA Annual Conference discussion-focused group on Managers as Faculty, it is one of the first questions asked – how do I find a syllabus? Implicit in the question is what kind of support or help can I expect in designing the course itself.

My first response to this question is that you should ask your department contact for a copy of the most recent syllabus from the department. Alternatively, you can find copies of syllabi on university and ICMA websites. My colleague in the discussion, Mark Levin, inevitably objects, commenting that the focus and approach of the academic's syllabus will be very different than the one you would prepare. Both simple responses to a complex question are inadequate.

Ultimately the proper answer is that you need to create your own syllabus. While individual departments may have both substantive and format requirements, a syllabus must fit your personality and unique knowledge of the subject. The questions that need to be addressed to create your own syllabus are:

- What is the purpose of a syllabus?
- What information needs to be included?
- What do you need to know about the course before you create the syllabus?

PURPOSE

The syllabus is the implementation plan for a course. As such, it must cover everything from the general mission to the benchmarks for delivery of the mission.

What then is the mission of a course? While a clue to the mission can be found in the course description listed in the course catalog, that description may be so cryptic that it's almost useless. The University of Akron, for example, limits descriptions to 25 words and will stop a description in mid-sentence to conform to that requirement. This "mission" needs to be both more personal and more outcome-focused than a true mission statement. This is your opportunity to frame the topic in terms of what you expect the students will gain from the course and to establish the basis for the course on your terms. This is both a statement of "philosophy" and an expression of teaching style. Both are pertinent as the starting point for (introduction to) a syllabus.

What are the benchmarks to be established in the syllabus? For our purpose, there are two types of benchmarks: process benchmarks and outcome benchmarks. Process benchmarks include the scheduling and production goals for the course (dates, assignments, etc.). Outcome benchmarks are the basis for judging assignments (grades).

INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

The expectations and requirements for a syllabus will vary from university to university. Frequently a syllabus is treated as a quasi-legal "contract" between the department (instructor) and the student--only those things written into the syllabus are considered valid in adjudicating a dispute (generally a grade or assignment). Norms and traditions in a department that don't find their way into print do not have much validity. Syllabi that used to be a couple of pages are now 4, 5, 6 or more, much of the addition coming from language common to every syllabus in the department and/or from detailed definitions of terms that are otherwise taken for granted (participation probably being the best example).

The legalistic details aside, what common components should all syllabi share? The discussion above gives us an outline of those common components. Each must include:

- An introduction that covers the mission and goals of the course, coupled with a discussion of teaching style or approach
- Process requirements
- Outcome requirements.

The elements (headings) of a syllabus to address these would include:

- Introduction
- Learning Outcomes
- Schedule (classes, readings)
- Student Outputs
- Grading Criteria.

Introduction: As suggested above, the introduction presents the instructor's framing of the course. This should specifically connect the course content to the course as described in the university catalog. This both affirms the elements of the course that are unique to your approach and that the course is "bounded' by the description provided by the departmen t to the university.

Learning Outcomes: Logically following from the introduction is a statement of what the student should know at the start of the class and then a statement of what the student will have learned from the class. Unless you are teaching the first course in a curriculum, there is knowledge derived from other courses (whether from the logic of the sequence of courses, or because it is a designated prerequisite) that the instructor will assume the students will have mastered, and, therefore, will not be covered in the class. The second piece is what you want them to learn. These statements can be either or both conceptual and quantifiable. Most often the type of course will dictate the format for the learning outcomes.

Schedule: What materials need to be covered, and when, is the core of any syllabus. I will defer to another discussion the details of planning the learning cycle. Essentially, the schedule reflects your choice of the timing of when and how you expect students to acquire interim knowledge toward the goal of the learning outcomes.

Student Outputs: What are the specific products and activities you want the students to create during the course? These outputs are the "things" that will be evaluated (graded). As I have suggested in other commentaries, it is best to require a variety of outputs so that grading is not skewed toward a particular product or type of activity that will bias grading.

Grading Criteria: The grading criteria establish the weights or values assigned to various student outputs.

CREATING A SYLLABUS

The discussion above reflects the pieces of a syllabus. Before a syllabus can be written, there are substantive issues and specific course knowledge that you must identify. In other words, you must prepare a lesson plan. This involves both identifying the knowledge to be acquired and also the sources of that knowledge (readings and activities) so that they may be introduced in a sequence that makes sense to you.

The sources of knowledge in a class are generally thought of as the reading list. It is a mistake to assume that students learn from a cycle of reading and then listening to a recitation on the reading. Simulations, project activities, and even homework may be better ways of acquiring knowledge. Readings are a way to establish a baseline of shared/common knowledge. You may assign readings for no other purpose than to create that shared knowledge. Lecturing "on" the readings may be a necessary part of initial classes, but in the later sessions it may be discussions, exercises, and projects "beyond" the readings that yield the greater learning.

SUMMARY

Creating a syllabus is a more personal activity than the simplistic advice to get a copy of an "old" syllabus. The syllabus is your commitment to the students about what to expect in the course. It is both an expression of your individual approach to the course and a commitment to the students of what they can expect in the course.

Ask yourself these questions when crafting a syllabus to ensure that it is effective:

- Do I offer insight on my understanding of the purpose and results of the course?
- Do I offer specific and identifiable learning outcomes?
- Do I offer a reasonable schedule of activities and expectations?
- Do I offer weighted criteria for assessing the outputs of the students?

DECEMBER 1, 2010

Mid-Course Corrections

In this month's Adjunct's Corner, Raymond Cox, Ph.D. instructs us not to lose sight of outcomes when following lesson plans.

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

There is nothing more disconcerting than to find that the basic assumptions upon which you based your lesson plan—the prior knowledge of the students—is wrong. This is not unusual. There is enough variability in the any student group that it is always a "guess" as to what they know. Especially in programs where the students are predominantly part-time, the academic backgrounds at entry into the program are diverse and the sequence in which they take classes will be driven by their work schedules and lifestyle, more than by an idealized sequence. This is more difficult for part-time faculty because they are less familiar with the broad cohort of students in the class.

In truth I think it is better to expect to be wrong about the students (whether the pleasant surprise that they know more than you expected or the more likely reality that there are gaps in their knowledge) rather than expect things to go as planned. Therefore, one of the most critical skills for a successful instructor is to monitor course progress to know when to change. The keys are two-fold: to stay true to the learning outcomes and to alter the schedule and approach in the classroom to address perceptions of the deficiencies of the original lesson plan. The model that I suggest is to use the framework of strategic management and implementation as the basis for mid-course, on-the-fly, change.

In strategic management, the approach to performance review is based on a stance that avoids the problem of sunk costs. In other words, at specific benchmarks, you should ask yourself if a change of direction the question of changing direction is asked. This requires two assumptions:

(1) It is possible to identify *in advance* assessment points when you consider changing the lesson plan if you expect to reach the outcomes desired.

(2) There is more than one path by which to get to the learning outcomes. Therefore, "staying" on track is not the appropriate course. The goal is to achieve the learning outcomes, not to follow the path. The route to an outcome may be serpentine rather than straight—in fact it is very likely to be serpentine.

A semester-long course is not composed of 15 equal components. There may, in fact, be 20 or 30 parts of the lessons to be learned. Also, an individual class may only address one or two of those parts, while another class may address several parts. The first step then is to cluster the parts of the lessons in relation to the learning outcomes. These can be arranged by importance and chronologically. Then a chart of the timing of the parts can be created, providing a visual depiction of the learning outcomes as they will be delivered in the classes. A new column which depicts when the parts are actually addressed in the classroom helps you keep track of progress (both planned and actual).

Assessment points are those times when it is expected that a learning outcome or a significant part is completed. At an assessment point you will know whether the class is going as planned or that you are ahead or behind in reaching the intended outcomes. As I have discussed in a previous commentary, there are assessment points built into all courses—they are the homework assignments and examinations that are scheduled during the term. As I noted in that earlier commentary you can learn as much about progress toward the outcome of the course as you can about the achievement of individual students if you see these activities as benchmarks toward the learning outcomes. The second, more qualitative judgment is whether being ahead or behind is viewed as good or a problem. If you are "ahead" of schedule, it likely suggests that the students are "ahead" in terms of the baseline of knowledge they brought to the classroom. This would suggest that you can add depth or detail to parts of the learning outcomes and/or add parts. Both of these

strategies strengthen the learning outcomes rather than add outcomes. Adding new outcomes at this point not only does damage to the explicit agreement in the syllabus, but also it creates the potential problem of getting behind later on. Adding depth to the discussion and classroom assignments (maybe, for example, examinations and assignments may become more "sophisticated") keeps you true to the learning outcomes.

If you find yourself behind, it probably means either that you are covering material you had not planned to cover and/or the students did not have the academic background you assumed. Both of these issues need to be addressed. If you are covering materials not planned, is it because you go off "plan" or does it reflect in implied concern about the original lesson plan? If it is either of these issues, then you must find a way back to the original lesson plan. The problem is in your teaching style. You must be disciplined by ensuring that your stories and commentaries reinforce the lesson plan. If the problem is that the students have different knowledge than you expected, then you must chart a path back to the outcomes that address the general weaknesses and gaps in their knowledge. In the same way that I suggested that adding depth is possible to expand the lessons, here you must add breadth that reflects the gaps in the background and knowledge of the students. The outcomes are still preserved but the discussion and classroom assignments are refocused on the missing knowledge. This may extend to changing the examinations and assignments to focus on that missing knowledge. Again, the strategies are designed to achieve the learning outcomes, not back away from them. Change the focus of the lessons, not the outcomes.

A mistake that is often made by all of us is to sacrifice the outcomes to exigencies of time. Instead of changing how we reach an outcome (how and/or what we teach), we drop outcomes to stay "on track" with the lesson plan. We forget the most basic of all assumptions in strategic management—the path to the outcome is unknowable in advance. Therefore, the path itself is irrelevant. The lessons we planned are simply a means to the end, not an end in themselves. They can and should be expanded, contracted or even rejected. The lessons are merely instruments for achieving the outcomes we committed to in the syllabus. The route to an outcome might be serpentine rather than straight—in fact it is very likely to be serpentine. We must not become so comfortable with the path that we risk the outcomes to adhere to the path. I would assume that a course that "goes as planned" is rare.

The driving force in a course is the achievement of the stated learning outcomes. Everything else about the classroom experience should be subservient to those outcomes. Having said that, no two groups of students are alike and no two terms are alike. The path to the outcomes should reflect those realities. You must adjust your teaching to the students and other exigencies of the term. As such, the lessons you planned to reach those outcomes should be treated as expendable. Adding to them or changing them is something you should expect.

2011

ARTICLE COLLECTION

MARCH 2, 2011

Mid-Course Corrections

By Raymond W. Cox III, Ph.D.

No matter how well a lesson plan is designed, changes are likely. Whether it is because you miscalculated what the students knew as they entered the course, or because of unforeseen events—like closure due to snow—changing a lesson plan "in the middle" is never easy. *The common mistake is to change the learning outcomes of the course rather than the lesson components that lead to the learning outcomes.* While the end result in the course is not obvious, once the learning outcomes are changed, the student will be knowledge deficient in each subsequent course, remaining "behind" throughout his/her program.

One of the most critical skills for a successful instructor is to monitor progress throughout a course so that you know whether or not to and/or when to change the direction of the class. The keys are two-fold:

- To stay true to the learning outcomes.
- To alter the schedule and approach in the classroom to address perceptions of the deficiencies of the original lesson plan.
- I suggest using a framework of strategic management and implementation as the basis for mid-course, on-the-fly change.
- In strategic management the approach to performance review is based on a stance that avoids the problem of sunk costs. In other words, at specific benchmarks ask yourself if changing direction is necessary. This requires two assumptions:
- It is possible to identify in advance assessment points at which the option of change is feasible, even (or especially) because the result will be change.
- There is more than one path to get to the learning outcomes. Therefore, "staying" on track is not the goal; getting to the end result (in this case a completed set of lessons learned) is the goal.

A semester-long course is not composed of 15 co-equal components, equating to the weeks of the term. There may, in fact, be 20 or 30 parts of the lessons to be learned. Also, an individual class may only address one of those parts, while another class may address several parts. Furthermore, learning is often "layered." Certain knowledge is acquired only as the result of building upon foundational knowledge. You cannot get "ahead" of your foundational knowledge. The first step then is to cluster the parts of the lessons in relation to the learning outcomes. These can be arranged in importance and chronologically. Then a chart of the timing of the parts can be created. This provides a visual depiction of the learning outcomes as they will be delivered in the classes. A new column that depicts when the parts are actually addressed in the classroom helps you keep track of progress (both planned and actual). Assessment points are those times when it is planned that a learning outcome, or a significant part, is completed. At an assessment point, you will know if the class is going as planned or that you are ahead or behind in reaching the intended outcomes.

The second, more qualitative judgment is whether being ahead or behind is good or a problem. If you are "ahead" of schedule, it likely suggests that the students are "ahead" in terms of the baseline of knowledge they brought to the classroom. This would suggest that you can add depth or detail to parts of the learning outcomes and/or add parts. *Both of these strategies strengthen the learning outcomes rather than add outcomes.*

If you find yourself behind, either because the students were less prepared and knowledgeable about the subject matter than you anticipated, or because of unforeseen events, then you must reassess and reprioritize the lessons if you are still going to get the same result as originally proposed in the syllabus. In neither case is this the time to drop learning outcomes. Misjudging the academic background and knowledge of students is a common problem for new faculty. Often we define what a student should know as a prerequisite to a course based on what we know about the course (forgetting that we have both academic and professional experience beyond that of the students

that shapes our definitions of prerequisite knowledge). I have had many a conversation with new faculty who comment on how little the students know about a subject. A few semesters later their judgment is rarely as harsh. It is less that the students are "better" but that the faculty member is better at gauging what can be reasonably expected of a student in terms of knowledge before taking the class.

If you find yourself behind, then you must refashion the plan. The question to be asked is "what are the knowledge gaps?" Having identified those gaps, the next question is "what is the best way to fill in the missing spaces in the knowledge of the students?" The goal is not to alter the learning outcomes, but to change the methods for delivering the knowledge that forms the foundation for the learning outcomes. The art of teaching is in this case a matter of finding alternate means of conveying knowledge in a more compact or direct way. This may involve new reading assignments or homework (and, yes, they will complain) and/or briefly changing the class format from discussion to straight lecture. The immediate goal is to "catch up." As a first step you must find as direct a means as possible for increasing "knowledge." The next step is to weave that new knowledge into the original lessons, so that it can be integrated into the learning outcomes. Because this is a two-step process, it is not a simple matter of giving them new information. Also, once you are behind, there is the cascade effect whereby the act of "catching up," puts you behind again. *This step back to add new information is likely to be a recurring part of the remainder of the course.*

TO SUMMARIZE:

- *The goal of mid-course corrections in a course is to keep the learning outcomes at the forefront of the lessons as delivered and to prevent students from being deficient in future classes.*
- *The common mistake is to change the learning outcomes of the course rather than the lesson components that lead to the learning outcomes.*
- *If you get ahead of your lesson plan, the goal is to employ dual strategies of adding depth or detail to parts of the learning outcomes and/or adding additional lesson components to strengthen the learning outcomes not to add outcomes.*
- *If you get behind, the goal is not to alter the learning outcomes, but to change the methods for delivering the knowledge that form the foundation for the learning outcomes. This step back to add new information is likely to be a recurring part of the remainder of the course.*




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