

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

Graham Gibbs

Idea Number 26, December 2014

Students are selectively negligent, and successful students neglect the right stuff

In higher education research there used to be a good deal of focus of attention paid to the phenomenon of curricula being excessively large, and teachers being excessively demanding. Given the low level of student effort common in many degree programmes and universities nowadays (see idea 6) this phenomenon might today be recast as 'Students do not want to study as much as they ought to'. But not so long ago the demand students faced were commonly unreasonably large, and this had unintended consequences.

One of the main reasons that students were found to take a 'surface approach' to their studies was that they felt that there was simply too much to try and understand – so they gave up and settled for memorisation. But the phenomenon this item will focus on is concerned not with the quality of student engagement, but with its quantity and distribution – with what students choose to study and what they choose to ignore, and the consequences of such selective negligence.

Studies in the USA, at MIT, and in Scotland at Edinburgh, both found that students were being selective about what they studied and what they did not. First, students were found to perceive that there was simply far too much to do no matter how hard they worked. Reading lists were perceived as absurdly

optimistic in terms of how much they actually had time to read, and given how slowly they read unfamiliar material compared with the speed of reading of their teachers who had compiled the lists. Problem sheets contained too many problems, lab sessions had too much data to analyse, and so on. Students also perceived that there were too many topics, dealt with at too high a speed, each one crashing in before the last one had been tackled adequately. Students at MIT memorably described studying as like 'drinking from a fire hose'. The only way to survive was not to study everything, and so the problem was re-cast as 'What should I leave out?', or more precisely 'What should I leave out so as to have the least negative consequences on my grades?' It is this focus on meeting formal assessment requirements that was found to dominate students' experience of over-stuffed curricula.

Where assessment was dominated by regular assignments or tests (as in the USA) students concentrated on meeting these requirements, but doing nothing else. Students at MIT commented that they were amazed when they finally realised how little they had to actually do to pass (especially if they did not like a course) if all they had to do was prepare for tests or submit assignments. Most of the curriculum was not tested and the teacher had no way of telling if students had bothered to

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study most of the curriculum. Assignments usually involved choice, and so you could ignore all the topics you did not choose to tackle an assignment on. This phenomenon was described as the 'hidden curriculum'. Not the formal curriculum described in course documentation or evident in lists of lectures or course topics, and not the curriculum as referred to in examination regulations, but the one students had to discover if they wanted to do tolerably well without excessive effort.

Twenty years later in the UK a diary study found that students progressively abandoned doing anything at all that was not directly linked to gaining marks, as they worked through three years of their degree programmes, so that by the third year there was almost no 'reading around' or studying out of interest, whatsoever – the opposite of what their teachers had hoped for. Students became progressively more narrowly focussed on 'sufficing' and meeting formal requirements, and doing nothing else.

While at MIT assessment was dominated by small regular assignments and tests, at Edinburgh it was dominated by exams. Here being selectively negligent took a different form. Students might work out from past exam papers that they only had to answer four questions out of eight and that there were only eight main topics on the course, so straight away they could cut their effort in half and not bother with half the course. They did not study every topic in equal depth and then decide which ones to study again in more depth for the exams, they simply excised half

the course from the outset. Students scanned past exam papers and saw what the examiners' favourite topics and emphases were, which years they came up, and how questions were framed. They deliberately chose some topics to study and not others, taking calculated risks with their distribution of effort so as to maximise their grades and not 'waste' their time on topics that would not be likely to be examined. Sometimes they guessed wrong and ploughed their exams, but usually it worked.

And here another phenomenon emerged. Some students were much better than others at guessing and neglecting the right stuff. Researchers identified three types of students that they called 'cue seeking', 'cue conscious' and 'cue deaf'. Here the cues were about what really needs to be studied and how to get good marks. Cue seeking students took their teacher for a beer and hoped they would let slip what might come up in the exam and probed in chats to see if they favoured one theorist over another. Cue conscious students recognised when their teacher said something like '..and this is really important' and made a note and made sure they revised it. Cue deaf students you could tell what they ought to be prioritising until you were blue in the face and it just went over their head. They studied everything, or tried to, until it became impossible, and then got discouraged and anxious. The researchers categorised a bunch of students as cue seeking, cue conscious or cue deaf and then waited until they had their exam results. The cue seekers got Firsts, the

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cue conscious got Upper Seconds and the cue deaf did much less well.

Today students are time-poor and highly strategic. In many contexts playing the assessment system is the biggest game in town. Whether curricula are too large or not, students will normally study only part of the curriculum. It is possible to devise assessment regimes that make this strategy more risky and will result in students distributing more effort across a greater proportion of the course. Making exam questions unpredictable and, crucially, with no choice, is the easiest way, though it has its own drawbacks. Making students tackle a large number of assignments but then only marking a proportion of them, at random, is another way. A system that the cue seekers cannot play is fairer to the rest. In the end the most important responsibility of teachers is to arrange things in such a way that students spend enough time on the right things, all the right things. The vast majority of courses fail to achieve this.

It is common nowadays, prompted by formal Quality Assurance regulations, to specify the

curriculum and its assessment in such explicit detail that there is only a small gap between the formal and hidden curriculum. However what seems to have happened is that the formal curriculum has shrunk to the size of the hidden curriculum and now students are all provided with extensive clues about what they do not need to study. Research into students' responses to different types of assessment regime has shown that detailed learning outcomes linked tightly to assignments and assessment criteria results in students saying that they do not have to study every week or every topic in order to do well. It seems to be the pattern of assessment that it has the capability of limiting selective negligence, not its detailed specification.

Reading

Miller, c.M.L. & Parlett, M. (1974) Up to the mark. A study of the examination game. SRHE: Edinburgh.

Snyder, B. (1970) The Hidden Curriculum. MIT Press: Cambridge Mass.

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