

Why teaching only a few good concepts and skills might make for a great semester!

There is more and more information out there but do you really need to teach it to your students? As an academic, I confess I am a news, science, technology, sports, and information junkie. I check the online news, the TV news, the radio news, Google scholar, online databases all day and every day to check out what is new out there. But when it comes to teaching I use the exact opposite strategy! I sit around before each semester and think about what skills I think my students need to be successful and why they need those skills. I think about what are the most important concepts that they absolutely must absorb, understand, analyze, evaluate, and dissect this semester. I think about minimization of information for the semester not maximization! Why? This certainly does not seem to follow my own personal information system! Why am I planning a semester around a few good concepts and skills for my courses when my own personal time will be involved in trying to keep up with all the information in my own discipline and lots of other information as well?

Well, partly it has to do with filtering and filing systems! I have built up years and years of mental cognitive filtering and filing systems where I can sort through lots of information very rapidly based on prior experience. I know what information is useful to me and where to file it for now or later and what information to let go of quickly. Our students don't have that cognitive filtering and filing system yet. All of this information that we bring to them has the same quality and level of relevance. So figuring out how or where to file it is quite problematic. It's a flat landscape to them where all information has the same level of relative importance. What they need is a filtering and filing system. They need skills and core concepts. And so I carefully explain this to my students.

I explain to my students that there are specific transferrable skills that they will need throughout their lives and careers (such as critical thinking and communication and team building skills) and how I have incorporated those very skills into this course. I give them specific examples of how these skills will transfer into a variety of careers. I also explain that we will focus on the most important concepts of this discipline so that they have a deep understanding of each of these such that they are able to expand on any of these when needed. This will provide them with a sizeable wealth of knowledge but I explain that they will have a rock solid foundation in this discipline at the end of this semester that will allow them to build and extend and specialize into any direction they wish. My "content freak" students do sometimes become frustrated because we have not covered every topic in the textbook. And so I do try to build into my classes a self-guided portion where students get to choose their own topic for self-directed focused study. But sometimes I do get a lovely email from a past student thanking me for that foundation as they are now in post-graduate work and have the tools that they need and wanted to thank me for taking the time to make sure that they had those critical thinking tools. So sometimes it's just good to stop and think about the information and the landscape it forms.

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