

# PAIDEIA

TEACHING & LEARNING AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY  
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PURDY CRAWFORD TEACHING CENTRE

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## CONTENT AND DISCONTENT . . . . .

**I**n almost every university classroom, the same two adversaries are locked in an ineluctable, and seemingly irreconcilable, conflict: time and content. There's an overflowing abundance of the latter and an inevitable shortage of the former. How can we reconcile the two?

At the risk of being branded heretical, this issue of *PAIDEIA* suggests that teaching less content may result in more learning.

We'll look at content from several different perspectives:

- What do we consider to be content?
- How do we choose the content we present in our classes?
- What's the link between content "coverage" and actual student learning?
- Does too much content promote bad study habits that cause only a temporary, superficial memorization of the material?

Finally, let's deal with the prevailing metaphor: what does it mean to "cover" content? Coverage is a virtue in some things—paint and flooring come to mind. But one of the meanings of "cover" is to conceal or hide. Don't we want to *reveal* things to our students using the content? Some of the issues regarding content are—well—contentious; however, I hope you enjoy this issue of *PAIDEIA* and that it encourages some reflection or even debate about exactly what we are teaching and what our students are learning.

### In this issue of PAIDEIA

<b>Content Conundrums</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>How Do You Choose Content?</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>New on the PCTC Bookshelves</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Coming Events</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Acquiring Midterm Feedback from Your Students</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Updating Your Teaching Portfolio?</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>J.E.A. Crake Teaching Awards: Call for Nominations</b>	<b>12</b>



## CONTENT CONUNDRUMS

Eileen M. Herteis

Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre

For the past few months, I have had the opportunity to ask that about 60 faculty members in Atlantic Canada and the Caribbean to answer the following questions about content:

- List all the things you consider to be *content* in the classes you teach.
- What factors influence how you choose subject-specific material?
- List the other things beyond the subject-specific material which your students are expected to know.
- Do you teach these things in your classes?
- Do you assess them?

I discovered that teachers have a very catholic definition of content. Some of the dozens of components of content I collected are listed below—a vast amount to cover in the typical academic term, especially when we consider that many of these items actually go beyond what we would normally consider to be content:

Facts, information, theories, concepts, and frameworks  
Terminology  
Written and oral communication  
Information literacy  
Critical reading and thinking  
Group co-operation  
Creativity  
Time management

If, as we see above, a large percentage of the content is process-oriented material, this raises an interesting question: are we actually a) teaching and b) disclosing to our students all of the things we consider to be content?

Many classes, for example, include group work as a central pedagogical approach. Do the professors in those classes explain to students why they are working in groups and what they are expected to learn from the experience? Do they teach the students *how* to work in groups, to manage discussion, to set ground-rules, to negotiate answers, to deal with non-productive members? Do we assume that the students have learned these skills elsewhere—and are we often mistaken?

### One professor's other things included all of these . . . .

*The ability to disseminate research including:*

- *Being able to talk about research informally*
- *Being able to present research formally (oral presentation)*
- *Being able to use technology (e.g., PowerPoint) as presentation aids*
- *Being able to present research in a written format (consistent with the requirements of the discipline)*

The same could be asked about giving presentations or critical thinking; we want our students to develop these skills, but do we actually give them the opportunity? Such skills, says Maryellen Weimer (2002), do not “develop by osmosis.”

Does the amount of content we have in our classes prevent us from having time to give our students regular assessments to see how well they are learning? Does it encourage bad study habits that result in a temporary, superficial understanding of the material? Does it promote teaching strategies that we know to be less effective in many cases (a concentration on lecture rather than discussion, for example)?

(contd.)



### Content and Learning

Much of the content we expect our students to learn in our classes is hidden below the surface; once excavated, we see just how much there is. Yet, when our students think about content, they think only of the facts and principles piece; the rest are activities (group work, cases, presentations) or assessments (tests, quizzes, essays, etc). Teachers have a dual responsibility here: we must do a better job of explaining to our students that these “other” things are actually part of the content, and— if they are—we have to give them the opportunities to learn, even master, this additional content.



It may be a “beguilingly simple term,” but Chris Knapper (1995) reminds us that learning encompasses “a multitude of different constructs: memory, comprehension and understanding, acquisition of skills (both physical and intellectual), problem-solving, analysis, and synthesis, as well as attitude formation and change.” And if the process of learning is *at least* as important as mastering a body of facts, argues Knapper, “Then those processes should be taught explicitly and not taken for granted.”

In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, author Ken Bain says that “the most successful teachers reject the view that teaching is nothing more than delivering correct answers to students and learning is simply remembering those deliveries.” While teaching the facts, concepts and principles of mathematics, history, or psychology is irrefutably important, others also see their jobs “as helping students to understand, apply, analyze and evaluate evidence and conclusions.” Content shares

its importance with the learning outcomes it effects. This is a different way of looking at content; it becomes more than simply an end it is also the *means* to an end.

### Content in Introductory Classes

It is unfortunately coincidental that many of the courses that contain the most content are introductory courses where faculty members wish to initiate students into the discipline by exposing them to basics facts, knowledge, terms, and concepts. These courses also tend to be the largest at most universities, making it even more likely that the professor will lecture and the students will be passive learners. To add another layer of jeopardy, these courses are often taught by more than one professor in a kind of relay, whereby each introduces the students to one aspect of the discipline (her specialty). In such cases, all too common, constrained by the course design, the number of students, the tolerance of their colleagues, and most likely the architecture of the classroom, professors fall back on lectures crammed with content. Is it any wonder that many students find such classes very difficult and believe that the purpose is to limit the numbers that enter second year studies? And is it surprising that the teachers of those subsequent classes are dismayed by how little even the best students remember from the introductory class?

Would an introductory course that contained a little less subject-matter content but which also introduced students to the ways of writing, thinking, analyzing, and solving problems in the discipline be more successful? It might, at least, be more pleasurable to teach!

### Content and Critical Thinking

Are we willing to deliver less content to free up time for students to actually think about it and understand its meaning? (contd.)



University mission statements throughout Canada laud critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Ask individual faculty members what they want from their students, and critical thinking will be high on their lists. Yet in many classes, content, its transmission and its memorization still reign supreme. “Surface” learning is mainly a matter of reproduction; it springs from students’ desire to meet minimum requirements, such as passing a test. “Deep” learning, on the other hand, the kind associated with critical thinking and problem-solving, emphasizes the pursuit of meaning and understanding, integrating new ideas with previously learned material. Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) have differentiated these two types of learning as “reproducing orientation” and “meaning orientation”.

#### Linking Learning and Content

*First, content is not covered; it is used to develop a knowledge base;*

*Second, content is used to develop learning skills;*

*Finally, it is used to create learner awareness.*

*Maryellen Weimer: Learner-Centered Teaching*

One definition of academic rigour is *difficulty*, and one way to look at difficulty is the amount of content in a particular course. But does super-saturating our courses with more content lead to more learning or to more memorization?

Drs. Richard Paul and Linda Elder from Sonoma State University’s Centre for Critical Thinking have this to say:

*“The majority of teachers and students currently approach content, not as a mode of thinking. . . but rather as a sequence of stuff to be routinely “covered” and committed to memory. When content is*

*approached in this lower order way, there is no basis for intellectual growth; there are no deep structures of knowledge formed, no basis for long term grasp and control.”* ([www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)).

Paul Ramsden (1988) reminds us that “scores of studies” have demonstrated that even though students may be able to “reproduce factual information . . . and pass examinations successfully,” they may still be unable to show that they actually understand, let alone have thought critically about, the material.

#### Content Binging

Scholars such as Craig Nelson have coined the term *academic bulimia*. This pathology is at its worst when students have to memorize vast amounts of content for a course. The binge-and-purge symptoms are common on university campus. For a few hours, students cram themselves with the content and purge themselves during the test. The information has been with them for such a short time, they have not really digested it; it has not—to stretch the analogy a little—led to any intellectual nourishment that has helped them grow and develop.



If, instead of giving students the time and opportunity to do things with the content, our focus continues to be *coverage* in a frantic race against the clock or calendar, the learning will stay superficial. Students may have retained the information long enough to do quite well on the test, but this surface learning does not result in real understanding, merely—and only temporarily—in reproduction. (How often have we lamented about students who got an A at Christmas forgetting basic concepts

(contd).



when winter term starts only a few weeks later?)

Of course, the corollary message here is this: If our courses and our testing focus exclusively on memorizing content, rather than *how the students apply it* to solve problems, we are also making it much easier for students to cheat!

There is a need for instructional methods that emphasize and provide opportunities for active learning rather than simply acquisition of facts, and for assessment that is frequent, authentic, stresses deep rather than surface learning, and is aligned with the instructional methods. Shuell (1986) is absolutely correct when he reminds us that “what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does.”

### We Can't Teach It All: How Much Content Is Enough?

There are constraints, of course. Teachers must include enough content in introductory classes to ensure the students are prepared for the next level; we also must make sure that content is addressed for accreditation purposes. But those two conditions aside, how much content is enough?



Some professors equate academic rigour with the amount and difficulty of the subject-content in their classes. For them the reduction of content would signify a corollary reduction in rigour. But if shoe-horning more content into the class actually leads to *less* of the kind of learning we want and instead increases short-term memorization rather than understanding, can we really talk about rigour? We can certainly talk about stress as professors and

students struggle to keep up. The educational literature (and even commonsense) tells us that “covering” less means that students get a chance to learn more—really learn, not just memorize and regurgitate. If it means that students have a chance to do more with the content and apply it to complex problems, isn't it worth trying to eliminate a little content to increase learning?

No matter how much we pack into our classes, we are forced to admit that we will never be able to teach our students everything they need to know. We acknowledge that every time we select—from the infinite array of texts, facts, and concepts—what will comprise the content for any class we teach (see page 8).

What we *should* do when we are choosing content, however, is to ask this question, suggested by Ken Bain: “What key information or concepts can I clarify to provide students with foundations (or scaffolds) from which they can continue to build their understanding?” In other words, since we cannot cover everything, we must free up enough space in the curriculum to teach students how to discover the rest for themselves. As Maryellen Weimer says, our “strong allegiance” to content coverage blocks a focus on learning. She goes on to suggest that we “aim not to cover content, but to *uncover* some of it.”

### Towards Learner-Centered Instruction

Focusing on learning, as opposed to content, shifts us into a new paradigm of *learner-centeredness*, where more content is not necessarily better. Wilbert McKeachie (2002) differentiates content-centeredness and learner-centeredness. In a content-centered course, the professor's primary objective is to share facts and concepts that expose the students to the ideas of the discipline. In a learner-centered course, the

(contd.)



process of learning is “elevated,” says McKeachie: “Teachers with this pedagogical philosophy accept and relish their responsibility for fostering changes in how students think by emphasizing active learning.”

In learner-centered instruction, the role of content changes. Students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills increase as they engage directly with the material through active learning, experimentation, and discovery.

### Teaching for Lifelong Learning

Only the minority of our students will pursue careers in higher education, or even enter Master’s programmes in the discipline. As they progress in their chosen career paths, therefore, the actual facts they learned at university will lose importance (and perhaps accuracy and currency in the field); however, *the process of learning* will become increasingly important to them as they acquire new work-related knowledge or skills, solve problems, or write persuasive arguments.

Maryellen Weimer argues that, if nothing else, students have to leave university knowing how to learn because learning will be “a lifelong occupation” for them. While at university, students need opportunities to learn and practice different learning skills to discover what works for them.

Allowing students to be actively involved in their learning, in uncovering or discovering things for themselves, will certainly take longer in class than if we simply tell them. We may “cover” less; however, the students gain in metacognition and learning skills. Weimer concludes:

“Learner-centeredness means that students leave our classrooms with a base of content knowledge and the skills they’ll use to apply it and to learn more.”

Chris Knapper agrees. Giving the keynote address at the 2005 Canadian Summit on the Integration of Teaching and Research (University of Alberta), Knapper says, that to be equipped for the swiftly changing complexities of today’s society, students require learning approaches that stress “depth, . . . conceptual understanding, and integration of new knowledge with existing ideas”: skills that help them “solve complex and often novel or unanticipated problems.” Knapper calls for greater alignment between what students learn in university and what they will need to know—and keep on learning—once they graduate and enter the workforce.

### Joe Friday Was Wrong

University is no longer just about transmission of the facts; there are books, libraries, and a plethora of websites that can do that. Nevertheless, the didactic, lecture method of teaching still predominates in universities.

For centuries, especially during the rise of universities in the medieval and renaissance periods, the lecture was *the* method of teaching. Only a few people had books, and the lecturer was one of them. The lecturer (from the Latin *legere*, to read) was doing just that, reading the book to the students who did not have it. When universities began, there was scarce access to information, and the sharing and memorization of those vital facts and concepts were essential elements of a university education.



Society is no longer information-poor—a world of facts and information is just a mouse-click away—and we no longer have to memorize it all. University teachers are no longer the book readers; instead, we have



to help our students navigate an information-rich terrain and show them how to make wise choices about what is worth learning, through questioning, critical thinking, comparison, and analysis. Students need meaningful frameworks or scaffolds on which to hang the content we give them: patterns, metaphors, roadmaps, or outlines. Teachers provide those frameworks, and students need time to learn them.

Content is a *means* to learning as much as it is an end. We should look at content not as a finite amount of stuff to be covered, but rather as tool that will help us and our students achieve learning goals.

### Conclusion

Is it time to overhaul a course with a view to what can be excised from it? If you ever do, you might want to ask questions such as:

- Why is this part of the class content?
- When did I add it?
- Why is it important to learn?
- Is it need-to-know material or nice-to-know?
- How does it fit into the “big picture”?
- What is the best way for students to learn this material: lecture, active learning? Inside or outside class?
- If this is important content, how will I assess whether students have learned (as opposed to just memorized) it?

If we truly want to focus on learning and on developing our students’ thinking skills, then we must create opportunities to do so. We must view content as a tool to help our students learn skills for a lifetime. As Maryellen Weimer says:

*“If we aim to be learner-centered, content still needs to be a focal point of the [instructional] universe, but it can no longer be the exclusive centre, the only or the most important variable when it comes to instructional decision making.”*

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## HOW DO YOU CHOOSE CONTENT?

Teachers choose the content for their classes in various ways and for a myriad of reasons. Our content defines our disciplines and reflects our unique take on the subject, our current research or preferences—even the availability of textbooks or long-negotiated consensus between team-teaching colleagues. When other universities decide whether to grant our students transfer credit, they tend to look first at the content—what is “covered” in class—rather than the intent, the learning objectives which study of the content helps students fulfill.

As part of an on-going survey I am conducting, I have asked over 60 professors to describe the criteria they use when choosing content for their courses. The following lists some of the answers I have received:

- Current trends/work in the field including the history (how did we get here)
- Relevance to “real world”
- What is emphasized across text books
- My own interests and research
- Fundamental/basic tools that students should acquire
- Interesting examples
- Popular issues
- Things to which students can relate
- Interdisciplinary applicability
- Its use of visually-pleasing presentations
- Requirements of the discipline; material students need to know for success in subsequent courses.
- Fundamental to understanding of subject area in general

(contd.)

- Relevance to student application in workplace or in higher-level learning.
- Feedback from previous students
- Its potential to give the students a sense of confidence
- What I think a student should know to have a general idea of the subject
- Relevance to local situation
- Skills I want my students to acquire

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## NEW ON THE PCTC BOOKSHELVES



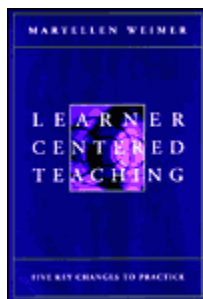
**Ken Bain (2004), *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press**

What the critics say: “Drawing on interviews with more than 60 exemplary college teachers from a number of disciplines and a variety of institutions, Bain identifies personal characteristics, pedagogical practices, assessment techniques, and other individual and institutional elements that can help anyone with a commitment to teaching and learning to become a more effective college teacher. Bain demonstrates that disciplined attention to relevant research and to effective practice can help scholars in any field become better teachers. Providing insight into how teachers can help students demonstrate significant gains in learning in a variety of ways, this volume will be of interest to any member of the college faculty.”

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New on the Bookshelves (contd.)



Maryellen Weimer (2002), *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*  
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

What the critics say, “Weimer focuses on learner-centered teaching in the college and university classroom. Coverage includes an overview of relevant literature on learning, changes associated with learner-centered education in five areas—the balance of power, the function of content, the role of the teacher, the responsibility for learning, and the purposes and processes of evaluation—and key issues in implementing the learner-centered approach. Three appendices contain practical sample materials, and reading lists of additional books on active learning, successful small group dynamics, personal accounts of learner-centered teaching, and texts on learning.”

“This book aims to cultivate our understanding of learning and it does so by connecting that knowledge to instructional practice. . . . It seeks to answer this question: What should teachers *do* in order to maximize learning outcomes for their students? It aspires to move the talk about learning down to the level of details and to make it more nourishing.”  
(Maryellen Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, p. xii)

COMING EVENTS

You will find links to more information about each of these conferences on the PCTC homepage  
<http://www.mta.ca/pctc>

*Evolving Scholarship*

The Annual Conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education  
University of Alberta, June 13-16, 2007  
<http://www.ualberta.ca/~uts/STLHE/>



*Faculty Development Summer Institute*

University of Prince Edward Island  
July 30-August 3, 2007  
In its 24th year of great faculty development, this is the only Institute of its kind in Canada. The overall goal of the Institute is to improve teaching and learning by enhancing the knowledge and skills of professors.  
<http://www.upei.ca/extension/FDSInstitute.htm>



*Engaging Students as Thinkers and Writers in Every Discipline*

The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Dalhousie Conference on University Teaching and Learning  
May 2-3, 2007  
Call for Proposals: Deadline March 7<sup>th</sup>  
<http://learningandteaching.dal.ca/dcutl/>

**N.B. The PCTC will refund the registration fee of each Mount Allison participant at the Dalhousie Conference!**



## ACQUIRING MIDTERM FEEDBACK FROM YOUR STUDENTS

**A**t this time of year, our students are writing mid-term tests and doing assignments that demonstrate their progress and how well they are learning in class. This is also an excellent time of year to do a midterm check-up on your teaching. Here are three ideas:

### 1. ONE-MINUTE PAPERS

One-minute papers are simple to design, quick and easy to administer, and should take only a minute (or two) for students to complete. Use one-minute papers if you have tried a new instructional technique; you have taught a lot of difficult material; or you want the students to reflect on what they've learned. To use this technique:

1. Write one or two questions on the board, on an overhead transparency, or have the questions ready on paper (see examples below).
2. Tell the students to answer in one or two sentences.
3. Read the responses to get "instant" feedback on what the students got out of that day's class.

#### Examples

What was the most important thing you learned in today's class?

What was the most difficult thing about today's class?

What questions remain uppermost in your mind after today's class?



### 2. STOP, START, CONTINUE

The easiest one of all, this technique asks students to think about what you are currently doing in class and to answer three questions:

What should we

- 1) Continue doing because it is worthwhile for your learning?
- 2) Start doing because it would be a valuable addition?
- 3) Stop doing because it is not helping your learning?

### 3. EVALUATION MINI-FORMS §

Evaluation Mini-Forms allow you to tailor questions to a particular class or learning situation. They facilitate asking relevant questions at an appropriate time:

1. Schedule them to allow enough time to make suggested changes.
2. Design the form so that it contains no more than five questions.
3. Ensure the question can be answered with a combination of scaled and short written responses.

#### **For example:**

How helpful are the feedback forms I attach to your graded lab reports?

Not helpful                      Very helpful  
0                      1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_



## Acquiring Midterm Feedback (contd.)

### Other Possible Questions for Mini-Forms:

How clear is my presentation of formulas?

How useful are class discussions in helping you understand the concepts we are covering?

How useful are the handouts that summarize the errors on your essays and possible corrections?

How helpful are the notes I post on the web?

How useful are the sample exam questions given at the end of each section?

How useful is the extra readings list for each section?

§Adapted from: Cross, K.P. & T. Angelo. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook For Faculty* (2nd edition). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (Available from PCTC).

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### UPDATING YOUR TEACHING PORTFOLIO?

How often you update your portfolio depends on the purpose and circumstances. If you are applying for a new position at this or another university, for example, you will certainly rework your portfolio to match the job requirements: emphasizing your supervision of honours students; your curriculum revision work; your administrative experience—whatever the position profile entails.

If you are planning no major moves, a quick annual tuning is all that is needed. First, check that your teaching philosophy statement still reflects who you are as a teacher. Then, remove items that are old or stale, and replace them with better evidence of your current teaching activities. Don't discard these old documents; file them in your archival portfolio (see below).

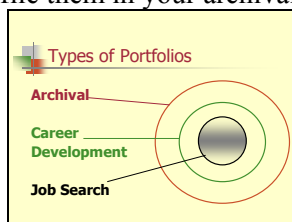


Figure One: Types of Portfolios

As Figure One shows, there are at least three types of teaching portfolio, narrowing in specificity, and materials can move freely among them:

- 1) Archival Portfolio: The most general, this is where you put everything. This portfolio "stocks" the other two types;
- 2) Career Development Portfolio: This portfolio tracks changes, enhancements, accomplishments in your teaching. Use this for job promotion within the same institution or simply to enhance your own teaching practice;
- 3) Job Search Portfolio: The most narrowly focused, this portfolio targets the requirements for the new position.

For more information on teaching portfolios, e-mail Eileen at [eherteis@mta.ca](mailto:eherteis@mta.ca) or visit <http://www.usask.ca/gmcte/portfolios/>



**THE J.E.A. CRAKE TEACHING AWARDS  
2006-2007  
CALL FOR NOMINATIONS**

The Crake Foundation is offering a teaching award for *each* of the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, and Science. These awards are intended to recognize and encourage teaching excellence at Mount Allison University.

The recipient of each award will receive \$2000, half of which will go directly to the individual (or to the individual's Professional Development Reimbursement account); the other half will support a teaching project of the award holder's design. The teaching project should be undertaken the year following the presentation of the award.

The Selection Committee will comprise the Director of the Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre, the three Academic Deans, and three recipients of either the J.E.A. Crake Teaching Award or the Herbert and Leota Tucker Teaching Award (appointed by the Vice President Academic and Research).

**Criteria**

The selection criteria include

- Evidence of excellent teaching
- The quality of contributions to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning<sup>§</sup>

**Eligibility**

All teachers who are members of the departments and programs which form their particular Faculty and who have not held the award in the previous five years are eligible for the award for that Faculty.

**Nomination**

Nominations are invited from any member of the university community. Students in particular are encouraged to submit nominations.

To nominate a faculty member:

- Check with your nominee to ensure that he or she accepts your nomination and is willing to submit a dossier in support of the nomination
- Write a letter or send an e-mail in which you explain why the nominee merits this award.

Nominations should be submitted by Friday, 16 March, 2007 to:

J.E.A. Crake Teaching Award Nomination  
Office of the Academic Deans  
Centennial Hall, Mount Allison University  
65 York Street, Sackville, NB E4L 1E4

For more information or for electronic submission, please e-mail [deans@mta.ca](mailto:deans@mta.ca).

<sup>§</sup>Examples of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning may include innovations in teaching; participation in PCTC programmes; attendance or presentations at local, regional, or national teaching events.

