

Focus on Administration

**Intensive Instruction:
Lessons from the Field**

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In the spring of 1994, I was engaged in a professional and academic quandary over how to teach a graduate level assessment course over four weekends. Professionally, I was skeptical that students could learn in such an intensive environment. Academically, I was unsure as to how to organize the course content and class experiences. I had taught workshops on weekends that involved hands-on experiences of high interest to students, but never a required course with a research paper requirement and an abundance of knowledge with related student testing.

The following describes the course as it had been organized, the ways I reorganized the course to meet the new time frames, the way I actually taught the course, and the resultant responses from the students. Most importantly, I attempt to document the surprising lessons I learned from teaching this course. I have been sharing my reactions about this course with my peers during the past year because of the many unexpected experiences I discovered through this new adventure in instruction.

Background

Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU) is located in Portales, New Mexico, and serves students primarily from New Mexico and west Texas. ENMU is noted for its emphasis on distance education via instructional interactive television, multiple branch campuses, and

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travel by faculty to teach courses throughout a one-hundred mile radius from the main campus.

In 1993, the educational administration faculty received a request to teach courses leading to a master's degree in Ruidoso, New Mexico, approximately 170 miles from the main campus where a small branch of ENMU had recently been established. Courses would be completed over four years to accommodate 15 students.

The 36 hours of required coursework was divided so that the core courses in educational foundations would be taught during the first year. Faculty would drive back and forth on the same day once a week to teach a class during the evening hours in the fall and spring semesters, and each year one faculty member would teach a course for four consecutive weekends in May and June. Students would be required to meet and complete all qualifications for entrance into the ENMU Graduate School and the School of Education Graduate Program.

As Coordinator of the Educational Administration program, I helped to organize the schedule of courses. Faculty are accustomed to driving to teach courses, but no one was volunteering to give up four weekends in May and June. I was also the faculty member who primarily taught one of the core foundations courses. so, when the course schedule was set, I was to teach courses in Ruidoso for the weekend sessions for the next three years.

In the spring of 1994, the Ruidoso students were completing six hours of core coursework in curriculum and history of education. They had already completed the core research course during the prior fall semester. All the students were full-time teachers who had made the commitment to obtain a master's degree in educational administration through which they could fulfill New Mexico's requirements for administrative licensure.

I was scheduled to teach the EDF 530 Assessment course for four consecutive weekends during May and June of 1994. This course focuses on both qualitative and quantitative assessment with a strong emphasis on current and future trends in testing in public schools. The first part of the course covers basic statistics as applied to testing and educational research. The course content then concentrates on development of objective tests with the final focus of the course on performance-based and portfolio assessments.

I had been teaching this course for six years. I had taught it on the main campus for 16 weeks in two and one-half hour class increments. I had taught it off campus for 16 weeks with students coming to the main campus for one or two full Saturday sessions. And, I had taught Assessment for four-week summer sessions during which classes meet for two hours and ten minutes each day for twenty days. Now I was faced

with attempting to teach this course over four weekends.

In previous years, the issue of weekend courses had come under considerable discussion and scrutiny by the School of Education faculty. The main argument for weekend courses was to meet student needs because the majority of our graduate students are full-time teachers. The primary argument against weekend courses was that there was insufficient time for students to complete assignments and be able to think about the course content. Some faculty even questioned the academic effectiveness of teaching four-week summer courses. The Graduate Dean agreed with those who disapproved of weekend courses and would not schedule such courses except for workshops, which were considered to be staff development experiences as opposed to rigorous academic experiences. So, my weekend course would be both an experiment and a possible prototype for any future excursions into weekend course scheduling.

Course Reorganization

My first task was to decide how to divide the course into meaningful and logical experiences within the time requirements. The class would meet on four Fridays from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m., four Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. with an hour break for lunch, and three Sundays from noon until 3:00 p.m. These hours equaled the required 45 hours of class time.

I was able to provide the students with these times about one month prior to the course so that they could adjust their personal schedules. I also was able to have students purchase the text for the course at this time so that they could begin reading the chapters related to the first weekend's course content. Two students purchased their texts on the first Friday of the class and were able to complete their readings on time.

During this time of course organization, I was reading Grant Wiggins' ideas about assessment. I had always given two major tests in Assessment, but, based upon Wiggins' concept of the need for multiple assessments, I scheduled four tests instead of two. I did this by simply dividing each of my usual two tests in half. Tests would be given on Friday nights or Sunday afternoon so that students could have time to study. Course content and sequence remained the same except that I began to view each weekend's classes as a unit. I did adjust some group work and in-class assignments so that they would occur on Saturday afternoons. This decision was based upon my experiences teaching Saturday classes for my off-campus courses.

Because the Assessment class is required of all students who seek to obtain an MA in education, no matter what their area of emphasis, I always require a paper that reviews the literature related to students' areas of interest. I was aware that the students would be working full-

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time for the first three days of the class, that library facilities were limited in Ruidoso, and that the students would be engaged in intensive reading and studying during their four days away from the class. Therefore, I decided that their paper would be due to me two weeks after the class ended.

Armed with the new syllabus, materials to teach the first weekend of classes (equivalent to five semester classes) and luggage for my two-nights stay at the Super 8 Motel, I drove from Portales to Ruidoso. I was eager to begin, as I am always with a new course with new students, but also apprehensive as to how these weekend marathons would eventually play out.

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I found the facilities for the class to be a mid-sized room with tables placed in a square. Aware that blackboard space was limited, and that I tend to use blackboard space extensively, I had brought large pads of paper and masking tape. Across the street from the classroom building was a restaurant that served breakfast, lunch, and also provided take-out beverages.

The 15 students had already formed a cohesive group, since together they had completed nine hours of graduate coursework. My task was to get to know them and to become part of the group, as well as the leader of this class. So, they had to get to know me. That first night we were both somewhat leery as we plunged into a new experience.

Because of the intensity of the time commitment, I became immersed in the content and students. Time away from class was spent reviewing, grading, and just catching my breath. It was not until several weeks after the course ended that I was able to gain some perspective on the experience and analyze what had occurred.

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Having facilities that were compact maintained the intimacy and intensity of the class. While students had sufficient room to spread out their materials, seating became territorial because we could leave our materials in place overnight and students became comfortable in their own setting. When one student changed his seat one Friday, it was cause for class discussion; a new level of student comfort had to be reached. Bringing large paper pads was an inspiration. I could tape up ideas around the room and refer to them all weekend. Some notes I saved from week to week for reference.

The students already knew each other from previous classes and this weekend class enabled them to know each other more personally.

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They told me about themselves and about each other. During breaks, breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, we came to know each other well. I know these students better than most of the other students whom I've taught because we spent time together around class, not just during class. Graduate students who work full time notoriously arrive just before class and leave immediately afterwards. I usually plan some individual student sessions so that we can discuss coursework and degree plans. I needed no artificial discussion times during the weekend course, because such discussions were natural and spontaneous.

The class times quickly fell into a pattern. During the Friday night classes, students were attentive, but tired after a day of teaching. They were receptive, but not forthcoming in discussions. On Saturday mornings, students were fresh, open, and talkative, and they remained this way for about two hours after the lunch break. Then fatigue set in—both physical and mental. The hands-on activities and group work I planned for Saturday afternoon maintained their attention. Sunday afternoons were productive, but students had been away from class for 20 hours and knew the weekend would be over soon. Tests worked well on Sundays, but discussion sometimes lagged as students began to wind down and focused on teaching the next day.

Instruction during weekend classes came as a surprise to me. I had to make adjustments after the first weekend due to student response. Usually, I briefly review the previous week's material with the students at the beginning of each class and tie in what we are about to cover. I didn't have to do that, because the material was still fresh in their minds except from weekend to weekend.

Students not only remembered material more quickly, they were able to integrate concepts and make connections more rapidly than students during the regular school year. This was due to our immersion in the material and the non-interference of extra-curricular issues. Teaching statistics brought unexpected consequences. Usually I teach pieces of this logical material each week and try to assist students in seeing the connections between these pieces. By teaching blocks of material over a three-day period, students more quickly saw the material as a whole, as evidenced by their comments and discussion. Ideas were fresh in their minds and, thus, material was covered more quickly and comprehensively.

This higher level of comprehension displayed in class was demonstrated in student test scores. I gave and continue to give the same four tests to students during the regular semester courses and during the four-weekend course. In my comparison of the scores of the weekend students to the students of my semester classes, the weekend students'

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scores were higher on the whole. While analyzing the higher scores, I noted that the weekend students were able to answer analysis and synthesis level questions with more than 90 percent accuracy, while semester students answered these questions with only 60 percent accuracy. Again, I attribute this performance to the intensity of the learning experience and to the non-interference of outside stimuli.

Students were able to and did complete reading and other assignments. The syllabus stipulated the assignments as weekly, so students prepared for the weekend and not for individual class sessions. The review of literature papers were all completed on time to specifications and written well, with the exception of the work of one student who phoned me two days before the paper was due and wanted to change her topic. Such problems are found in any course taught in any time frame.

As for the instructor, I was tired. Each Monday after one of the weekends, I was exhausted yet satisfied. The intensity of the courses plus the driving was more than I had planned for during the first weekend. From then on, I lunched alone and had dinner alone so that I could relieve the intensity, maintain some objectivity, and think about something other than assessment. The students quickly had become my friends, but I still had to give them grades and evaluate their work. So, some distance became necessary.

Afterthoughts

Last year's experience contradicted my previous beliefs about weekend courses. Yes, I was one of the education faculty who voiced concerns about such courses being too intense and not giving students time to think. Students did think and thought well. They went beyond mere knowledge acquisition. From the weekend experience, I learned that the intensity of the learning situation could force most students into higher levels of thought processes. Conceptual integration and application, from my experience, were facilitated by student immersion into the subject matter.

Would I do it again? Yes. It's now the spring of 1995 and I'm beginning to plan the next four-weekend course in Ruidoso. There are new challenges with this course because it is significantly different in content and instructional methodology. This year I will teach an educational administration seminar course and the focus is on student reading and discussion. The seven hours of the upcoming Saturday classes apprehensively loom ahead. Can students spend seven hours in one day discussing total quality management and its application to education? So, again, I'm in a quandary, but, after last year's experiences, with less apprehension and more emphasis on creativity. As last year's experiences taught me, the students will learn and I will learn.