

Reflections on Summer Teaching: *Academic Rigor or Curriculum Light?*

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Abstract

This reflective article describes the journey of three new faculty members trying to reconcile the differences between teaching regular length semester courses and compressed summer courses. The authors document their struggle to maintain academic rigor while accommodating the time compressed nature of summer semester courses. An analysis of teaching methodology, approaches to student assessment, and other pedagogical issues is discussed and recommendations for teaching and research are made. It was determined that academic rigor and learning outcomes do not need to be compromised due to time constraints of the teaching schedule.

Introduction

At the end of spring semester, two professors run into each other in front of the mailboxes and one inquires about how the spring has gone. As they speak, they begin to discuss their preparation for the upcoming summer. They briefly talk about their different approaches for preparing for the summer sessions. A few days later a third professor enters the dialogue with some similar concerns. One week into the summer session,

the first two faculty members see each other again, and one asks how the session is going. The other shares, “It seems like I’ve gotten to know them very well, but the course is designed differently than I would during the regular year. There are other readings I would like them to do and other assignments but there doesn’t seem to be the time for it.” They agree and continue to discuss what is happening and how they have each designed their summer courses to accommodate the fast-paced and compressed nature of the schedule. They decide to delve into this topic more deeply and invite the third professor to join in their inquiry. And so begins our quest to explore whether our summer courses maintain the academic rigor of their semester-long counterparts, or whether they are “curriculum light.”

Focus of the Dialogue

This paper reports the self-study of three faculty members in their first year of teaching in the College of Education at the same institution. The purpose of the inquiry was to understand how each of us, faculty from different disciplines within education, approached, experienced, and learned from his or her teaching of compressed summer courses. As we engaged in conversations about our summer teaching, several common concerns emerged, including teaching methodology, student assignments, assessments, and academic rigor. We realized that maintaining academic rigor was not only a common concern but the primary issue. We wanted to understand each other’s experiences reconciling the differences between teaching regular length semester courses and compressed summer courses while maintaining academic rigor.

During our initial conversations it became apparent that each of us held a unique perspective as to what academic rigor was and how it should be maintained. Therefore, it became important for us to define academic rigor.

Alicia reflects upon academic rigor as follows:

When I think of academic rigor I think about the level of challenge not amount of work but the challenge of the assignments, activities, dialogue. It must involve a lot of higher level thinking, lots of analysis, synthesis, evaluation (and application). Also, that the students learn a great deal from the experience, that they grow in their thinking, etc. I do think that there is also a part of going beyond what is expected—I’m not sure how to explain this. Like we’ve talked about an A should mean excellent and it goes beyond expectation—there’s that piece but I’m not articulating it well right now...

Mark perceives academic rigor:

For graduate classes, I believe that academic rigor is requiring one's students to think deeply about and engage the material. It isn't about how much one reads or how hard it is to get an "A." It isn't about challenging students to think in ways and terms they previously could not have imagined. Graduate students must be able to integrate, synthesize, and apply what they are studying. Faculty must guide these students to the next level of academic discourse. As for grading, if you give me what I expect, it is "B" work. Go above and beyond—knock my socks off that will be "A" work.

Eunsook is always searching for academic rigor by listening and looking at evidence of students' thinking and questioning:

Are they really in "deep" thinking? How do they present their thinking? What are their emerging questions as they process the content? Do their questions make us think and engage in discourse that is more than and deeper than the course expected outcomes? Is their thinking and making connections constantly going beyond the "book knowledge" to create their own knowledge? Do they present their vision of how to apply their new knowledge into practice? Are their thinking and questions holding a critical thinking and action: meaning analyze and articulate limitations of the subject they are learning, and attempt to uncover and unknown possibilities to overcome the limitations that they articulated?

In our definitions there was a shared understanding regarding academic rigor, which included an emphasis on the learning process of our students. Aspects of this learning process included: challenging work; deep thinking; making and understanding connections; and the construction of new knowledge.

Background

We came to our summer teaching with different experiences and backgrounds. Although all first-year faculty at Multi-State University, one of us was a newly minted Ph.D. who had come with some university teaching experience as a graduate student, but no full-time university teaching experience. One was a previous administrator who also had some university teaching experience but had no full-time university teaching experience, and one was an experienced university faculty who had previously taught summer courses as well. Interestingly, we worked in three different programs within the same department, Teaching, Leadership, and Curriculum Studies (TLCS). The three programs are Secondary Social Studies Education, Early Childhood Education, and Higher Education Administration and Student Personnel.

Semester and Summer Session Formats

Fall and spring semesters consist of fifteen weeks of teaching time and a one-week examination period. Graduate classes are generally offered one day a week for two and a half hours. The time between spring semester and fall semester at our institution is divided into four sessions. There is an intersession, a two-week session between the end of spring semester and before the first summer session in June. Classes within this session generally meet Monday through Friday all morning or afternoon. After intersession there are three summer sessions. Summer 1 and summer 3 are two separate five-week sessions. Classes within these sessions vary in number of days per week and hours per session. For example, some classes are three days a week for two and one-half hours while others are four days a week for one hour and fifty-five minutes. Others are four days a week for four hours each day for two and a half weeks.

The summer session 2 is an eight-week session overlapping both summer 1 and summer 3. Classes in this session are quite varied as to time per day and number of days per week.

Shared Assumptions about Summer Teaching

There were two initial assumptions held by all three faculty members about the teaching of the summer (compressed) courses. First, we assumed that since the courses were the same courses in the summer as the regular term the learning outcomes of the summer courses should be the same as those of their regular term counterparts. Second, we assumed that we had to modify the pedagogical approach, including content delivery, types of assignments, and forms of assessment, to accommodate the difference in time structure.

Literature Review

As part of our inquiry we wondered whether other university faculty members had written about maintaining academic rigor while teaching summer courses in a compressed format. As a result of our literature review, we found a dearth of studies that addressed how faculty balance the nature of compressed courses while maintaining academic rigor. We did find literature addressing the context of summer sessions, expectations held by students, and faculty perceptions of their experiences in these types of courses and learning outcomes.

Academic Rigor

According to Smart, academic rigor comes through students' participation in their own learning:

The question of academic rigor, for me, becomes a question of thinking. I look for rigor by looking at students' thinking. The thinking is the rigor. The thinking is there, visible in their spoken and written voices, in their visual imagery and use of metaphor and symbolism...The thinking is evident in the connections students make to their own lives and to other reading other knowledge that they have. The rigor comes through students' participation in their own learning. (Karla Smart, 1995)

This definition is consistent with the independent definitions of academic rigor stated by the authors earlier. All of these definitions indicate that academic rigor requires students to exercise high order thinking in their processes of learning as well as in their performance of meeting or exceeding expected outcomes.

Context

Summer courses on college and university campuses are increasingly viewed as more than an opportunity to "make up" course work for the academically ill-prepared student. Today, the summer session is seen as an extension of the academic program that affords students three additional opportunities: to take courses they were unable to fit in to their academic year schedule; to take additional courses beyond degree requirements; and to take courses that will allow them to lighten their load during the academic year. Typically, summer session courses are shorter (2-10 weeks) and more intensive than the traditional semester length course. Both types of classes must meet the "seat time" requirements of 15 hours of contact for every one hour of academic credit. These time-shortened or compressed courses provide an alternative to the traditional 15-week semester long course (Daniel, 2000) and are viewed as academically legitimate on most campuses (Taylor, 1988).

Expectations and Perceptions

Faculty expectations of academic rigor and the maintenance of standards may not necessarily match the expectations of students enrolled. The literature indicates that many students choose to enroll in summer session for academic reasons but bring with them expectations that such classes will require less study time and that course standards may be lowered as compared to the traditional academic year (Wayland

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et. al, 2000). Scott also found that students enrolled in summer session courses had very explicit expectations of the workload and faculty members. Those expectations include: (1) students in compressed courses prefer depth over breadth; (2) students expect a closer relationship with the faculty member; (3) students anticipate smaller classes; (4) students expect and want instructors to modify the assignments; and (5) believe that compressed courses are more “laid back” (Scott, 1995). Additionally, Scott noted that most students believe the instructor is the most essential ingredient to a good learning experience, especially in intensive courses (Scott, 1996).

Research indicates that students attribute high-quality learning to specific faculty attributes regardless of the course timeframe (Kreber, 1999). Scott also found that students believe that intensive or compressed courses: (1) often engender a more continuous learning experience than semester-length classes; (2) produce a much more concentrated and focused learning experience; (3) allow students to devote more time and energy to classes that might otherwise get lost in the shuffle during the regular semester; (4) engender a more collegial classroom experience and foster more classroom interactions and in-depth discussions; and (5) enhance the student-faculty relationship (Scott, 1995).

The faculty perspective is slightly different than that of a student. The literature indicates that faculty and administrators are hesitant in scheduling regular graduate courses during shortened periods of time such as summer session (Barclay, 1990). It is also rather clear that faculty are concerned about the time spent on activities outside the classroom (Wayland et. al, 2000), and they question whether or not the intensive/compressed format allows students to appropriately process material (Daniel, 2000).

Learning Outcomes

Summer sessions and compressed courses have long been criticized by faculty because of the need to sacrifice breadth of knowledge and the resultant lessening of academic rigor (Scott, 1995). And yet, the literature on learning outcomes clearly indicates that students participating in summer or compressed courses learn as much as more than students taking the same course during the traditional semester (Daniel, 2000).

There is an abundance of literature on teaching strategies and pedagogy, but very little that specifically addresses teaching summer or compressed courses. Daniel notes that faculty may need to modify their curriculum and instructional approaches when preparing for these courses. Several others suggest that faculty employ a variety of teaching

methods (Kreber, 1999) and attend to different approaches to learning (Hativa & Birenbaum, 2000).

Methodology

We began meeting to discuss what brought us together; sharing our experiences and thoughts, taking notes, and trying to make sense of our own and each other's experiences. After several of these meetings, we decided that we should begin to articulate more clearly our individual experiences. We each wrote a general reflection paper about our respective experiences of teaching the first summer at our new institution. During this process we also investigated relevant literature. After completing our reflections and reading the scholarly work on this topic that we could find, we met again to discuss our interpretations of our summer experience.

As we discussed our writing and reviewed the notes from our earlier meetings, we began to see some common themes appearing and chose to organize our reflections around four main topics: assumptions about summer teaching; how we planned; what we experienced; and what we learned. In order to explore our experiences more systematically, we analyzed these written reflections with a cross-case analysis process as referred to by Miles and Huberman (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The cross-case analysis involved a detailed comparison of our three reflections using techniques of open, axial, and selective coding, as described by Strauss and Corbin, (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), to explore, analyze, and capture patterns in our thoughts about teaching summer session courses.

Specifically, this process proceeded in the following fashion. After the formal reflections had been written, we began by looking across each case and organizing our reflections into common themes by using open coding, a process in which we labeled parts of our reflections, grouped the parts, and then named each group. Next, axial coding was completed, a process in which we looked at the groups that we had named and related them to one another. We next worked on selective coding of the written reflections. Selective coding involves bringing a core category to the foreground and relating all other categories to it. For us, our planning and our sense-making about the experience became the core categories. We related the background, assumptions, and emerging thoughts to these core categories.

Findings

In our analysis of our reflections, we found many similarities in our planning, sense-making, and approach to maintaining academic rigor.

Planning

Within the planning process we recognized three themes that demonstrated how we approached the design of our courses.

Impact of time: During the initial planning for the summer session, a main theme was a concern for the impact of time on academic rigor. Based on our assumptions that the learning outcomes must be the same and that the limited amount of time would make it difficult for students to process the same material in the same way, we looked at changing assignments. We asked ourselves several probing questions during the planning of our courses to prevent ourselves from compromising the academic rigor. When should assignments be due? How much work is involved? How much thinking time do students need to accomplish the goals I have set? Can students who are taking two classes be expected to read two to three hundred pages a night? Is it fair to ask students to write three papers during a five-week period? Will the students have enough time to “grasp” the concepts and be able to make personally meaningful connections? Will we have enough time to build a sense of community of learners that will lead to a higher level of classroom discussion and diverse learning applications? Although we may ask ourselves these questions prior to every class taught, they became more relevant due to the compressed nature of these summer courses.

Collegial Support: Another common theme was that we consulted experienced faculty, gathered previous syllabi, and asked about how others modified their courses and assessments. For example, Mark explained,

I approached several colleagues and asked about making the adjustment to summer teaching and was assured that it was not difficult. I was advised to think about the course differently and not to rely on reading and writing as much... The faculty member who previously taught these courses was contacted and he did share his most recent syllabi. However, he had emphasized very different content areas from what I believed important for these students to experience.

Modification of Assignments: We found during the planning process that modifications were made to the regular semester course assignments to account for the compressed time. Alicia considered the sequencing of assignments and content. As she explained,

I chose to place the students' research projects and presentation and their microteaching in the last two weeks of the course. Since it was their first education course, I wanted them to have a little time to learn what they were interested in, get used to the program, and find their way around the library.

Mark approached the compressed time by reducing reading requirements and changing the types of assessments, for example using in-class tests instead of out-of-class research papers. As an experienced faculty member, Eunsook did not consider reducing reading assignments or modifying course content. She focused on adapting daily class activities and discussions to the compressed time format. As she explained,

What is the most critical component among the students in this course experience that needs to be constructed from the beginning of the short term course? I decided to spend a decent amount of time on the first day of the class to get to know each other and build a sense of belongingness and interdependent learning community, hoping that each student would realize his/her own responsibilities of class preparation and participation (i.e., finishing all the reading assignments on time, bringing critical questions for group discussion, and presenting one's own multiple perspectives on each topic/issues) with a high self-motivation.

Sense-making: What We Experienced and Learned

Within the category of sense-making, we found three areas as follows: establishing rapport; pedagogical modifications; and unanticipated benefits.

Establishing Rapport

We found it was much easier and quicker for us as faculty members to establish a rapport with the class; likewise, we found that the students tended to develop closer relationships more quickly: "I felt like my relationship with the students was very good and that it developed very quickly.... The students also seemed to have a strong bond early on" (Alicia). "I must say that I usually get to know my students better and quicker during a short-term summer course than I do in a regular long term" (Eunsook). As a result, we found that our classrooms seemed to be more open and accepting during discussions which in turn allowed the discussions to be qualitatively different from those we experienced during the traditional semester. Typically, class discussions were deeper and richer in content:

Discussions in the classes seemed to flow better than in my previous classes. This may have been due to many factors, but one that seems most logical is that the students were more comfortable with each other earlier because of the shorter time between class sessions. (Mark)

The compressed summer session also afforded the faculty the opportunity to engage their course material in a more focused fashion: "The daily-

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based class meetings made me prepare the next class with a strong continuity of the content discussion and active follow up of students' emerging questions and inquiry" (Eunsook).

Pedagogical Modifications

We did alter our course expectations with regard to readings and assignments during the term but did not alter the expected learning outcomes. The alterations took the form of a reduction in writing assignments and shorter daily readings:

I did require less reading and fewer writing assignments, which may have slightly reduced the academic rigor of the summer courses.... However... the learning outcomes set fourth at the beginning of the courses appear to have been met with the same level of satisfaction as if the courses had been offered in a traditional 15-week semester. (Mark)

Additionally, the daily activities and in-class sessions were different. For example, lecture and class discussion were somewhat reduced in favor of process oriented interactive activities. Changes also occurred in several of the individual projects assigned. This was approached in two different ways. One faculty member encouraged a classroom negotiation while the other two designed the experiences into their syllabi: "There were times that the students and I had to negotiate in reducing some of the course expectations" (Eunsook).

I found that I wanted to require other readings but felt they already had too much to be able to read and understand what was provided so I did not. There were also a couple assignments I would have liked to have done but because the days were so close together, I chose not to. (Alicia)

In some instances the writing assignments were replaced with short answer tests and text book selection was made with the understanding that daily reading assignments would be reduced. While not liking to give exams during class time, I was pleased with the way the exams turned out and will most likely incorporate their use in one or more of my traditional classes. (Mark)

Unanticipated Benefits

The compressed summer format permitted us to focus on one or two specific courses with no extraneous distractions, such as committee meetings. This gave us the opportunity to provide feedback more quickly than during the regular academic year, and the ability to adapt promptly the curriculum to incorporate the issues and concerns raised on a daily basis. One faculty used computer-based technology as a tool to provide prompt responses to students' work and their inquiries. Additionally, the

feedback appeared to be more meaningful to the students and permitted active follow-up and discussion because the material was still fresh in students' minds. Eunsook and Alicia deftly summarized this phenomenon.

...I feel I am more 'alert' to what's going on in the class due to the intensity brought by short-term conditions. In the regular semester, I usually split my time and attentions into many different directions—research meetings, multiple writing tasks, conference trips, and endless committee meetings (huh!). I am usually free from (or literally set aside) these multiple assignments in short-term summer courses... Use of computer-based technology (WebCT) helped in maintaining prompt responses to the students' inquiry in the fast pace course context. (Eunsook)

It seemed intense to them and to me. I enjoyed it but it required a great deal of time and effort each day. As the course progressed I felt like I spent more focused time on this course than I had on courses during the regular academic year. Since it was summer, there were few responsibilities besides teaching, (few meetings, no committee work, little advising) so I spent a great deal of time examining student work, providing specific feedback, and adjusting the curriculum to student needs. (Alicia)

Emerging New Thoughts

Even though we shared many similar experiences in planning and teaching the compressed summer term courses, the questions and ideas that emerged from the experience in regard to our future summer teaching were unique. Alicia's emerging thoughts for future summer teaching focused on the students' learning experience: "Will the summer always be more or less the same, but rushed? Is the learning as powerful? Is it more powerful since it is so concentrated?"

Mark indicated,

I want to incorporate the use of technology into the course design in the hope that I can have students engaging in dialogue outside of the classroom as well. I would also like to utilize the web for testing the students I could assign do-at-home exams, which would free up class time for lengthier discussions or in-class experiences.

Eunsook brought questions,

Who are the students we serve and will be serving in higher education? Does term length (short or long, i.e. regular) really matter in bringing academically rigorous and pedagogically sound practice in higher education? Will the new "information age" computer generations take serious consideration in short term vs. long-term courses when they have choices of choosing courses?

These differences in emerging new thoughts seem to reflect our differences in backgrounds and assumptions. “We now understand that our beliefs about teaching affect the directions of our emerging inquiries: We teach who we are.”

Future Conversations and Concluding Thoughts

As new faculty experiencing a compressed summer session, we soon realized that, as Phillips noted, this is yet another area in which initial training does not prepare the entering faculty member (Phillips, 1999). We are typically provided with a structure within which we must work. Within the structure we are given, we must negotiate the situation to create the best possible course. We all assumed that the compressed summer courses should have equally meaningful learning outcomes as the courses offered during the 15-week semester, but that the compressed nature of the courses would be a challenge. This manifested itself differently for the inexperienced and the experienced faculty; the two new faculty members assumed that this meant students would not be able to do as much of the reading, writing, and preparing that would occur in the regular year while our more experienced colleague did not share this assumption but rather focused on classroom dynamics.

What all three of us concluded from this study is that a summer (compressed) course should be viewed as essentially the same course that is taught in the regular semester. The difference between the two should not be in the content and the academic rigor expected of students but rather the methods of delivery and assessment (including assignments) provided by the instructor. Intended student learning goals should not change. To do otherwise would be to water down the curriculum, to offer students “curriculum light,” which neither they (students) nor we (faculty) should find acceptable.

Recommendations for Practice

We found that there is not a single way to maintain academic rigor but that our process of reflecting on our experiences with colleagues was a way to help us struggle with and maintain such rigor. This experience was powerful for helping each of us: (1) understand our own thinking and teaching; (2) get ideas about how others teach in the compressed format; and (3) clarify the meaning of academic rigor. A recommendation for all faculty is to teach a summer course and engage in this type of dialogue with colleagues to learn how a course can be altered while maintaining academic rigor.

Recommendations for Research

Time-compressed courses are becoming more prevalent in higher education, but little has been written to help us understand the impact of this structure on student learning. Some of the research suggests that the learning outcomes of compressed courses are equivalent to longer-term courses in the short-term (Van Scyoc & Gleason, 1993). The question remains: Is there a difference in the long-term and short-term retention of the meaningful learning outcomes? Similar questions arose in previous research (Daniel, 2000). We think additional investigations into what occurs in compressed courses in terms of teaching and learning is important so that dialogue about how to maintain academic rigor within a course across varied structures can occur. As Boyer suggests, it is important to make public one's discussion of scholarly activities, which includes teaching. Therefore we believe this topic needs to be widely discussed in the public domain (Boyer, 1990).

Further research and professional dialogue are needed to clarify what is and should be taking place, with differences by discipline and level of teaching (e.g., graduate and undergraduate) perhaps needing to be taken into account. Some questions come readily to mind. For example: Are there specific courses that benefit from the time-compressed formats? Are there some courses that are particularly disadvantaged in such contexts? Are there circumstances when expectations of student learning are properly lowered? What ways does faculty have of maintaining academic rigor in such courses? What strategies, procedures, support systems, etc. are needed to assist faculty members, especially new ones, address such questions? We hope that this presentation of our own investigations can help to address more fully these and other relevant questions related to the rather special nature of summer teaching.

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