Diversifying the Role Course Content Plays

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Peter Burkholder’s recently published piece in *The History Teacher* (highlighted in the October issue of *The Teaching Professor*) is another reminder of how much we need a different way of thinking about course content.

We all pretty much agree that we try to cover too much material in our courses, programs, and majors, but the thought of leaving things out often causes personal and profession anguish. We argue with ourselves that a certain piece of content is too important to cut, and our students need to know the information to pass certifying exams and to get jobs. Then there are departmental expectations. Most courses establish knowledge bases for subsequent courses. Our colleagues are depending on us. We further complicate matters by making course and instructor reputations a function of content quantity. A decrease in the amount covered means lower standards and a dilution of the intellectual currency of the course. Bottom line: We know we’ve got a problem, but these realities and our thinking have us backed into a corner.

Burkholder asks a question that creates some space in which to move. “What should the role of content be?” I vote for multiple roles.

The content coverage role is all about knowledge acquisition. And there’s no question that role is an important one. Content matters. It should be a central component to every course, but Burkholder asserts that it isn’t the be-all, end-all of the course. It shouldn’t have a tyrannical hold over instructional decision-making and course design.

Content can play a role in developing essential learning skills, like critical thinking, which has generic components that transcend fields and characteristics unique to each discipline. There’s also a role for content in promoting understanding of how knowledge is acquired, advanced, and assessed within a field. In introductory courses, content can show how the field is organized, the basic principles on which it rests, and how those in the field think about what they study. Content can play a role in helping students discover themselves as learners.

Moreover, a single course activity can simultaneously fill multiple roles. Our thinking tends to be dichotomous when it should be integrative. It’s not covering content or teaching skills, where a teacher hurries through the content and then squeezes in a skill-building activity. These things can happen at the same time. I advocate that students do the summarizing at the end of a class session. Do they best learn how to summarize by listening to the teacher do it or by doing it themselves? When students attempt to extract the essence of what has happened in class, they do so by thinking about the content, which expedites their understanding of it at the same time they’re learning to summarize.

In Burkholder’s case, content functions in three roles. Students take a quiz individually—it provides a snapshot of their content knowledge. But then they do the same quiz in a group where the content is discussed and debated, and the answer determined collectively. Students study (and learn) the content so they can pass the quiz, and then they learn it some more as their discussion with others enables them to understand it more deeply at the same time it lets them practice critical thinking skills.

I’ve always loved envisioning the scenario where you meet a student five years after having taken your course and you control what the student is remembering from the course. What would you have the student remember from your course? That perspective makes it easier to envision a larger role for content in a course. It reminds me of a great tongue-in-cheek piece biologist Dan Klionsky wrote for the newsletter some years back pointing out that nobody is teaching a course on the telephone book. His point: “we should not teach science (or other subjects) as though every fact is worth knowing, any more than we would use a telephone book to help us memorize numbers… Memorizing facts is not as important as knowing how to ask questions and how to synthesize information to formulate an answer.”

Diversifying the role content plays in our courses doesn’t lower standards. If anything it raises them. It just makes using content more important than covering it.

**References:**  
Burkholder, P. (2014). A content means to a critical thinking end: Group quizzing in history surveys. *The History Teacher,* 47 (4), 551-578.

Klionsky, D. (2006). [Why don’t we teach the phone book?](http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/curriculum-development/dont-teach-telephone-book/) *The Teaching Professor,* 20 (3),