

Chuck Shuler

Professor and Dean, Faculty of Dentistry

Small Groups and Inquiry Changed My Approach to Teaching and Learning

My experience as a new faculty member was similar to many others. Start-up funds were provided to get my laboratory up and running, which was a task that I felt well prepared to complete. Then my department head said, “by the way you will be the director for our first year student course,” which led to a level of anxiety since I had never had that type of responsibility and did not feel prepared for the course director role.

So what does a new faculty member do to start teaching an entire course at a new university while also balancing the requirements of building a program of research? You look at the curriculum and, most importantly, the syllabi used in the course previously and then try to duplicate what was done by previous instructors. This approach leads to a certain economy in the preparation of the course since all you are doing is replicating the structure. In a traditionally structured curriculum that means develop and give a series of lectures to the eager young minds taking the course and organize examinations to see if they mastered the material.

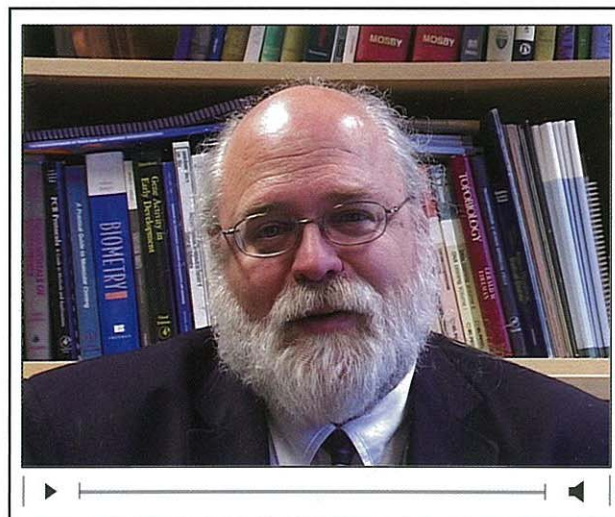
Developing the lecture content and level of coverage leads to a common misconception of all new course directors, that lectures need to be highly detailed and filled with content material. That was my goal in the course, and as I gave the lectures, I could watch the students in the class drift off and disengage from the learning. The students did acceptably on the examinations so I felt they had “learned” the material. However, when I later saw the same students in a different learning environment, it became clear that there was almost no retention of the content from my course. For several years, I tried many different approaches to the large group lecture style of teaching and remained consistently dissatisfied with the student outcomes. This led to a

rather typical assumption, that the students just didn’t know how important the material was to their life and didn’t appreciate my outstanding course. It also led me to increasingly focus on what I could control and receive positive outcomes from my research program, which consequently decreased my teaching activities.

Although I enjoyed my research and established a well recognized expertise in the discipline, I always wondered whether there might be a more rewarding approach to teaching. After 12 years as a faculty member, I had the opportunity to become engaged in a curricular change based on a small-group, inquiry-based pedagogy. This pedagogy required the participating faculty members to believe the students could learn without a series of lectures, which was accompanied by disbelief by many colleagues. Since I knew that the long term retention of material that I taught in lectures was poor, I was anxious to try a new approach to student learning. What became clear from the onset was that the students were eager to learn and when they were

given the responsibility, they accepted it willingly. Watching a small group evaluate information, apply information, and come to a new level of understanding was revealing and exciting. I could watch the students learn, and, over time, appreciate how the new information had been added to their knowledge base. Facilitating student learning in the small group engaged me in the learning process, leading to clear recognition that my contributions were helping the students learn the curricular content. This was a major change from my initial experiences as a course director. It became clear to me that ‘Teaching’ and ‘Learning’ are not always directly linked, and that the really important outcome in any educational model is student learning.

A small-group, inquiry-based pedagogy proved to me that I could make a much greater impact on student learning by assuming the role of a facilitator of active learning rather than a lecturer in a passive environment.



cshuler@interchange.ubc.ca 604.822.5773