HOW TO REDESIGN A COLLEGE COURSE USING NCAT'S METHODOLOGY

XI. How to Ensure Student Participation

The most important way to achieve student success in course redesign is to make sure students are doing the work. In this chapter we address how to introduce the course redesign to students, how to get them to do the work, what to do if they are not doing the work, and what to do if they say they "don't like" the redesign. This chapter is a compendium of ideas about how others have dealt with student acceptance of and resistance to the new way of learning.

Introducing the Course Redesign

Q: For students, what is the most difficult period in the redesign process?

A: Making the change from traditional classroom instruction to new ways of learning involves far more than learning to use a computer. Many students are set in their ways after a lifetime (albeit a brief one) of passive instruction. They need preparation before making the transition to a more-active learning environment. The adjustment period is often difficult, but persistence will win out. The pilot semester can be a difficult transition period as the redesign methodology gets introduced. Most common here are negative student reactions to the perception that the class will be impersonal because it uses technology or that it "has no teacher" (i.e., will lack opportunities for student-student and faculty-student interaction.)

Those challenges can be met by up-front engagement with advisers to explain what the course will be like and by the development of written materials and orientation sessions that explain the new format. Giving careful thought to how students will learn about the redesigned course will help avoid a number of problems that can arise.

Q: How should we orient new students to the course redesign?

A: Most institutions have found it useful to discuss the new approach to learning during new-student orientation. You need to develop—and communicate to students and family members— a coherent and compelling description of the course redesign that addresses common misconceptions and concerns. Both students and parents should be able to see a demonstration of the course and learn more about why the course redesign works so well. Some institutions have also established a website that includes a demonstration version of the course for students and parents so that they can gain a better understanding of the course redesign, the results it has produced and the benefits that students accrue.

As the institutional memory of how a particular course was taught in the traditional format begins to fade and as more and more students become successful, fewer and fewer students and their parents will question why the course is taught in the redesigned format. However, there will always be returning students who remember the "old way" and parents who say, "That's not how I learned X." For that reason—and because course redesign can be so different from the traditional format of other college classes—many institutions continue to include in their student orientations an explanation of the course redesign even well after the model has become fully established.

Q: Are there specific things we should be sure to avoid when we introduce the course redesign to students and others?

A: The most frequent problem that institutions have encountered lies in emphasizing the technology over the educational purpose of the redesign. Here's an example: "Initial stories in the campus and local presses emphasized the technology of the course. The radical change in instructional style produced what the team dubbed the *no-teacher syndrome*. The stories frightened many students, angered faculty, and confused administrators as parents phoned administrators to ask for details about a so-called instructorless course that was still in the design stage. In hindsight, a better approach would have been to emphasize that technology was already being used in hundreds of other campus courses and that there would be more in-person help available than ever before. It would have been better from the outset to insist that the press stress educational ends rather than technological means. Although improved student learning will always seem less newsworthy than stories about, say, streaming video, it's nevertheless crucial to keep a clear focus on why the technology has been called into play in the first place."

Attendance/Participation

Q: Should lab/classroom/online hours be required?

A: Don't even bother to redesign if you are not going to require all course activities.

Q: How do we get students to go to class/lab and/or participate online?

A: You will never get all students to attend all class meetings or put in all of the required hours in the lab or online, but you can get most students to attend regularly by making classroom, laboratory, and/or online participation at least 10 percent of the final grade. (Some advocate a higher percentage for participation.) This is extremely important. Without course points for participation, success rates may not improve.

Q: Should all students be required to spend the same amount of time on course activities?

A: There are mixed opinions about whether or not students' required hours should be reduced throughout the semester if they earn a certain minimum grade on each test. Some institutions do not change the required amount of time for any student. Others allow the number of hours to decrease if a particular student is maintaining a certain minimum level of mastery on all assignments, quizzes, and tests. No institutions permit students to reduce the required hours to zero.

What to Do When Students Won't Do the Work

Q: What do we do if students do not start working immediately—at the beginning of the term—and they fall behind?

A: It is important to contact students at the end of the first week if they have not attended a lab session/class meeting or have not begun working. Students who start late usually have a difficult time completing the course. The software's tracking feature makes it easy to determine who should be contacted early. Sending an e-mail or making a telephone call demonstrates that the instructor has noticed the student's absence and cares that the student has not begun the

course. Some students will respond to the e-mail or phone call by coming to class because someone noticed they are absent and followed up. Those students will continue to need support and encouragement but may become self-sufficient once they experience some success with the course content and see themselves making good progress.

Others will need more-assertive intervention. Those institutions that have early intervention specialists may be able to learn more about students' concerns or life issues and address them if possible. It may be that the course redesign is not the problem. Several institutions have tracked students who did not come to their redesigned classes—yet did not officially withdraw—and discovered that those students had stopped attending *all* classes. In those cases, the institutions administratively withdrew the students and encouraged them to return once they were ready and willing to attend classes.

Q: What do we do if students are not coming to the lab/class for the required number of hours or to the class meetings or are not doing the work?

A: It is essential to monitor student progress and intervene as needed. Faculty (or others working in the course) should track student progress and contact students by e-mail or telephone to set up a time to talk to those who are not engaged. Ideally, the contact should be personal during lab or class meetings. The instructor (or other personnel as described in Chapter IV) should be certain to talk with students who are behind at least once a week. The conversations should determine the problems students may be having with the content, the technology, or the course in general and help students overcome whatever the barrier may be. A student who has taken a test and done poorly should be asked to meet with the instructor (or others working in the course) in class or in the lab to discuss the errors.

Q: Should we communicate with students about problems only?

A: Absolutely not. It's easy to send out a weekly email to all students in the course with study tips or other encouraging thoughts. At some institutions, when a student has taken a major test and done well, the software sends an automatic congratulatory email to the student.

Q: What do we do if students say they don't like the redesign format?

A: When students arrive in college, they expect a particular way of learning: in the form of the traditional lecture format, which requires them to listen, take notes, and take tests. Course redesign, however, requires different behaviors, such as requiring that students engage with the content in an active learning environment before moving on. Thus, when students declare they don't like the redesign, many of them are actually objecting to having to do more work in order to pass the course.

Faculty must be prepared to explain clearly why the new model is better and how it improved prior students' success rates. Merely explaining how the redesign works is not enough. Faculty need to help students arrive at an understanding that additional work will lead to additional learning and to success in college and that they will be supported with personalized assistance in the process. Although students might initially complain that they believe they're working harder than they expected to or harder than their friends did in the traditional courses, their satisfaction with the new format will increase once they acquire the ability to learn the course content and experience success. Student complaints will also diminish once students accept that the new model is here to stay.