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BUSINESS EDUCATION: CONFUSING DIFFICULTY WITH RIGOR; THE IDEA OF ADDING DIFFICULTY WITHOUT EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

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Business Education: Confusing Difficulty with Rigor; the Idea of Adding Difficulty without Educational Benefits

Synopsis:

There is a lot of research about course rigor, grade inflation, and students earning higher grades than necessary in higher education. Courses should be designed to challenge students to grow by using critical thinking skills that include content identification, research, bias identification, inference, relevance and curiosity. This paper intends to provide guidance for instructors on how to provide quality knowledge transfer through the use of critical thinking skills.

Business Education: Confusing Difficulty with Rigor; the Idea of Adding Difficulty without Educational Benefits

Abstract

Recently, there has been quite a bit of discussion in the literature about course rigor, grade inflation (Nordin, Heckley, & Gerdtham, 2019), and students earning better grades than necessary in higher education. Business schools have not been excluded from this discussion (Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). Because this conversation has been highlighted, one tactic being used by faculty and administrators is to build up the academic rigor so students must work harder to earn decent grades. There is nothing wrong with providing strong academic rigor in any college course, however this does become a problem when too much rigor is put in place just to make the course difficult for no academic reason. Students can and do learn under many different circumstances, within many different teaching and learning styles. According to McNulty & Quaglia (2007), “the destination for education has to be rigor, relevance and relationships if we want to prepare students for college, work and life in the 21st century” (p. 24). And this rigor is needed to provide our students with the education that they need to survive and be successful after graduation. However, the authors of this paper intend to point out how to continue to provide strong learning without adding undo rigor that has no educational benefits. This paper intends to provide guidance for instructors of business courses on how to provide quality knowledge transfer without just making a course difficult in an effort to lower a courses overall grading curve.

Keywords: Business Education, Classroom Behavior, & Course Rigor

Introduction

The act of grading a student can be both subjective and objective. Most professors tend to believe they have a good strategy when dealing with grades. However, there has been some discussion in the literature about course rigor, grade inflation (Nordin, Heckley, & Gerdtham, 2019), and students earning higher grades than necessary in higher education. Business schools have not been excluded from this discussion (Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). Because of perceived grade inflation, faculty and administrators are working to build in more academic rigor so students must work harder to earn decent grades. That said, there is nothing wrong with providing strong academic rigor in any college course, however this does become a problem when too much difficulty is put in place just to make the course difficult for no logical academic reason.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the need for academic rigor along with the concept of how too much difficulty may be detrimental to the learning process. Grade inflation exists (Goldman, 1985) and for many reasons, the trending of grades climbing is becoming more prevalent every year. Along with grade inflation comes the concept of faculty correcting this inflation by making courses so difficult, students cannot possibly earn a good grade. The idea of adding rigor so difficult that students are guaranteed a low grade works well with the idea of lowering bell curve distributions of grades, however the authors of this paper wonder if just adding difficulty is limiting what students are learning.

There are techniques for passing knowledge onto students through many different means that the debate of how much rigor may be an undefinable moot point. This paper intends to analyze and describe when the addition of difficulty for the sake of being difficult is too much for a student to handle and it becomes detrimental to the learning process. In higher education,

rigor is good, and students learning to use problem solving skills to become educated individuals is what education is built upon. We are not seeking to oversimplify a course for students, nor to remove academic rigor to make courses easier. To the contrary, we are examining if too much difficulty is detrimental and if there are alternate ways to make sure students learn without the worry of grade inflation or the opposite, the creation of self-induced grade deflation.

Grade Inflation

Goldman (1985) states, “grade inflation can be defined as an upward shift in the grade point average (GPA) of students over an extended period of time” (p. 98) without a corresponding increase in student achievement (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002). Grade inflation has been shown to exist. It has been identified in many studies over the past few years (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002). Bar, Kadiyali and Zussman (2009) state that grade inflation and high grade levels have been the subjects of concern and public debate in higher education. Rosovsky & Hartley (2002) go on to defend a small group of faculty members who believe grades influence the future behavior of students as they grow into their professions, “some professors hold the view that low grades discourage students and frustrate their progress. Some contend it is defensible to give a student a higher grade than he or she deserves in order to motivate those who are anxious or poorly prepared by their earlier secondary school experiences” (p. 3).

There is no definitive answer to why there has been grade inflation (Bello & Valientes, 2008), but whatever the reason for grade inflation—students taking easy classes, seeking out easy professors, or professors wanting to boost student self-perception—the concept of grades creeping up has become significant enough to be labeled inflation.

Academic Rigor

Although accreditation standards provide a benchmark for academic rigor across institutions (Wergen, 2005), the concept of academic rigor is a highly debated topic. Finding a singular definition of the term is difficult. The exact meaning is filled with multiple perspectives, definitions, and contradictions. Bruner (1996) concludes that academic rigor “seeks to pose dilemmas, subvert obvious or canonical ‘truths’ or force incongruities upon our attention” (p. 127). In addition to this, Draeger, del Prado Hill, Hunter & Mahler (2013) state:

The analysis reveals a multidimensional conceptual model of academic rigor, including active learning, meaningful content, higher-order thinking, and appropriate expectations. The dimensions can overlap in various ways. The context (e.g., an assignment, course, course of study, or institution) can be considered rigorous along some dimensions and not others. We have argued that learning is most rigorous when students are actively learning meaningful content with higher-order thinking at the appropriate level of expectation in a given context (p. 279).

However, we find that there is one constant within all of these definitions that holds true, academic rigor is a multi-dimensional concept where the word difficulty rarely plays a role. Given the multiple different definitions of academic rigor, what seems to be suggested is that students must learn how to think critically (Payne, Kleine, & Carter, 2005), engage with concepts that require deep thought and effort (Winston, Vahala, Nichols, & Gillis, 1994), and make connections between concepts (Wyse & Soneral, 2018).

We believe academic rigor and course difficulty are two completely different concepts; and the idea of making a class difficult to increase rigor is not entirely correlated, nor is it empirically supported. The concept that adding in difficulty for the sake of making a course harder to lower overall grades is validation by many instructors and administrators that the course has rigor. However, few definitions of academic rigor suggest that this is true. In fact, a higher level of learning, or an engagement of critical thinking and deep thought and effort is

usually more accurately interpreted to mean the course is rigorous. Low grades should not be interpreted that academic rigor exists.

Adding Critical Thinking and Deep Thought

One way to add deep thought to a course is by using “good assignments [to] give students opportunities to receive early feedback on their work, encourage meaning making, and clearly explain the instructors’ intention and purpose” (Bean, 2011). Alluding to the concept of creating a strong learning environment, it becomes more important for the instructor to engage with the students than to just grade harshly. In addition to deep thought, instructors also look to incorporate critical thinking skills or, “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (Scriven & Paul, 2007, p. 1) into the education process.

It is through both critical thinking and deep thought that rigor is developed. When thought about in an academic setting, it becomes clear that if we want to create learning, we must change our process of adding increased difficulty and focusing on creating assignments that foster critical thinking skills. These skills are described by Snyder and Snyder (2008) as:

The premise that critical thinking is to knowing as listening is to hearing implies that critical thinking is a learned skill that must be developed, practiced, and continually integrated into the curriculum to engage students in active learning. To support this premise, focused attention needs to be placed on the application of content, the process of learning, and methods of assessment (p. 91).

And these skills need to be fostered by careful and purposeful assignments that allow students to process information, grow, and learn in a rigorous manner.

Increase Rigor, without Needless Difficulty

There are many processes instructors can use to foster critical thinking and deep thought with their courses. According to Snyder and Snyder (2008), the best practices include:

- **Modeling Critical Thinking:** where instructors walk students through the process of critical thinking by showing how to think about a problem.
- **Asking Critical Thinking Questions:** critical thinking is best supported when instructors use critical questioning techniques to engage students actively in the learning process
- **Guiding Students' Critical Thinking:** Instructors should be aware of students' initial resistance and guide them through the process to create a learning environment where students feel comfortable thinking through an answer rather than simply having an answer (p. 94-96).

The more instructors understand the process of critical thinking and deep thought, the easier it is to bring in rigor, without increasing needless difficulty. Instructors must foster more thought-provoking learning. According to Behar-Horenstein, & Niu, (2011) “apparent from [past] studies is that improvements in students' critical thinking are more likely to occur where the teaching of these skills is explicit rather than implicit (p. 36). Instructors must be purposeful in their own teaching and bring in explicit learning.

Step 1

Be the critical thinker you want in your students. As Snyder and Snyder (2008), model the behavior you want to see in your students. You can do this by showing them what you want them to do. Ask critical thinking questions, and model how you want these questions answered. You need to guide the students to understand how to question what they already know and believe. Teach how to critically think, by showing what it means to actually critically think about the topic.

Step 2

Create an explicit teaching environment. One way to create an explicit environment is the use of experiential learning in your course. As Behar-Horenstein and Niu (2011) state, create an atmosphere that allows students to actively engage in their own learning process. Use active learning teaching styles to make the students immersed in the learning process. Tate and Keeton (1978) offered up a strong definition of experiential learning “as a particular form of learning from life experiences, often contrasted it with lecture and classroom learning” (p. 37).

Kolb (2014) stated that the use of experiential learning fosters strong learning outcomes in the classroom. By using the students’ own experiences, it is possible to foster a better understanding of course content. This allows students to comprehend the new knowledge in a way that is supported by what the student already knows.

Step 3

Do not allow the total outcome of grades in the course dictate how you teach. Students have long sought a good grade over learning the course content. According to Gaultney and Cann (2001), “students in [their study] sample wanted success (65%) as the outcome [more] than wanted learning (35%)” (p. 86). We teach to pass knowledge, information, skills, and concepts to students, and a subjective grade has been shown to not entirely capture if that goal has been accomplished. A grade is not always the mark of student comprehension.

Even in difficult courses where low grades are common, instructors could create ways to communicate their expectations. Ideas like showing a past grade distribution help show students what is normal. If students find a course difficult, prepare students for what they will encounter. According to Ansborg (2001), “instructors could invite students who did well in the course

during previous semesters to make a class presentation in which they discuss strategies for success with new student” (p. 10).

Some courses are just difficult for students by design, and if that is a solid and academically sound design, there is often low grade averages. If this is true, all accounts should be made to help students understand the concepts. According to Barclay (2012), “any research done to help students understand concepts at a higher level could be beneficial to the fields of Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Engineering, and Education” (p. 95) and should be sought out to allow students to learn. Our position as instructors is to educate students. We are not just gate guards posting grades.

Limitations

A low grade distribution does not always imply that there is academic rigor or more learning is taking place. Just as a high grade distribution does not always imply that there is no rigor or learning taking place. Our intention was to provide reasons for instructors to help foster critical thinking, deep thinking in their course versus just adding needless hard work. There are plenty of studies and research that show the benefits of learning by employing what we have stated, however this paper has been limited by what has already been studied and by what has not been discovered. We did not conduct primary data collecting to provided conclusive findings, however through secondary data collection we found plenty to support our thoughts.

Conclusion

It is only through very careful thought and preparation that instructors can control the rigor in their courses by explicitly adding in critical thinking and deep thought processes. Students learn best when they are pushed beyond what they already know and understand.

However, it is important to differentiate between increased difficulty and increased rigor. Our thoughts in this paper are beyond just adding in difficult concepts and ideas that force students' grades to suffer for the sake of bringing down the grade curve. There has been plenty of research to show that rigor comes from thought provoking questions, instructors modeling critical thinking behavior, guiding students to think beyond what they understand, and putting in place very explicit learning projects. We believe that teaching students to think is far more important than forcing students to struggle.

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