

## **Best Practices:** *Teaching in Summer Session*

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### **Introduction**

The topic is one that has long been of interest to those involved in summer session because of efforts to ensure the quality of academic programs taught in compressed formats. While the literature on the topic of teaching and learning using compressed formats is not extensive, most of what has been reported supports the notion that the quality of the learning experience is comparable to when the same subject matter is taught in a longer format, particularly when the instructional quality is high. This study attempts to provide more detailed information about how faculty, known for high quality instruction, approach teaching in a compressed or intensive format, identify how these teaching strategies and approaches may differ from those used in full-length sessions, and propose best practices for teaching in summer session. Please note, *compressed* and *intensive* are used synonymously in this paper to describe courses taught in a comparatively shorter time period in summer session. This article is an abridged version of the research paper.

### **Teaching Courses in Compressed Formats**

The literature on teaching and learning in compressed formats is limited. Regardless, several researchers have commented on what makes for effective teaching in compressed formats. In her review of the literature related to the use of intensive courses in higher education, Daniel (2000) included a section on teaching practices in which she concluded that intensive courses stimulated discussion and fostered creative teaching. Specifically, she noted that successful intensive courses are well planned with organized and structured activities, utilize a multitude of teaching strategies, and focus on learning outcomes and careful student assessment. Lee and Mroczka (2002) determined from their review of the literature that time per se may be relatively unimportant if instructors deal effectively with the learning environment. In particular, they proposed instructors set clear learning outcomes, recognize individual learning differences, create positive classroom environments, consider using short, frequent assignments, and provide regular feedback and support to students. Building on her earlier work, Scott (2003) reported on her research findings, and those of others, concluding that there are benefits of intensive courses such as more focused learning, more collegial classroom relationships, more in-depth discussions, and stronger academic performance when certain instructional and classroom attributes are present. These attributes include instructor enthusiasm, active classroom interaction, good course organization, and relaxed learning environments. The attributes uncovered by Scott and others parallel the principles of good practice for undergraduate education developed by Chickering and Gamson (1998), which apply in a variety of settings in higher education. Their seven principles include encouraging contact between students and faculty, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, encouraging active learning, giving prompt feedback, emphasizing time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning.

In several articles published in *Summer Academe*, Peca (1996-97), Digregorio (1996-97), and Crowe, Hyun, and Kretovics (2005) analyzed their own experiences when teaching courses in intensive formats. All concluded that the experience was positive, but required adjustments to their teaching approaches and methods. Peca presented an account of a teaching experience in which she adapted a 16-week semester-length graduate course to a four weekend format. She did a number of things to fit the intensive format, including required pre-reading of the text, more frequent testing, rescheduling of tests to better utilize available study time, and lengthening the due date of a research paper.

Peca concluded that she got to know her students better, and student meetings, normally scheduled in the semester, happened naturally and spontaneously in the intensive format. Digregorio, in an article that discussed the non-classroom interactions between students and faculty, raised an interesting consideration about teaching in summer session. She indicated that in the literature student development and performance was linked to the quality of student-faculty interaction. She suggested that summer session may be the best time to foster this type of interaction in order to benefit students not only in summer session, but throughout the year. Her claim in this regard was that summer session, with typically smaller classes, a more relaxed setting, and closer classroom relationships, is an ideal time for faculty to begin to create opportunities for (and reduce the barriers to) interaction with their students. Crowe, Hyun, and Kretovics discussed their experiences as new faculty members preparing to teach courses in summer session; specifically they examined teaching methodology, student assignments and assessment, and academic rigor. They determined that faculty need to consider changes to teaching methods and student assessment, but elements that define academic rigor (course content, learning goals) should remain unchanged. They suggested that careful consideration be given to the time required for students to complete assignments and reading requirements, and to assimilate content. In particular, they emphasized the need to modify assignments in compressed courses, and to consult with experienced colleagues about teaching in summer session. All three faculty members had positive experiences teaching in summer session, in particular noting that it was easier to establish rapport with students, and to engage in teaching in a more focused way because there was little interference of extracurricular events, such as committee meetings.

On a related issue, Swenson (2003) focused on learning outcomes as a measure of learning quality in accelerated (intensive) and traditional-format courses. He suggested that the goal of a teacher and those responsible for creating effective learning environments is to create the conditions under which the greatest amount of learning can take place by the greatest number of learners (p.86). In his view, at the end of a learning situation (course) one must be able to answer two key questions: do learners know what they should know? can learners do what they should be able to do? By asking these questions, a potential shift happens in thinking from teaching to learning, which, in turn, provides a basis for a change in the way one plans to teach a course. Thinking in terms of managing learning versus transmitting information, opens up possibilities for planning courses differently regardless of the format. This

outcome-based approach potentially creates opportunities to plan more effectively to teach in compressed formats because, rather than simply trying to fit the semester-length content into a more compressed format, instructors can focus on what needs to be learned and plan accordingly.

### ***Best Practice—What Is It?***

Benchmarking is a process designed to improve organizational performance by identifying outstanding (best) practices used by others and adopting them in one's own practice (Mancuso 2001). Best practices are practices that have been shown to have good results, have been selected using a systematic process, and have been judged as exemplary. Once identified, best practices can be adopted to improve performance. The benchmarking process begins by identifying critical areas of practice, then determining best practices in each of these areas. In other words, the process involves identifying best practices of individuals or institutions and examining how they do what they do. Often the easiest part of the process is determining best practices, while the more difficult part is implementing these practices in another organization. In order for implementation to happen, it is important to take into account resistance to change, identify performance gaps, and develop a process to integrate new practices into the organization (Smith 1997).

Overall, the literature suggests that instructional strategies and approaches affect the quality of learning in compressed (summer session) courses. Using a qualitative approach, this study builds on these ideas in an effort to develop best practices for teaching in summer session.

## **Methodology**

### ***Instructor Sample***

Initially, a pool of eighty (80) high performing summer session instructors (in the rank of professor or lecturer) from a university in the University of California system was selected. Individuals selected had to have taught undergraduate courses in two or more summer session (in the past 5 years), and have a reputation as an excellent teacher. As well, instructors had to have taught in a fall, winter or spring, full-length session at least once in the last five years. Twenty-seven (27) instructors agreed to be interviewed about their strategies and approaches for teaching in summer session.

### ***Interview Schedule***

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from instructors about the strategies and approaches they used when teaching courses in summer session. The interviews were approximately 60-90 minutes in length, and were divided into questions related to overall impressions and assumptions about teaching in summer session, course preparation, course delivery, learning environment and students, student assessment (assignments, examinations), and course quality. Instructors were also asked to identify how teaching in summer session differed from teaching in full-length semesters, and to comment on issues and concerns related to teaching in compressed formats.

### ***Relevance of Context***

The study design did not attempt to control for effects of context but, based on comments from faculty, a complex of contextual factors appears to influence teaching in summer session, including class size (typically smaller), degree of compression (greater frequency of class meetings, longer classes), subject/discipline, and number of courses an instructor is teaching and/or students are taking. Generally, classes are smaller in summer session, which increases the opportunity for interaction between teacher and students, and between students, which is seen as positive. In addition to smaller class sizes, the degree of compression affects the frequency and length of class meetings, which requires instructors to rethink how to teach the course. Different disciplines, but more evidently different courses within a discipline, appear to be influenced differently by teaching in a compressed format. For example, one instructor indicated that he chose shorter novels to teach in a summer session course because longer novels would force students to cram and skim versus carefully reading. The same instructor indicated that certain courses, such as 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century British fiction, are not suited to be taught in a compressed format because the novels were too long to be read in the shorter term. Finally, instructors commented that the ability to teach in summer session was affected by the number of courses they taught. They stated quite simply that the more courses they were teaching, the greater the workload and related pressures and stressors. Similarly, when students were taking a number of courses at one time, instructors felt expectations for workload and performance were compromised.

## **Best Practices for Teaching in Summer Session**

The goal of a teacher or administrator with responsibility for planning quality learning experiences is to create conditions where the greatest amount of learning can take place for the greatest number of learners (Swenson, 2003). Identifying and using best practices for teaching in compressed formats will help increase the likelihood that such a goal will be achieved. What do successful summer session faculty do to ensure quality of students' learning experience? What can we learn from them? What is best practice?

Based on the analysis of interviews with successful instructors, suggested best practices are outlined that can be adopted to improve teaching performance and the quality of the learning experience in courses taught in summer session.

### ***Restructure Courses***

High performing instructors considered re-structuring the course as a key element in preparing to teach in a compressed format. Restructuring requires instructors to re-organize/redesign the course content and processes into the different format. This may require prioritizing content, whereby some material is given more emphasis than others, or deferring or eliminating select content altogether. While courses taught in compressed formats typically have the same number of contact hours or amount of class time, the courses are taught at a faster pace (longer and more frequent class meetings over a shorter term). This results in a need to think about how to set up the course content to fit the compressed schedule. Best practice suggests that instructors consider the basis on which to determine the fit of course content. One suggestion is to focus on outcomes versus content delivery (what students need to know versus what content needs to be covered). For example, the need-to-know determination may be based on requirements of advanced courses (majors) in the discipline, curriculum standards, or requirements of professional practice. An outcome-based approach helps outline the "must" versus "should" components of a course. At first, instructors may feel uncomfortable with the approach because it requires sacrificing some content in order to focus on key course components.

When re-designing courses to teach in a compressed format, it is recommended that complex and important topics are dealt with as early as possible in the course. This practice, echoed by several best-practice instructors, connects to decisions about "must" versus "should" inclusion of course content. Given other considerations like the sequencing

of topics, it makes sense to deal with “must” topics earlier in the course rather than at the end when time pressures tend to increase.

Course restructuring and adjusting for teaching in summer session fits with the notion of “focus” outlined in a workshop exercise developed by Virginia Lee (2002). She proposed that faculty teaching in compressed formats focus on what needs to be covered in the course. For example, she suggested that as a planning exercise instructors consider what they would do if they had to teach a course in only three hours (versus several weeks), specifically asking themselves what they would like students to know and be able to do as a result of the three hour “course.” This suggests that it is most important for instructors to focus on what students need to know and do as a result of taking the course, which fits with a learning outcome-based approach noted earlier.

### ***Reconfigure Assignments***

In order to fit the time compression of summer session courses, high performing instructors did a number of things to allow students to complete assignments more readily without compromising the integrity of the course. Best practices include deconstructing single longer assignments into frequent shorter assignments, scheduling the first assignment early in the course in order to have students start immediately, and requiring an assignment outline early in the course that is counted as part of the grade. The latter is most appropriate for larger assignments that may be due later in the course. As well as immersing students in course work earlier, early and more frequent assignments provide important feedback that encourages students to keep up with the course work.

As part of the redesign to a compressed format, best practice instructors suggested rescheduling assignments to fit the “rhythm” of the course by synchronizing assignments with lectures. In particular, attention should be given to scheduling longer assignments and more complex readings over longer breaks in the week. Lee (2002) suggested instructors develop a general evaluation scheme for the course based on the expected outcomes, and place assignments and exams appropriately in the course timeline. In some instances, best practice instructors felt it was prudent to reduce the number of assignments in order to allow students to complete the course requirements in the shorter time frame. The general view was that a reduction in the number or length of assignments did not jeopardize the academic integrity of the course or limit students’ ability to perform.

In addition to reconfiguring reading and written assignments, high performing instructors moved select activities from in-class, as was the

case during the full-length term, to outside of class time in summer session. For an example, students were required to view films on their own time versus being shown the film in class. This shift increased the available class time for other activities.

### ***Maintain Expectations and Standards***

High performing instructors were clear that expectations and standards should not be lowered in courses taught in compressed formats. In their view, redesigning a course, selectively determining reading requirements, and adjusting assignments and tests did not result in lowering standards and expectations. On the contrary, many exemplary instructors attributed these changes to creating a better learning experience for students in courses taught in compressed formats.

### ***Organize and Plan for the Term***

Good organization is critical to any successful teaching experience, but it is particularly important when teaching in a compressed format. High performing instructors planned carefully, taking into consideration the compressed schedule. They attempted to anticipate requirements and contingencies for the course. This included developing a longer planning horizon for courses taught in compressed formats. In other words, a teaching plan should be developed for the entire course, including scheduling opportunities for instructor-student interaction.

Once a plan was developed, successful instructors checked their pace regularly against the course plan (value of planning the entire course). As well, instructors checked with students about the pace of the course. One instructor used the analogy of Goldie Locks and the Three Bears to describe checking with students about pace, which he did frequently by simply asking them if the pace was too slow, too fast, or just right. Best practice instructors indicated that coaching students on time management was key to helping students keep pace. While students may use time management techniques in full-length semesters, the lessons of time management need to be reviewed for students taking courses in compressed formats because the pace is much faster. This includes stressing the importance of beginning course work early, alerting students to the intensity and faster pace, and warning students not to overextend themselves with too many outside activities.

### ***Focus on Teaching***

As important as it is for students to focus their attention on the

course, so it is for instructors. High performing instructors talked about “clearing the decks” in order to be better focused on teaching. Some successful instructors suggested not teaching more than one course at a time during summer session. The significance of this warning will vary with experience, but, as is the case with students, teaching more than one course is more time consuming and energy draining, which can have a negative impact on the quality of the teaching/learning experience.

### ***Capitalize on Continuity, Smaller Classes, and Variety of Students***

The greater continuity of class meetings in summer session provided best practice instructors with an opportunity to focus on teaching with less interruption than in courses taught in a full-length term. This has advantages of creating a more seamless teaching/learning experience, and increasing time-on-task.

Typically, classes taught in summer session have comparatively fewer students. Smaller classes provide a better opportunity to recognize and respond to learner differences, and to engage students more fully in the course. According to Lee and Mroczka (2002), the notion of engagement includes setting a relaxed classroom environment and creating a sense of community through discussion, group work, guided reflection, and other activities that promote student interaction. This, in turn, helps learners to connect with course material, and with the instructor and fellow students. Best practice suggests that instructors schedule class time for discussion, group work, and student interaction to maximize student engagement.

Courses in summer session often attract a greater variety of students, including mature students, and visiting students from other universities and colleges, which provides a broader range of experiences and backgrounds than is typically the case in courses offered at other times during the year. Best practice suggests making every effort to take advantage of this situation to enrich the experience within the classroom for all students.

### ***Maximize Supports to Students***

Best practice instructors purposefully made themselves more available to students. Even though the classroom time may be equivalent, students do not have as much opportunity to connect with instructors in summer session as they do in a full-length term. Consequently, it is important for instructors to be more available to students by scheduling longer and more frequent office hours, and planning to arrive early and stay after class. These increased opportunities to meet with students to deal with

academic and other course related issues are important to student retention and successful performance in compressed-format courses.

High performing instructors provided reading and study guides to support student learning. Guides could include an outline of the textbook chapters and readings that students must read (primary importance) versus those that students should read (secondary importance), plus a list of discussion/reflection questions to help students focus on key issues. Another option is to arrange shared reading where not every student is responsible for all readings, but rather each student is assigned selected reading with a responsibility to report to the class.

Best practice instructors prepared handouts of lecture notes or slides for students. While note taking may be considered work that students should be doing, handouts of this type ensure students have the basic information contained in lectures and presentations, which is particularly important in the faster pace of compressed-format courses. As well, this practice gives instructors the opportunity to shift class time from information giving to facilitating more interaction and discussion with students.

#### ***Caution on Teaching in Compressed Formats***

Best practice instructors recommended not teaching a course for the first time in a compressed format. Without a good grasp of the content and the processes of teaching, it is difficult to make the necessary decisions to ensure success in a compressed format. This is particularly important for less experienced instructors; less experienced in teaching generally, and teaching in a compressed format specifically. On the other hand, best practice instructors with a good deal of teaching experience, both in the full-length term and compressed formats, often used summer session to develop and teach new courses because summer session was considered a good time to experiment.

#### **Concluding Comments**

Instructors were asked to construct a metaphor that was illustrative of their summer session teaching experience. One instructor used a coffee metaphor, “teaching in summer session is like drinking a cup of espresso versus drinking a cup of American coffee.” Another talked in terms of acting in a play, “teaching is like being in play, you are interacting with the audience [students], but it’s a different type of play in summer session, it’s more intense and I am on the stage for longer.” While a third offered an image of jars of soup, “the content of the course

is like a quart jar of soup; summer session requires that you fit the soup into a smaller jar, but as you attempt to get the soup into the smaller jar some spills over; you have to be okay with some broth spilling, letting some broth go, but you need to ensure that the hearty components of soup get into the smaller jar.”

These metaphors represent different perspectives on teaching in a compressed format; more concentrated, more intense, and more attention to course redesign. The best practices outlined in this paper focus on these features, and provide those teaching in summer session with suggestions on how to maximize the quality of instruction. Adopting best practices, those practices judged exemplary, can help to improve teaching performance and, in turn, the quality of the learning experience.

Implementing best practice requires taking into account resistance to change, identifying performance gaps, and developing a process to integrate new practices into teaching approaches. A common approach in universities and colleges is to incorporate new practices into faculty development programs in the form of workshops and seminars. These sessions could cover a range of topics that would help improve teaching in compressed-format courses, including time management, small group learning strategies, outcome-based learning, facilitating group discussion, effective questioning techniques, teaching with technology, and student assessment. Those responsible for developing and managing courses taught in summer session are encouraged to work with instructional development units on their campuses to introduce such workshops.

Overall, the findings confirm what other researchers had identified as important to achieving quality teaching in compressed formats. While almost all instructors in the study indicated that they approached teaching in summer session differently from teaching in the full-length term, it is evident from the findings that attention to planning, delivery, student assessment, and interaction with students is important to create a quality learning experience. These practices are important regardless of the format, but appear to be more critical when courses are delivered in a compressed format. Of particular note is the value of changing focus from delivery of content to a focus on learning outcomes in order to facilitate decision making about teaching in compressed formats. Clearly, an expansion of this study would be useful in examining a broader range of instructional experiences. Those responsible for creating effective learning environments in summer session are encouraged to consider such studies, including identifying best practices at their own institutions, which could add to the best practices identified in this study.

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