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This chapter outlines the best teaching strategies to use in intensive courses to achieve the best possible learning outcomes.

Attributes of High-Quality Intensive Courses

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Intensive courses have become a mainstay of higher education. Defined as semester- or quarter-equivalent classes offered in compressed, accelerated, or condensed formats, most colleges and universities now offer intensive classes alongside traditional semester-length classes. Although intensive courses have become quite common, many academic and administrative pundits condemn their use and claim that these formats sacrifice academic rigor and learning for student convenience and higher enrollments. Although they offer little research to support their claims, many colleges and universities continue to schedule classes based on assumptions and tradition rather than solid empirical evidence.

Recent research, however, suggests that intensive course formats can be effective alternatives to traditional formats. Scott and Conrad's review (1992) of the intensive course research and studies published since their review (Caskey, 1994; Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999) indicate that intensive courses yield equivalent, and sometimes superior, learning outcomes when compared to matched traditional-length courses. Moreover, under some conditions, intensive courses can lead to a more rewarding learning experience for students than traditionally scheduled classes (Scott and Conrad, 1992; Scott, 1995, 1996).

This chapter explores how students experience intensive courses differently than they do traditional scheduling formats and the factors that contribute to high-quality intensive course experiences. These insights emanate from a qualitative study (Scott, 1994) that compared two matched sets of college classes: an intensive and a semester-length English and marketing class. Each set of classes was taught by the same instructor and

covered the same material; the only differences were the scheduled formats. The study incorporated participant observation, focused in-depth interviews, and videotaped class session analysis to examine students' experiences and behavior in these classes. The insights resulting from the study help us to understand how to structure intensive courses to maximize their strengths and students' learning.

Attributes of High-Quality Learning Experiences

Based on student interviews and classroom observations, qualitative analysis suggests that students experience intensive classes differently than they do traditional-length courses, but the quality of the experience depends on the presence or absence of certain attributes, which can be grouped into four major categories: instructor characteristics, teaching methods, classroom environment, and evaluation methods. When these attributes are present, students prefer intensive over traditional-length classes for reasons that will be discussed. When these attributes are absent, most students said intensive courses become boring, painful experiences.

Instructor Characteristics. Students consistently indicated that the instructor was the most essential component to a high-quality intensive course learning experience. They wanted instructors to display certain characteristics.

Enthusiasm. Students relished intensive course instructors who exhibited enthusiasm, even passion, for the subject and for teaching. Students mentioned that instructor enthusiasm was infectious and motivated them to commit more energy to learning; it also made the course seem more important and meaningful.

Knowledge, Experience, and Good Communication. Students appreciated intensive course instructors who demonstrate expertise on the subject through their knowledge and, most important, experience. Although instructors often possess the necessary knowledge, many students perceived instructors to lack meaningful experience. Students wanted instructors to "bring the subject to life" and explain the subject's relevance, which more likely occurred when the instructor had "lived" the subject. Moreover, instructors needed the communication skills to convey that expertise in an understandable and interesting fashion. Students complained that too often, instructors talk above them and alienate them from the learning experience.

Willingness to Learn from and Consult with Students. Students wanted intensive course instructors who would step out of their expert role of authority in the classroom and become fellow learners. They admired instructors who "get in the dirt" and "grapple with the material" along with students, as well as instructors who are open-minded, respect students' opinions and experience, do not interject personal biases, and allow themselves to learn from students. For example, when describing a favorite instructor, one student mentioned that the instructor "not only encouraged

students' ideas" but would jot down these ideas and use them in other classes. Similarly, students encouraged instructors to consult with them on course-related issues such as the course outline, course expectations, assignments, and course content. Allowing input gave students a sense of control in intensive courses and increased their sense of ownership.

Student Orientation. Instructors can strengthen students' learning experiences in intensive courses by caring about and relating to each student in a class. Students believed that their attitudes about learning improved if instructors "showed they cared" and emphasized the importance of student learning to class success. According to the students interviewed, too many instructors viewed the student-teacher relationship as superfluous, which made students feel insignificant and unimportant.

Teaching Methods. In addition to certain instructor characteristics, students wanted instructors to use what they considered to be effective teaching strategies. Generally, students urged instructors to demonstrate classroom creativity by incorporating a variety of teaching methods to maintain student motivation and interest. Without creativity and variety, students indicated that intensive courses easily become monotonous. Specifically, students highly recommended using active learning methods and emphasizing depth over breadth of learning to enhance the overall experience.

Active Learning. Students unanimously identified active learning as essential to intensive courses. As one student noted, "I don't think the pure lecture with five minutes of questions at the end of class is going to work in the intensive format." Instead, students wanted to engage the material actively.

Learning research supports students' desire for active learning. Learning depends on the degree to which students build meaningful connections between new information and their prior knowledge and experiences. As Wittrock (1987) notes, students do not come to the classroom as blank slates. They arrive with a plethora of knowledge and experiences that support their personal understandings of life and the world around them. To learn successfully, students "must generate connections between the information [they] . . . are trying to learn and the knowledge already organized in [their] . . . memory" (Weinstein and Meyer, 1991, p. 16). The more connections students generate, the more meaningful the connections are to them. And the more active the learner is in building these connections, the greater is the likelihood that students will remember and be able to access new information. Students recommended several ways to introduce active learning in the classroom.

Classroom Interaction and Discussion. Students advised instructors to promote classroom interaction primarily through small and large group discussions. According to students, interaction augmented their interest in the subject and facilitated learning by allowing them to verbalize their opinions or understanding of the subject.

Research supports the use of discussion as a classroom strategy. McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, and Smith (1987) reviewed the teaching and learning literature and concluded, "In those experiments involving measures of retention of information after the end of a course, measures of transfer of knowledge to new situations, or measures of problem solving, thinking, attitude change, or motivation for further learning, the results tend to show differences favoring discussion methods over lecture" (p. 81).

Experiential and Applied Learning. Students advised intensive course instructors to avoid lectures when possible. As one student stated, "I know a lot of classes where students are lectured at, and I don't think that's a very good idea . . . simply because I don't think students' brains are to be poured full of information." Instead, students wanted to experience the material and recommended that instructors incorporate experiential teaching methods such as problem solving, role playing, simulation exercises, field trips, and skill-training practice into the class. Moreover, they wanted to apply the material in addition to experiencing it. For example, many students voiced the desire to personalize the material by applying it to their own lives. Said one student, "You get so much information that you memorize, you lose half of it, whereas the stuff you can remember is stuff that personally plays a part [in your life]."

Once again, research supports students' desire for experiential learning. Research on experiential teaching methods indicates that these approaches appear to optimize student learning better than more passive methods like lectures (Combs and Bourne, 1989; Whiteman and Nielsen, 1986). As McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, and Smith (1987) concluded, the use of "cases, simulations, and games involve getting, recalling, and using information to solve problems involves the kind of restructuring that should be likely to result in better retention, recall, and use of learning outside the classroom" (p. 89).

Although students preferred experiential and applied learning, they also desired a limited amount of lecture so they could benefit from the instructor's expertise. On these occasions, students advised instructors to infuse examples throughout the lecture, preferably from personal experience. They also recommended the use of demonstrations, thought-provoking questions, and controversial statements to enhance lectures. One student recalled a favorite instructor who once stated, "Today I'm going to try to prove to you that there's no difference between males and females." Controversial statements piqued students' interest and encouraged them to scrutinize the instructor's lecture.

Depth over Breadth: Course Organization. Students believed that organization was one of the most important factors to successful intensive courses. Because intensive courses progress so quickly, instructors need to be organized and present the material in an easy-to-follow manner. Without organization, intensive courses quickly become overwhelming and chaotic. Moreover, students recommended that instructors organize intensive

courses to emphasize depth over breadth of learning. Too often, students said, intensive course instructors try to cover too much material, which creates information overload. Students preferred to delve into fewer areas in more depth and concentrate on major concepts rather than learning large amounts of seemingly inconsequential information.

There may be some research to support students' request for depth over breadth of learning. Cognitive science research suggests that learning depends on the depth to which students process new information (Marton and Saljo, 1976). Deep processors—students who take the time to understand new material—recall information significantly better than do surface processors, who merely reproduce or memorize new material. Helping students process new information by emphasizing in-depth learning could result in stronger long-term retention of learned material.

Classroom Environment. In addition to certain instructor characteristics and teaching methods, students noted the importance of a good classroom environment to the success of intensive courses. Students identified classroom relationships, classroom atmosphere, class size, and the physical environment as the most important elements of the classroom environment.

Classroom Relationships. Students advised intensive course instructors to foster close student-student and student-teacher relationships to increase the level of trust and participation. One student recalled that she particularly enjoyed one intensive class because of the instructor, who made a sincere effort to build classroom relationships. As a result, she said, she “felt so at home” and “one-on-one with everyone” that it made the learning experience particularly meaningful to her.

Research indicates that learning, achievement, and retention seem to be socially rooted and that strong classroom relationships with both the instructor and fellow students facilitate student satisfaction and learning outcomes (Billson and Tiberius, 1991). With regard to student-teacher relationships, there is strong evidence that meaningful student-faculty connections positively and significantly contribute to student development, academic achievement, persistence, and educational aspirations in higher education (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). As Tiberius and Billson (1991) note in their review of the literature, “Students who are positively connected with their teachers are more likely to feel involved in their educational experience, to be committed to the institution, to have passing grades, and to persist to graduation” (p. 69). Similarly, strong peer relationships also increase student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Wulff, Nyquist, and Abbott's survey (1987) of eight hundred college students found that students identified other students as the second most important factor to their learning, after the instructor.

Atmosphere. Students noted that good intensive course learning experiences require a relaxed classroom atmosphere that encourages student participation. A relaxed atmosphere requires a class size of no more than ten to thirty students and a comfortable physical environment. Students also

recommended that instructors “joke around . . . with the class,” “chat with students before class,” and alter the traditional seating arrangement so students face one another when talking. Most important, the instructor must establish a supportive, nonjudgmental atmosphere. As one student stated, “I’ve always . . . been a passive learner. . . . I [would] like to be a really hard-hitting participant. In order to do that, I need a teacher who’s going to be able to interact [with me] . . . without criticism, without any negativity at all.”

Research indicates that learners respond to the entire sensory context in which learning occurs. Consequently, the learning environment is an important variable in the learning process (Caine and Caine, 1991). Although much of the research in this area has been conducted in primary and secondary classrooms, studies have consistently found a relationship between the classroom environment and various cognitive and affective outcomes. Haertel, Walberg, and Haertel’s meta-analysis (1981) of the relationship between classroom psychosocial environments and student outcomes concluded that students who perceived their classrooms as cohesive, comfortable, goal directed, organized, and less divisive achieved more than those who did not. The studies conducted in college classrooms reached similar conclusions (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991).

Evaluation. Students believed that intensive courses require different types of assignments and exams than semester-length classes do. With regard to assignments, students advised instructors to redesign assignments or give “smaller assignments” so they can be readily accomplished within a shorter time frame. Moreover, instructors should choose assignments carefully based on the course objectives and not overload the students with homework. According to those interviewed, students needed time to synthesize learning, and busywork interfered with this objective. Students preferred meaningful assignments that require them to apply or experience the material personally. Some other student recommendations included giving students options on assignments and incorporating more in-class group assignments.

With regard to exams, students rejected objective exams because they encourage cramming. Instead, they advised instructors to use essay exams, which allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge better; take-home exams, which gave them time to communicate what they have learned; or frequent quizzes. Moreover, some students recommended using forms of evaluation other than exams, such as written papers, hands-on projects, and class presentation.

The Consequences of High-Quality Attributes and Intensive Course Scheduling

Students reported that when most of these high-quality attributes were present, intensive courses became rewarding and sometimes powerful learning experiences for a variety of reasons.

Focused Learning. Students felt that successful intensive courses engendered focused, uninterrupted learning. Unlike semester-length classes that students take concurrently with three to four other classes, students often took only one or two intensive courses at a time. Consequently, they felt that under ideal conditions, they synthesized the material better since they could focus on a particular class, uninterrupted by other subjects. This exclusive attention allowed them to immerse themselves in the subject and develop a stronger relationship with the material. During the traditional semester, students had to divide their attention among five subjects.

One additional benefit of this focused learning was that students did not give short shrift to classes that they considered less important (for example, general studies courses). Many students remarked that during the semester, their courses competed for their attention, and they felt forced to prioritize subjects. The courses they viewed as less important often received little or none of their attention. Under intensive course schedules, they could give each course relatively equal attention.

Another benefit of focused learning is that students often experienced a greater sense of control over their schedule. They said that semester schedules were often chaotic and required them to juggle too many responsibilities simultaneously. Conversely, intensive formats permitted them to concentrate on one or two classes exclusively, which allowed them to manage their time better.

More In-Depth Discussions. When the high-quality attributes were present, students also preferred intensive courses because they tended to promote more classroom interactions and in-depth discussions than typical semester-length classes did. One student noted, “This may sound crazy, but I think I liked having three-hour [class sessions] . . . because I think you can really get into something without the class ending.” Moreover, students felt there was less downtime in intensive courses. One student said that in semester classes, “you spend fifteen minutes of class trying to get going” and “then you have to spend fifteen minutes trying to wrap up.” In intensive courses, students were less likely to hear, “We can’t get into this today because we don’t have enough time.”

Emphasis on Core Concepts. Students generally appreciated that intensive courses required instructors to eliminate what students considered “extraneous material” and stress the most important concepts. These modifications helped students concentrate on the most important material.

More Memorable Learning Experience. As a result of the factors detailed above, students often felt that intensive courses engendered a more memorable learning experience that affected them longer than traditional-length classes. As one student stated:

I think that a lot of the way that people learn and retain information is directly related to how intense the experience is while they’re learning it. If I have an experience that’s not particularly intense, that’s spread out over a

long period of time, at no point . . . will I have a lot of my mind into it. I really won't have a devotion to the subject or to the material. . . . I remember things that affect me intensely, and because this class for a period of six or eight weeks was a really big part of my life, and it was something that I was thinking about all the time, I think that will always occupy a space in my brain.

Classroom Relationships. Students enjoyed the more collegial relationships they formed in successful intensive courses. Because of their concentrated nature and the increased classroom interaction, intensive formats allowed students to form deeper classroom relationships, which resulted in a greater degree of comfort, camaraderie, and classroom community. One student commented on the closer relationship she formed with one of her intensive course instructors: “I think maybe seeing her every day and seeing that she had personal tragedies and traumas too, you know you probably wouldn't see if you were only going to class a couple days a week [was important]. It made her seem more human and more real.”

Classroom Atmosphere. Many students described successful intensive courses as more laid back and informal than semester-length classes even though the class progressed through the material faster. They appreciated instructors' willingness to deviate from traditional teaching practices and engage in dialogue more with students, which created a more relaxed classroom atmosphere and learning environment. One student noted, “When the barriers are brought down between students and between the professor, I think everyone works better and talks better and can be a little more open to ask questions or to bring up situations.”

Performance. Most important, students felt their academic performance improved in successful intensive courses compared to semester-length classes due to a number of factors:

- Because students typically took fewer courses in conjunction with intensive courses, they were able to direct their efforts more fully to the intensive course. Said one student, “You were constantly studying this stuff, and you knew that with the final only being three weeks away . . . you didn't forget it. . . . You didn't have to go back and re-learn it all.”

- Students maintained their stamina better in intensive courses compared to semester-length classes because of their short duration. Students likened the learning experience to a sprint versus a marathon.

- Because of their short duration and concentrated nature, students felt they retained information and synthesized concepts better compared to semester-length classes. According to this student, “You learned it all at once,” so “it's all up there and you can relate it.” As a result, students felt that concentrated learning experiences led to greater understanding of the material and more in-depth, creative thinking.

- Students did not procrastinate in their intensive courses as much as they did in their semester-length classes because of their short duration. As a result, they were often better prepared for class discussions and exams compared to their semester-length classes.

Conclusion

There are benefits of intensive courses and students' preference for concentrated learning formats when certain instructional and classroom attributes are present. Students repeatedly indicated that instructor enthusiasm and experience, active learning, classroom interaction, good course organization, student input, collegial classroom atmosphere, and a relaxed learning environment were essential to learning in intensive courses. This chapter also pointed to the supportive research that corroborates the effectiveness of many of the attributes students identified. When these attributes are present, students report that intensive classes allow for the following attributes:

- More concentrated, focused learning
- More collegial, comfortable classroom relationships
- More memorable experiences
- More in-depth discussion
- Less procrastination
- Stronger academic performances

When these attributes are missing, students report intensive courses to be tedious, painful experiences.

This study suggests the importance of using nontraditional instructional practices when teaching intensive courses, but I suspect that many intensive course instructors are not doing so. As Astin (1991) found in his last national survey of college faculty, more than 60 percent of university professors still lecture extensively in all or most of their courses. Lecture corresponds to the transmission model of teaching, which requires instructors to disseminate their “wisdom” to students as if they were empty receptacles (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991). Although additional research is needed, this study suggests that the expansion of nontraditional scheduling formats must coincide with adoption of alternative teaching practices that will maximize the strengths of these concentrated formats and student learning. Without adoption of these high-quality attributes, instructors may be diminishing student learning and motivation rather than enhancing them.

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