

It's Not About Hard or Easy Courses

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Now here's an argument I haven't heard before: Improving your instruction makes it easier for students to learn. If it's easier for them to learn, they won't work as hard in the course, and that means they could learn less. It's called offsetting behavior and we can't ask students about it directly because it would be disingenuous for them to admit to studying less when learning becomes easier.

Gee, I'm not sure exactly where to begin. We could start with what's making the course hard. As Stanley, Delmontagne, and Wood point out in the offsetting piece, students may be finding the course hard because the instruction isn't very good—not well organized, unclear explanations, content seemingly irrelevant, and poorly constructed test questions. Or, students may find the course challenging because the content isn't easy and the instructor has high standards.



No doubt, ineffective instruction makes the students work harder, but what are they working harder at? Is it learning or cleaning up the clutter so that learning can proceed? And what about the conditions for learning created by poor instruction? Frustrated, angry students are not kindly disposed to the content or the teacher. Poor teaching does not usually motivate more learning. I just can't quite wrap my head around the idea that poor teaching merits preserving because it makes students work harder. What's the more salient issue? Whether students are working hard or whether they are learning the content?

The automatic virtue associated with hard courses is something we don't explore as deeply as we should. I absolutely support courses with rigor and standards. I am not in favor of easy courses or easy A's. However, when it comes to hard courses, there is a point of diminishing returns. The *College Teaching* article referenced below provides just one example of what's well documented in the research. If students are convinced there's no way they're going to succeed in a course, the bulk of them stop trying, and that certainly affects what they learn in the course. Moreover, if the teacher has made a good faith effort to teach, the students have made a good faith effort to learn, and a majority of students are still failing or doing poorly, that's a hard course whose virtue should be questioned.

I'm also troubled by the motivation behind making courses hard. It isn't just (or even usually) about better learning experiences for students. No, it's about the reputation of the course and its instructor. Even if you teach at an R1 institution where instructional sins are often tolerated, the one to avoid is teaching a Mickey Mouse course. What's the definition of a hard course? It's one overflowing with dense, complicated content and one with high standards, meaning few students get A's. Is learning front and center in our thinking about hard courses? I don't think so. Learning is assumed, which means it isn't thought about much or at all.

Then there's the easy courses—the ones we worry about are those with fluffy content and far too many students getting A's. The ones we should be worried about are those where teachers are doing all the learning tasks for students. If teachers answer all the questions, solve the problems, provide the examples, do the previews and reviews, give students their notes and PowerPoint slides, and prepare the study guides, they're doing those things that develop the skills students need to master the material at those levels we associate with deep learning.

I really don't think hard or easy should be our default thinking mode when the issue is course quality. That leads us to dubious conclusions and directs our attention away from what matters most. What students need are not hard or easy courses, but course experiences that result in lots of learning—where they master the material, further develop

the sophisticated learning skills necessary for lifelong learning, and where the encounter leaves them breathless to learn more.

References: Stanley, L. E., Delmontagne, E. M., and Wood, W. C., (2016). Offsetting behavior and adaptation: How student respond to hard professors. *Journal of Education for Business*, 91 (2), 90-94.

Martin, J. H., Hands, K. B., Lancaster, S. M., Tryteen, D. A., and Murphy, T. J., (2008). Hard but not too hard: Challenging courses and engineering students." *College Teaching* 56 (2), 107-113.