

The Hidden Costs of Active Learning

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Viewpoint

Flipped and active learning truly are a better way for students to learn, but they also may be a fast track to instructor burnout.

- By Thomas Mennella
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I am an active learning college instructor and I'm tired. I don't mean end-of-the-semester and need-some-sleep tired. I mean really, weary, bone-deep tired.

A perfect convergence occurred in my professional life approximately four years ago. First, my university decided to become an iPad institution. Starting that year, every incoming freshman received an iPad (and now, four years later, all students have them). As part of that initiative, my university did something incredibly smart and provided all instructors with extensive professional development for integrating this technology into the classroom. This PD was the best I've had in my 10-year career. Instead of focusing on the iPad, the sessions focused on active learning strategies geared at making learning student-centered and engaging. I remember thinking, "This stuff is great, but when would I ever have the time in class to do this?"

At the same time, I happened to hear about flipped learning, which had just bubbled up from K–12 to higher education. I instantly recognized that *this* was how I'd free up class time to achieve active learning in my courses. The very next semester, I piloted my first flipped course and the rest is history.

In the past four years, I've guest-blogged on flipped learning, published on the topic and I've presented my model for flipped college courses regionally and nationally. I end every publication and every talk with the catchphrase "I'll never teach another way again," and I mean it. Students learn more deeply, more effectively, and they integrate material much more through a flipped/active learning format than with more traditional, lecture-based instruction. To teach in any other way, to me, seems almost unethical — especially given how much money today's college student spends on his/her education. How could I deliver an inferior product to my students when I know that flipped learning

is so much better?

That said, there are many days when I wish I'd never heard of flipped learning at all — times when I wish I actually *could* teach another way again.

All of my flipped courses follow a very similar format. Students watch the equivalent of two lectures' worth of material each week as online videos at home, and they submit very short reflections on each lecture (focusing on what they understood most and least from each lecture, and why). The first class meeting of each week is spent informally reviewing the topics that the majority of students reported to be most confusing, and the second day each week is spent on active learning exercises or activities. Each week ends with a take-home quiz to be turned in at the start of the next week. This is a total of four assignments per student, per week. And, as we all know, students take their work far more seriously when they know that it will be thoroughly read, assessed and graded by the instructor. So, I read each and every assignment, grade it and provide personalized feedback to each student. This semester, I had 86 students spread across four courses; a fairly typical teaching load at an institution like mine. Eighty-six students, each submitting four assignments a week — that's 344 assignments each week or 3,784 assignments this semester, not including my all-essay unit exams, papers and cumulative finals. And that's why I'm tired. Very soon, I will turn 39 years old and so I've got a lot of time left in my career. But, I'm honestly not sure for how much longer I can keep this up.

Higher education is currently in transition. This is as true pedagogically as it is in many other areas of our industry. Active learning strategies are being developed, explored and deployed throughout higher education, and — most times — this is being done successfully. Students in my courses now expect, if not demand, that the class be flipped. They recognize the power and effectiveness of active learning and have little patience for 'sage on the stage,' passive instruction. In addition, at my institution, I enjoy the support and encouragement of my supervisors, my colleagues and my students. And while no one is forcing me to teach this way, it is clear that many are glad that I am and many would be disappointed if I stopped.

The time has come for us to have a discussion about the hidden cost of active learning in higher education. Soon, gone will be the days of instructors arriving to a lecture hall, delivering a 75-minute speech and leaving. Gone will be the days of midterms and finals being the sole forms of assessing student learning. For me, these days have already passed, and good riddance. These are largely ineffective teaching and learning strategies. Today's college classroom is becoming dynamic, active and student-centered. Additionally, the learning never stops because the dialogue between student and instructor persists endlessly over the internet. Trust me when I say that this can be exhausting. With constant 'touch-points,' 'personalized learning opportunities' and the like, the notion of a college instructor having 12 contact hours per week that even remotely total 12 hours is beyond unreasonable.

We need to reevaluate how we measure, assign and compensate faculty teaching loads within an active learning framework. We need to recognize that instructors teaching in these innovative ways are doing more, and spending more hours, than their more traditional colleagues. And we must accept that a failure to recognize and remedy these 'new normals' risks burning out a generation of dedicated and passionate instructors. Flipped learning works and active learning works, but they're very challenging ways to teach. I still say I will never teach another way again ... I'm just not sure for how much longer that can be.

About the Author

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