

Trying Something New? Seven Things that Boost Success Rates

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So, the fall semester is about to begin and you've decided to try something new in one or more of your courses. Maybe it's a different quizzing strategy, a revised assignment, or a new group activity. Or perhaps you read about a note-taking technique or exam review strategy that you want to try. You want it to work—you want to make learning better for most students (hopefully better for everyone, but there's value in being realistic). Here are some things you can do to increase the chance of success when you roll out something new in your courses.

Plan for it carefully – Don't just up and do it because you think it sounds like a cool idea. Start a bit more objectively by exploring questions such as these: Which of your learning goals is it best equipped to accomplish? Should you be trying it in all of your courses, or does it fit better in certain ones? At what point in the course should it be implemented? What logistical decisions need to be made before you implement the activity? How will you assess its impact?



Modify, adapt, and alter – Don't plan to do it exactly the same way as the person you learned it from. The new approach needs to work with the kind of content you teach, the kind of students in your courses, and the kind of teaching you do. When it worked for someone else, those variables were different. You need to make the innovation your own, and I think there's justification for trusting your gut. What do you think needs to be changed? What strikes you as a reasonable way to change it? Think creatively and make this new approach something that you believe will make a difference for your students.

Talk about it – Changes have a better chance of making a positive difference if they aren't done in isolation.

Consult with a trusted colleague as you plan and make alterations. But even more importantly, involve students in discussions about the change. They are the ones who are going to experience it firsthand. It makes sense to talk about the new approach before they do it, while they're doing it, after they've done it, or at all those times. New approaches have been known to strike fear in students, to foment protests, and result in resistance. The best way to prevent that kind of negative response is to communicate openly. What motivated the change? What's the educational rationale on which it rests? What objectives are you hoping it will accomplish? Instructional change directly affects students; the chance for success improves significantly if you make them part of the process.

Implement confidently – Preparing, adapting, and communicating all build confidence, and teacher confidence contributes to successful implementation. Students take their cues from the teacher. If you look tentative and unconvinced, they'll start to feel unsure. Your confident commitment decreases their anxiety and helps them get more involved, and that, in turn, grows your confidence. You and the students are in this together. Implementing confidently doesn't mean you expect everything to go smoothly and work perfectly. When it doesn't, that's when confident leadership makes a huge difference. An "I know how we can make this work" attitude can keep things from going off the rails.

Forge for feedback – Aggressively seek feedback, and then devour it. One of the values of thinking about assessment before implementation is that you can develop a plan for collecting feedback. It's essential that you receive feedback from students, and the question to them is not whether they "liked" whatever you've had them do. You need to know the impact of this new policy, practice, activity, or assignment on their efforts to learn. What about it helped them learn, hindered their learning, or had no effect on their learning? Use that student input to confirm, deny, elaborate, or adjust your sense of how things went. You may have designed it, but they did it.

Try to fix it before you toss it – This is good advice even if student feedback confirms your sense that it didn't go well. Sometimes a few minor changes can make a big difference. As with most everything else in teaching, the second time through is better—whether it's a new course, new content, or a new approach. Here's another situation where student involvement benefits them and you. Students are usually quite articulate about what didn't work. They should be challenged to help you figure out what could make it more effective.

Finally, loop back to the beginning – Start planning what you'll do differently the next time you implement this approach.

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