
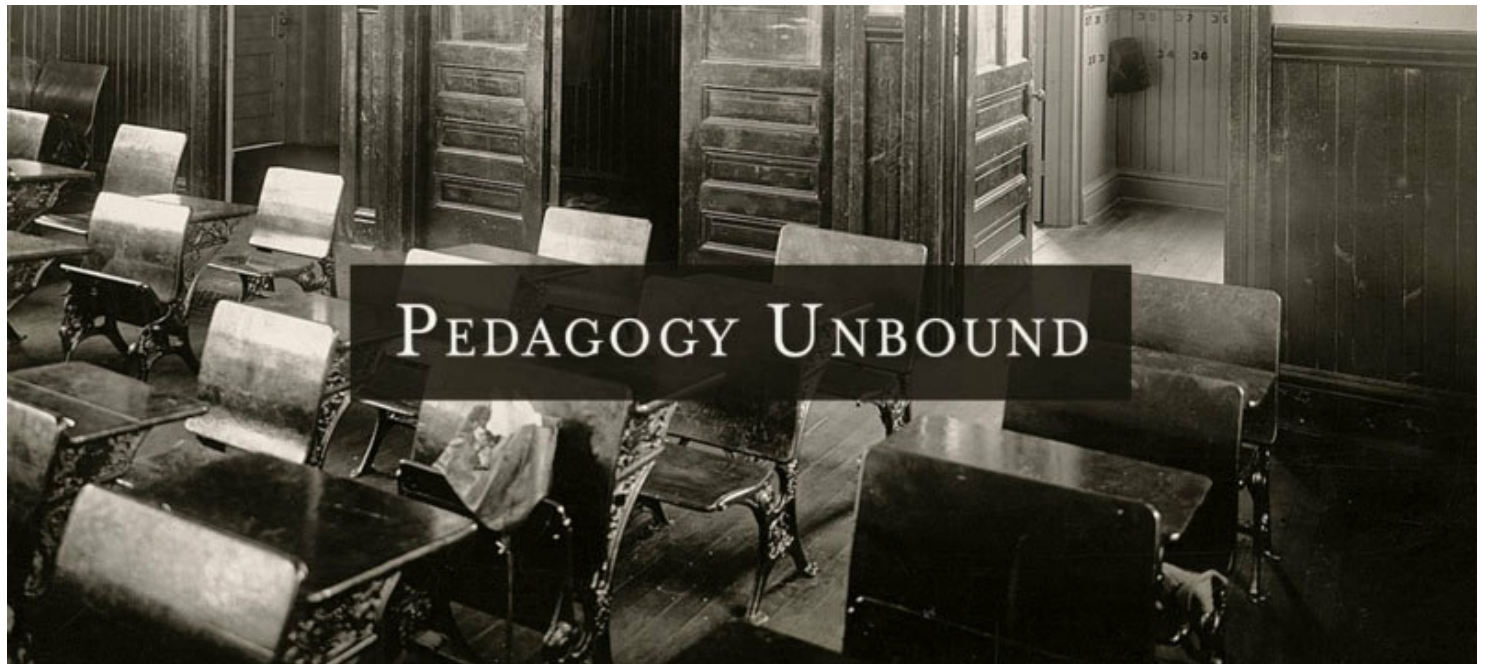


Same Lesson, Different Semester

 chroniclevitae.com/news/1705-same-lesson-different-semester



February 15, 2017

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I'll be the first to admit that I haven't been teaching at my best this semester. Oh, there have been some good classes. And I think I'm finally getting a handle on the one group of students who don't want to speak up in class. But in general it feels like I'm going through the motions a little bit, not fully reaching as many students as I have in the past, talking too much from the front of the room. I have a theory as to why this is happening.

This is my fourth semester at the University of Iowa teaching rhetoric to mostly first-year students. After years of adjuncting, it's great to be able to teach the same course again and again. I'm able to learn from my mistakes and improve semester to semester. Even better, prepping for class takes less and less time each semester. I [keep an archive of class activities](#) from previous semesters in [Scrivener](#), and I can quickly arrange a few of them to make up a whole class period. It's great.

But I worry sometimes that this newfound ease isn't a great thing for my teaching. Finding enough activities to fill a class period may be easy for me lately, but filling up a class period is not the same as teaching well. And even if those lesson plans are battle-tested and effective, teaching them cold — that is, without spending any time thinking about them before class — is a poor way to operate. It is undoubtedly a good thing to be able to prep for teaching more efficiently, but can I benefit from my previous experience without sleepwalking through my classes?

No doubt many readers struggle with the same challenge. Here are some of the ways I've been able to revitalize old course material. The goal here is to let your prior experience help you, not suffocate you.

First, get down to brass tacks. Review each class exercise and ask the crucial questions that should apply to everything we do in the classroom:

- What are the goals?
- What do you want the students to learn?
- How does this activity help them learn?
- Are there ways to more effectively achieve that learning?
- And why is it important that students learn this material?

Your initial reasoning for designing some particular exercise may now be lost to the sands of time. Re-evaluate it to make sure it's doing what you want it to be doing. Remember that your goals should not be to merely cover material, but for students to learn valuable information and skills. This sort of interrogation will almost inevitably lead you to revise and improve your material.

Even after considering those questions, you may want to teach the unit the same way you always have. That's OK. Just subjecting your approach to scrutiny will improve your teaching. You will operate in the classroom with a refreshed sense of purpose, a clear understanding of why you're doing what you're doing, and why it's important that the students go through the experience. And you'll still be spending less time on class prep than you would have starting from scratch.

Tailor your activities to the semester. Every group of students is different, and every semester is different. The undergrads you're teaching now have different strengths, weaknesses, and needs from the students you taught in the past. And the progression of the semester changes from year to year. How might you adjust an activity to these particular circumstances? Ask yourself how the exercise links up to what you taught last week or what you're planning for next week.

Maybe you've noticed, as I did last week, that students respond particularly well to questions that steer class discussion to connections between the reading and current events. That may be just the information you need to make an adjustment that helps other class activities succeed. Ask yourself:

- What have you learned about this semester's students so far?
- What do they need extra help with?
- How can you revise your old material so that it fits their needs, not just your own need to have some activity ready to go?

The goal of self-scrutiny is that you actually improve from semester to semester, instead of becoming fossilized.

We can also take our familiarity as an opportunity to innovate. The fact that you've taught this course before means you are comfortable enough to experiment. You have a roadmap to get from here to the end of the semester. So why not take a detour? This may be the perfect time to [give students more control](#) over class activities, to [find new ways of connecting course material](#) to their lives, or to [browse through other people's syllabi](#) in search of new ways to approach your subject.

I don't want to go back to the days of my first semester on the job, when teaching prep seemed to require more hours than I had to give. But I don't want to get lazy, either. Good teaching requires a kind of attention that isn't always easy to muster when you're as busy as most of us are.

How do you keep things fresh — and effective — when you've taught the same course again and again?

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