Courses That Are Hard, but Not Too Hard: Finding the Sweet Spot

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By Maryellen Weimer, PhD   11/9/2016

I have been doing some reading and thinking about hard courses. Courses need to be challenging, but when they become too hard, students stop trying and little learning results. So how do we find that sweet spot between hard and not too hard? More importantly, how do we create that sweet spot in our own courses through the decisions we make about content, assignments, and exams?

Finding that perfect balance is not particularly easy or straightforward. Course and instructor reputations are linked to rigor and high standards. Nobody wants to be known for teaching an easy course. Fine. Courses should have rigor and high standards, but how much and how high? There's a tacit assumption that rigor and standards can always go higher, as well as a concern that both have declined.

There's research on hard and easy courses that's relevant here, most of which gives students more credit than many faculty do. Students do not prefer easy courses. Consider the findings of a study based on interviews with students in several STEM fields. The interview questions were straightforward: "What has been your favorite (least favorite) class?" "What makes a class easy?" "Do you prefer easy classes or hard classes?" Student comments were placed in one of four categories: 1) easy courses students disliked; 2) easy courses they liked; 3) hard courses they liked; and 4) hard courses they disliked. "By far the majority of participant responses…fell into the category of hard classes that students liked" (p. 107). They used adjectives like "challenging" and "difficult" to describe these courses, and were more likely to offer positive than negative comments (70 percent to 30 percent).

However, "for each student there appeared to be a demarcation line…that professors could cross by making their courses too difficult" (p. 109). Once that line was crossed, opinions of the course and instructor quickly changed to

dislike. The too-difficult courses had grading systems students perceived as unfair, tests that were too hard, homework that was graded harshly, and feedback that was difficult to interpret.

Some of the student comments were revealing. When exam averages are very low, even when a student scores above that average, there's a feeling that he or she is not doing well in the course and not understanding the content. A tough fact needs to be faced here. If students have made a good faith effort to study for the exam (granted, not all do) and teachers have made a good faith effort to teach the content, yet most exam scores are still less than 50 percent, there's a problem.

So how do we find that productive place between hard and not too hard? For starters, we need to look for it purposefully, not arrive there by accident. And then, wherever we think we might be on that hard–easy continuum, we need to find out if that is, in fact, where the course resides.

The authors of the study recommend that we give students opportunities to work on content in class and then listen closely to their conversations. Are they working hard, experiencing some frustration, but finally figuring it out? How much effort are they expending?

We also need to ask our students. This can be done informally when they show up during office hours or for help sessions: "Tell me about your learning experiences in this course." "How many of them are positive?" "How challenging is this course?" "What's your biggest frustration in learning this material?" "How confident do you feel about learning this material?"

Feedback can also be solicited with a short series of questions attached to exams (sometimes called exam wrappers; see July 29, 2010, blog post): "Rate the overall difficulty of this exam." "Was it harder, easier, or just about what you expected?" "How long do you think you would have to study to get an A on a test like this?" "List any questions you thought were impossibly difficult." "Predict your exam score." Graded exams should be analyzed for the most frequently missed questions. How was that material covered in class and/or the text? Why was the question missed so often?

We should also talk with colleagues, informally sharing with those who teach the same course and more formally in departmental discussions of standards and rigor. Do we need to be more consistent across courses?

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

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