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The Missing Course: An Introduction to College Teaching for Graduate Instructors

Cover Page Footnote

We thank Jason Marshall, Kenneth Zia, and Maryann Schneider for their contributions to the ETE Explore Learning Circle, which greatly influenced the content of this review.

The Missing Course: An Introduction to College Teaching for Graduate Instructors

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Abstract

Book review of Gooblar, D. (2019). *The missing course: Everything they never taught you about college teaching*. Harvard University Press.

Keywords: college teaching, graduate instructor

Introduction

Dr. David Gooblar's book *The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You About College Teaching* is a crash course in becoming a more effective classroom instructor, covering broad teaching topics which make the book especially beneficial for novice instructors. Gooblar not only presents fundamental pedagogical theories but also includes extensive research support for those theories and actionable strategies to improve the course and instruction. The authors of the following book review participated in a multidisciplinary reading group for early career and graduate instructors where each chapter's content was analyzed in a group setting to discuss practical applications and feasibility of the techniques Gooblar puts forth. However, the text would be a beneficial standalone read for any instructor looking to improve their teaching.

The opening topic focused on the constructivist theory of learning, which was appropriate for Gooblar's broad, fundamental presentation of pedagogical practice. Constructivism focuses on students constructing their own knowledge while building upon previous learning and experience (Hein, 1991). In practice, constructivism means that in order to learn students

cannot be the focus of passive transmission of content, but must actively revise their existing knowledge, based on their experiences, with novel information (Narayan et al., 2013). So while disseminating content is an important part of any college course, the book separates that goal from the objective of students constructing their knowledge of that content. Gooblar compels his readers to use the theory of constructivism in a college course through three basic areas: active learning, appropriate assessment and student-focused instruction, and emphasizing process.

Active Learning

Active learning has become a buzzword in teaching, and with good reason. Gooblar advocates for a shift away from traditional lecture-centered courses to a more student-centered structure where students work with peers to co-construct knowledge. However, to convince students to step beyond passively receiving information, a partnership between student and instructor is required to challenge the student to become an active collaborator in their own learning. Gooblar recommends beginning each course with an explanation of the science supporting active learning in order to build the expectation of active participation (Gooblar, pg. 22). Instructors must motivate students to collaborate and take more responsibility for their learning and, while grades are a strong motivator, they are extrinsic motivators that are not conducive to long-term interest. Gooblar suggests ceding control of the course, which can serve as a powerful tool for ensuring student investment in their own learning. These practices create an interactive, constructivist-based classroom where both the instructor and the student are collaborating to revise the students' knowledge base and create a better understanding of concepts.

The literature supports Gooblar's claims, as one of the basic characteristics of constructivist learning environments includes that both authority and knowledge will be shared between teachers and students. Additionally, these environments focus on the pedagogical goals of encouraging student ownership and voice in their learning process (Olusegun, 2015). Research has shown that active learning does indeed benefit students' learning and achievement, thus benefitting the learners in the classroom (Freeman et al., 2014).

Gooblar's suggested strategies begin at the development of the syllabus, where leaving blank sections can allow students to help shape course content and assignments, allowing them to argue for the material they want to study (Gooblar, pg. 54). The syllabus can also be treated as a sales pitch, where the major interesting questions the course will cover and the connection to the students' lives are outlined. Research supports that using similar learner-centered principles in the syllabus can increase student motivation and student-instructor rapport

(Richmond et al., 2018). Gooblar's recommendations for ceding control continue throughout the course, including speaking less and allowing students to drive discussions, asking students to teach pieces of content to each other, and requiring participation with a reflection on the students' contributions in the course. The literature supports Gooblar's approach to collaborative ownership as a path to increased student motivation and learning as increased student ownership has been shown to enable lifelong learning (Pawson & Poskitt, 2019), increase student motivation (Mikalayeva, 2016), and increase overall active participation and student engagement (Bandura, 1997).

Many of the learning circle members are graduate instructors and did not feel that they had the power or autonomy to change the course syllabus, or cede control to students. However, the discussion on active learning focused on increasing participation and activities during class, which all members felt were important and achievable steps in the right direction. These small changes included embedding case studies, pre- and post-quizzes, hands-on activity, and discussion into any lecture period. Several instructors had great luck utilizing specific activities from *Hitting Pause: 65 Lecture breaks to refresh and reinforce learning* (Rice, 2018) to break up lectures to include more active participation. Many members of the group had struggled with increasing participation in online student discussions, where strategies from Gooblar would need to be altered from a face-to-face context.

Appropriate Assessment and Feedback

A second area that Gooblar emphasizes throughout the text is the evaluation and assessment process in a course. Gooblar discusses two types of assessment in his book: formative and summative assessment. Summative assessments are used to measure students' progress to determine if they have mastered the learning objectives for the course. Formative assessment allows the instructor to gauge where students are at in their learning and is then used to influence students' future performance. In many courses, instructors implement a summative assessment that provides students with a judgment on how they have grasped a concept. In a formative assessment, students will attempt to respond to an instructor's questions or complete tasks (Gooblar, pg.131). The instructor provides students with feedback by identifying areas for improvement and ensuring that the students understand where they have failed. The students are then allowed to make adjustments and make another attempt. The value of this approach is that learning occurs from repeated practice and information about failures. Gooblar discusses a variety of strategies to help instructors provide students with productive feedback. These strategies include: reviewing tests with students, going over the commonly missed questions and giving a follow-up quiz on those concepts, and incorporating

a two-stage exam where students first take the test individually, then immediately retake it in groups.

One of the biggest challenges, especially for new graduate instructors, with assessment feedback is that instructors want to provide detailed, specific feedback to students, but it takes time, which is often lacking (Henderson et al., 2019b). Another challenge with assessment feedback is it is often given to support the grade given by the instructor (Carless & Boud, 2018), and doesn't support students' agency in how to improve their work (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

Henderson et al. (2019a) conducted research that led them to identify 12 conditions that enable effective feedback. Four of these conditions relate to the design of feedback and are most relevant for Gooblar's suggestions to be effective. First, the feedback given to students needs to be usable and students need to know how to use the feedback given (Henderson et al., 2019a). At the beginning of a course, instructors need to teach students why feedback is given, how they will receive feedback in the course, and what is expected of them in regards to the feedback that has been provided. Second, feedback is given to meet the varied and different needs of students. Using Gooblar's suggestion of reviewing tests with students, especially if done individually, is a great way to provide feedback that addresses individual students' learning gaps. Third, feedback should come from not only the instructor but others (students, online communities, etc.) and in a variety of modes (text, audio recordings, in-person, etc.; Henderson et al., 2019a). This helps students have an active role in the feedback process by reaching out to others for feedback and evaluating how to implement the feedback received (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Lastly, the feedback should occur frequently and be aligned to the learning outcomes for the course (Henderson et al., 2019a).

Members of the learning circle had struggled with the best way to implement formative feedback using methods where the feedback from the instructor was not overly time intensive. Learning Management System tools that allow instructors to record audio or visual feedback were found to be valuable for giving in-depth feedback quickly. Other LMS-specific tools included Atomic Assessments and EdPuzzle to provide weekly formative assessments for students, and the group had found that low-stakes assignments, those with unlimited attempts, or even completely ungraded quizzes helped to encourage our students to focus on their learning rather than their grade. Rubrics were also discussed as a valuable tool to give specific feedback to students in a more time-sensitive manner. Perhaps most impactful to members of the learning circle was the discussion on the importance of reaching out to students who were failing the course, which resulted in multiple students being contacted and making additional progress in members' respective courses.

Emphasizing Process

The third area Gooblar focuses on is emphasizing process to students. “Focus on the process, not the outcome” is a common piece of advice given to learners of new skills that serve as a reminder to direct attention away from the result and toward the steps or techniques involved in order to learn information or acquire skills faster, easier, and with better results.

Learning largely occurs by watching others model behaviors or processes and, consequently, instructors need to model processes for their students to improve their success (Bandura et al., 1961). Gooblar suggests instructors start with modeling confidence, showing students they believe their course is designed to be an impactful learning experience that will benefit students’ lives (Gooblar, pg. 158). Next, instructors can model stupidity by finding opportunities to model gaps in their knowledge and admitting to mistakes they have made (Gooblar, pg. 160). Instructors can model to their students how to be comfortable when they don’t know the answer to a question by demonstrating their process of finding answers to difficult questions as they come up for students (Fleener, 2010). Likewise, looking for opportunities to discuss scholarly work during class will further model academic behavior, demonstrating the processes that have benefitted the instructor as an expert in the field (Glass, 2013). Using these opportunities to reveal thought processes will model scholarly behavior to students.

Gooblar also suggests that, in addition to teaching students the rules of the discipline, instructors teach the function and history of the rules so students can consider what the rule was intended to govern and make their own decisions regarding the rules. Once the rule is understood, Gooblar suggests making students break those rules because by “inviting students to write badly, or perform an experiment incorrectly, or botch an equation’s solution and then share their mistakes, we can get students to think about their processes of writing or performing experiments or solving equations. Once they start thinking about those processes, we can start helping them do them right” (Gooblar, pg. 176).

Members of the learning circle had a few strategies that mirrored Gooblar’s suggestions, including synchronously walking through the steps of a problem and demonstrating their own processes to students through thinking out loud as they solve a mathematical equation or write an essay. Additionally, members agreed to have an assignment in which students break the rules would shift students’ focus to the process and stimulate creativity. While the individual examples of how graduate instructors can use this concept differed by teaching discipline, the existing literature supports the importance of modeling central process to students as the act of ‘stupidity’ and outright failure is an integral part of the scientific process (Schwartz, 2008). The practice of teaching productive failure, where students are set up to fail by being asked to

solve challenging problems before receiving explicit instructions, has been one method of approaching this idea. Modeling productive failure for students involves showing students the method of approaching the problem, then asking students to do the same, and research has shown that this can improve student understanding overall (Chowrira et al., 2019). Overall, modeling the process of learning appears vital to improving skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving in our students (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Instructors modeling the processes they find most important can give their students skills they can take outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

Higher education saw a dramatic and sudden shift to online learning as the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world in 2020. While the authors found Gooblar's strategies helpful in a face-to-face classroom, they found his examples lacking in online learning contexts. Additionally, many of the suggestions provided are overwhelming and time-intensive to implement all at once. For example, many of the strategies to give students ownership of the course require changing the fundamental structure of the course, something that isn't necessarily feasible for a graduate instructor. Based on the experience of those present in the learning circle, novice instructors may find it easier to use strategies to improve student discussion and the syllabus. While it may be intimidating to implement active learning by completely shifting a course to a flipped learning structure, or by allowing students to decide on course topics, assignments, or grading, each suggestion could be implemented over time to slowly modify a course to apply these concepts and teaching strategies. Several authors found success in implementing a strategy or idea from the book. For example, one author created a video example for his students of the process they use to write a summary for a journal article. Several of the authors also implemented a peer review process where students were able to give and receive feedback on major assignments in the course.

The authors of this review highly recommend Gooblar's book *The Missing Course*. The book is a wealth of actionable suggestions made by Gooblar for both novice and experienced instructors to create a more collaborative learning environment in many different disciplines. The book is a wealth of practical information based on theory and embedded with actionable strategies to improve course instruction.

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