

On time: A response to time requirements for courses

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“Time is God’s way of making sure everything doesn’t happen at once.”
Anonymous

Inasmuch as time is the most important resource used in learning, it is interesting that few business schools are interested in how to most effectively use time. How much time do we require of students? Which leads to the questions: How much time do students spend on learning? And how can they most effectively use their time?

How much time should students spend learning?

When I was working with the director of an executive education program run by the Stockholm School of Economics in 1975, we asked all instructors to estimate the preparation time requirements for each task and to sum them. (They were not very obliging until we subtly informed them that this was part of their teaching contract for that year). When we summed across instructors, the amount of preparation time worked out to about 80 hours per week, as I remember. Then, of course, students would be in class many hours. In the past, since they actually believed that someone had rationally planned things, they initially stayed up long hours to do the tasks. Of course, they could not do it all, so the instructors would get upset at the students’ poor preparation. In a few weeks, students did not bother doing much preparation because they found that classes rumbled along without much effort on their part.

Suggested solution: Ask teachers to estimate time for each task and publish the time estimates in their course outlines. These estimates would be rough, primarily because it has been shown that some students learn much faster than others.

How much time do students spend on learning activities?

Many years ago, I would ask students to keep a time budget for a week. (This was in a marketing class and the idea was to see how people spend time - - as a way of assessing consumer needs.) One result was that students were surprised at how little time they spent on learning.

At Wharton, I have conducted a few small scale-surveys of undergraduate students on the first day of class, asking then how much time they spend on learning for all their courses (including classes, meetings, reading, analysis, and all). The responses have typically been less than 25 hours per week per student. (I have not done this for the MBA classes; however, the undergraduates perform at a higher level than the MBAs, given the same tasks.)

Suggested solution: I had used time contracts as an alternative basis for grading during most of the 1980s. (It is not really that strange; it is the way that I charge my clients as a consultant.)

Students had to keep a diary and they could only claim time if they were able to report specific techniques or concepts that they learned. Almost 90% of the students would choose this option and about 80% would successfully complete it. (Alan Tough gave me this idea and it had worked well for him for adult education.) The results in my Wharton classes were favorable as (compared with those in traditionally-run courses) students reported a much higher level of responsibility and many more behavioral changes (for details, see my paper "Learner Responsibility in Management Education" under Full-text Papers on "Education" at <http://jscottarmstrong.com>). At Wharton, the time-contract system made administrators (and some students) nervous, especially the part about keeping a learning diary. My then Department Chairman told me that I should not invite students to keep a learning diary, so I gave it up for about ten years. Last year, I again offered the time contract as an option, but only about 10% of my students selected it. Perhaps it is part of the new culture where students are "customers" who should be having fun, and where course work is seen as an infringement on their time. That said, I suspect that this system would work well at many schools.

How can students use time more effectively?

Various studies have shown that the presence of others inhibits learning (because it inhibits experimentation and reduces felt responsibility). Further reductions in learning occur if there is a group leader (i.e., a teacher). There are many empirical studies on this, such as Alan Tough's book *Intentional Changes*. I have provided a review of this book at <http://jscottarmstrong.com>, listed in full-text papers under "Implementing change."

Suggested solution: Make classes optional. Help students to set learning goals and to search for useful learning tasks.