I Spent How Many Hours in a Classroom?!

It’s been a long time since I’ve spent a full day sitting in a classroom, day after day, for an entire academic year. But a couple of recent experiences forced me to think about the types of learning environments we put our students in.

The first experience was in a week-long publishing course, featuring five days of lectures and workshops. It was the first time in many years that I’d sat in a lecture hall, but this time I had my laptop in front of me. Rather than trying to write down everything the lecturer was saying, I could follow along with slides I’d downloaded ahead of time and take notes as needed. I could also look up information about my lecturer and materials on the Internet instantaneously. In a way—although I’ll admit to checking emails and browsing the weather from time to time—I wondered if I was more engaged in this connected environment than when I was a dental student many years ago.

Then, I remember sitting in an auditorium for 200 (front row, right side for every lecture), taking copious notes from Kodachrome Slides and from what my professors were saying. As I scribbled, sore wrist and fingers dancing across the paper, I tried to keep up to avoid missing information. I even attempted to draw clinical pictures and radiographic images with arrows and annotations to record details. However, I could not really reflect or grapple with concepts. That evening or before exams, my red pen (for underlining or even double underlining important points) and my highlighter would go to work. As the evening wore on, the urge to highlight was driven less by what I thought was important and more by my need of highlighting for the sake of highlighting!

My other recent experience in a learning environment was following my high school senior son around for a full day of classes on parents’ day. Most classes were spent around tables in small groups. None of the students had devices in front of them. Math was much more about problem-solving than about memorization and getting the right answer. There was discussion as well as group work. The laboratory sessions were equally engaging. I was exhausted by the end of the day. Here was an environment in which students had to engage and be active. It was hard work! These students were accountable in a way that students in a lecture might never be.

How many hours do we spend in class? There is no real accounting of the total time we spend in classrooms from kindergarten through professional education. According to the Pew Research Center, U.S. primary schoolers average 790 hours of annual “total intended instructional time” (compared to 470 in Russia and 1,007 in Chile), while middle schoolers average 925 hours (compared to 741 in Sweden and 1,167 in Mexico).

As we think about our classroom environments, how might we use technology to enhance learning and better engage this generation of learners? There should be no shortage of research questions and projects that can be generated. In this month’s issue, three articles address these topics. Azab et al. examine the relationship between class attendance and performance on exams, including the effect of online resources. Arias et al. compare the outcomes of small-group learning and traditional lecture format on students skill acquisition, and Quick provides a model for “conversation salons” that allow for reflective practice.

We cannot predict the future, but visionaries are trying to explore the possibilities. An MIT dean recently left her academic post to “start a university without lectures or classrooms.” Maybe the result of these innovations is that future generations will not have to spend as many hours in the classroom.

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REFERENCES