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Teaching at the Speed of Light: Tips on Teaching an Intensive Semester

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Teaching at the Speed of Light:
Tips on Teaching an Intensive Semester

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews the intensive semester (short semester) in an information systems course. The intensive semester is compared with the traditional length semester. Past research in the intensive semester teaching approach is cited for advantages and disadvantages of the approach. The main finding in past research is that there is higher concentration and focused learning, better rapport resulting in a higher chance of in-depth discussion and active learning. The author uses his experience in an introductory IS course in both the intensive semester format and the traditional length semester to give tips that will help future instructors who will be teaching using the intensive semester format.

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1. BACKGROUND

Rational for an Intensive Semester

Educational institutions today are under more pressure to offer their students alternative options to the traditional length semester or quarter (Daniel, 2000; Scott, 2003). These courses were first developed due to time constraints and can be traced back over 100 years (Seamon, 2004). Because students are working full time and part time jobs, educational institutions are being pressured to offer other time bound options such as night time classes and intensive (shortened) semesters (Daniel, 2000).

The traditional length semester is around fifteen weeks long and there are often two semesters offered during a calendar year. For the purpose of this study the author will be talking about semesters but the same problems and tips can be used for intensive quarters at an institution that is on the typical ten-week quarter system. Intensive semesters are conducted at an accelerated pace and can be at twice the speed at half the time, or as fast as eight times the speed conducted over two weeks.

Typically intensive courses have been offered in the summer session, but as educational institutions expand their offerings, the author has seen examples where intensive courses being offered during the winter break, in conjunction with the regular academic semester, or in a short period before or after a summer session. In the past, summer school was thought to have been a penalty for not performing well during the regular academic year. But as students are dealing with other pressures such as balancing work, school, and life, these intensive classes can be an enticing proposition to get a few classes out of the way during a short period of time (Scott, 2003).

Are intensive courses worse or better than the traditional length course? While this is not the focus of the study, the results of past studies are mixed. "Although intensive courses have been studied relatively extensively, the literature suggests that no overwhelming support or condemnation of the format has emerged" (Seamon, 2004).

The intensive class can also be seen in information systems (IS) as well. This author has seen firsthand the offering of an intensive course in IS both as a student and as an instructor. The intensive course the author has taught and refers to during this paper is a three week intensive course that meets for two and a half hours a day every weekday during the three week period. The traditional length course being compared to the intensive three week course is a fifteen week course that meets for two and a half hours of instruction during each week for fifteen weeks. Both courses are the same standardized undergraduate level computer information systems course taught at an urban university in the southeastern United States. The intensive three week course is covering material in one day which is equivalent to the work for one week in the traditional length course. Both the three week intensive class as well as the traditional length course was a three unit class.

The author used WebCT Vista as an online tool to conduct communication outside of class. WebCT Vista is a tool that allows the distribution of material (class slides, notes), submission of assignments, communication (email or bulletin boards), and grading. The service is typically offered 24 hours a day seven days a week, except for a few down times where system maintenance must be performed.

The rest of the paper will be conducted as follows. Some advantages of an intensive semester course will be covered in section 2. Problems of an intensive semester course will be covered in section 3. Tips, loosely coupled with the problems identified in section 3 will be covered in section 4. The paper ends with the conclusion in section 5.

2. ADVANTAGES WITH AN INTENSIVE SEMSTER COURSE

Short Term Advantages

There have been advantages identified for the short term in an intensive course. During the intensive semester, students can make greater gains in the short term than students in the traditional length course. Students can also feel like they are in an environment that promotes a continuous learning experience in an intensive semester. Students in an intensive semester courses

have also been shown to do better at basic recall exams compared to their traditional length semester counterparts (Daniel, 2000; Scott, 1994, 2003; Seamon, 2004).

Another advantage is that since the intensive semester class meets so frequently, the instructor tends to build rapport with students quickly. The instructor has a much easier time remembering a face or name of a student when the instructor sees the student three days in a row as opposed to once a week for three weeks. This rapport occurs between the instructor and student and can also occur between students (Hinger, 2006; Katok, Katok, & Tabachnikov, 2002). "Concentrating classroom time in the intensive course enhances group cohesion, showing a significantly higher degree of group-building communication by peers in relation to group-building communication by the teacher than in the standard format course" (Hinger, 2006).

3. DISADVANTAGES WITH AN INTENSIVE SEMSTER COURSE

Long Term Disadvantages

There have been disadvantages in the longer term. Students who take a intensive semester have been shown to have less long term retention of information than students who took the traditional length semester (Daniel, 2000; Seamon, 2004). Students in intensive semester courses have also been shown to do worse at comprehensive exams compared to their traditional length semester counterparts (Daniel, 2000).

Academic Integrity

As academics, we are obligated to offer the best education for our students, regardless of the length of time it may take to conduct the instruction. We may see that the best way to deliver our instruction is in a traditional semester (Daniel, 2000; Hildreth & Sawyer, 2001) but sometimes we are not in control of the length of semester. We are also obligated to offer instruction in the way that our department sees fit and may have to do the best with the time we have (Daniel, 2000).

Accreditation Standards

Educational institutions are responsible to offer a course in an intensive format similar to the traditional length format. Educational

institutions are also obligated make sure that when offering intensive courses, the courses are indeed the academic equivalent to the traditional length course. When the intensive course is thought to be of lesser quality than a traditional length course, the educational institution can be in jeopardy with accreditation boards (Bollag, 2005).

Drop Date Approach

The drop date, which is commonly the last day that a student can drop a course without the penalty of receiving a grade for the course, is typically a temporal milestone for a class. Educational institutions have different policies on drop dates, and when they are placed temporally during the semester. The problem with intensive semester courses is that the drop date approaches much faster.

While the drop date is typically placed temporally at the same time for the intensive course as with the traditional length course, the drop date still approaches quicker in the intensive course. For example the course that the author taught, the drop date was placed right at the mid point of the semester. This midpoint was eight business days into the course, which was the end of the business day of the Wednesday of the second week of classes. This is the same for the traditional length semester as the drop date was given at the end of the eighth week of instruction. The problem for the intensive semester you don't have much time after instruction and the drop deadline. In a traditional length semester you typically have a few days to ponder your position in the class.

Typically the author gives feedback right before the drop date so that the students can get an accurate assessment of their academic standing in the class. With a traditional class this can be given during the eighth week of class. The feedback can be done typically by the Wednesday evening of the eighth week of class using some online teaching tool such as Blackboard or WebCT Vista. The availability of feedback on the Wednesday evening allows the student two days to ponder their decision. With an intensive course the author gives the feedback on the Wednesday of the second week of class and the student typically has a few hours to ponder their decision.

Increased Pressure on Students

The authors' institution has guidelines to students on the amount of study expected outside of the course for a typical X unit class. The typical study time outside of a course is 3 hours times X per week for an X unit class in the traditional length course. That is for example a three unit class requires nine (3 hours times 3 units equals 9) hours of outside study per week. When this is translated to the three week intensive course, the student is expected to work nine hours a day, on top of the two and a half hour instruction time. The total time load on a student for one three-unit course is eleven and a half hours (9 hours outside study and two and a half hours of course instruction) during a 24 hour period.

There were some instances when students claimed to be taking two or three, three-unit courses. Taking multiple intensive courses concurrently is heavily unadvisable as two courses correspond to 23 hours (11 ½ hours X 2 = 23 hours) of time load on a student during a 24 hour period and three courses correspond to 34 ½ hours (11 ½ hours X 3 = 34 ½ hours) of time load on a student during a 24 hour period.

Increased Pressure on Instructor

The instructor is also on the same ride as the student. During the intensive semester all material comes at a rate of one week of instruction in a traditional length semester in one day. Lecture preparation, grading assignments, test preparation, test administration, presentation of relevant materials, all have to be done at a faster pace.

The need for the syllabus to be tightly administered becomes a priority as the temporal pressures increase. Students typically want to know what material is going to be presented in the next couple of days, or want to hear about what assignments are due at the end of the week. You may be covering material that is for week two of the traditional length semester and be asked about an assignment that is due during week eight (or a month and a half out) during the traditional length semester.

Feedback for assignments and tests need to be conducted in a timely fashion. Due to the quickness of the class from day to day, fall behind on emails and grading becomes easy.

At one time during the authors' intensive semester, emails were arriving at a rate of one every five minutes. The arrival rate of emails required the instructor to keep up with responses to emails in a timely fashion.

4. TIPS

The tips of conducting an intensive semester class can be broken down into three categories: Tips that are inherent to the advantages of the intensive semester, tips that address the students' needs and tips that address the instructors' needs. Some student needs tips and instructor need tips are common to both targets.

A. Build on the Advantages of the Intensive Semester

Continuous Flow

The intensive semester can harbor a more continuous flow. The instructor can quickly refer to something that was discussed two days ago and the student should recall the material. This may not be the case with a traditional length semester as the same two days would be a recall of material covered from two weeks prior. This flow can allow you to streamline the material as well as getting into more in depth discussion on certain topics.

Classroom Rapport

The fact that rapport can build quickly between students means that you can allow more intense classroom discussion quicker. You may be able to harness this rapport and have students really get engrossed in classroom discussion (Hinger, 2006; Katok et al., 2002; Scott, 1994, 2003). There are more opportunities for active learning and in-depth discussion in an intensive semester format.

Student Focus on One Class

Typically students are taking only one class or fewer classes during the intensive semester than in a traditional length semester. Students tend to be more focused on the course. The focus can be harnessed as students tend to remember more material from day to day than in the traditional length course. Students do not lose the one course in a shuffle of courses which can happen during a traditional length semester where students take multiple courses. Students

also find that intensive semester courses are more memorable and tend to have a better experience than in a traditional length semester (Scott, 1994, 2003).

B. Increased Pressure on Students

Orientation of Intensive Semester

During the first day of class, it is advisable to talk to the students about their expected work outside of class. If your institution has a set of guidelines of how long a student is expected to study outside of the class, it is helpful to explain this in detail to the students. If there are students that are taking multiple classes, advise against this practice. The intensive semester is actually advantageous to the student when the student can dedicate and concentrate on one or a few classes (Scott, 1994).

Time Intense Nature of Computing Assignments

Assignments in an IS course tend to be more time intensive as a semester progresses. Computing assignments such as database development and computer programming are very lengthy. The computer intensive assignments are typically easier at the beginning of the semester, when assignments are designed for the students to acquaint themselves with the environment of the computer application. Often assignments later in the semester require the most time outside of class.

Use Weekends for Large Projects

The course the author taught required two group projects. The course was constructed so that weekends would be used for the two group projects. Each group project was assigned a few days before a weekend (Wednesday or Thursday) and was due after the weekend (Monday or Tuesday). This allowed students to be able to spend more time on the projects than if the projects were assigned and turned in during the week. The author believes that using the weekends for group projects was essential to the success of the students in these projects. When faced with large assignments or projects, an instructor is advised to create the course to use weekends for time for students to work on these assignments.

Academic Dishonesty

The increased pressure students feel can present more opportunities for student to be academically dishonest. Since IS courses relying heavily on computer generated files, the temptation of copying file is high. Even though the sample size is small, the author did find an increase in cases of academic dishonesty during the intensive semester course as compared to the traditional length semester.

C. Increased Pressure on Instructor

Accreditation Standards

When teaching an intensive semester course one must attain the syllabus for the corresponding traditional length semester. The instructor must make sure that all material is covered, assignments are similar, and tests are similar. There will be the temptation to lower the standards or cut corners in the material covered or assigned. In order to keep the courses consistent between the intensive and traditional length semester, the instructor must keep the course workload similar.

Syllabus Creation and Maintenance

The syllabus should be prepared carefully and distributed early if possible (Daniel, 2000). This allows students to see what material is covered and prepare themselves for the intensive semester. This may allow students to plan their personal life around the intensive semester (Scott, 2003). If any changes are made to the syllabus, announce them in class and post the updated version online as soon as possible.

Non Teaching Work

Try to avoid doing other work during the intensive semester. If at all possible avoid research and service activities can take away precious time from the instructor. In reality, if you are teaching a two and a half hour class during an intensive course, you only have about twelve hours of free time (given that you take out time for teaching 2 ½ hours, commute 1 ½ hour, sleep 7 hours, and meals 1 hour). Given that you only have twelve hours for preparation for the next class, taking two hours out of your twelve hours can seriously cut back on your time commitment for the course you are teaching.

Online Tools

The use of some online tools is essential in an IS course. Blackboard or WebCT Vista can be used for feedback, communication, assignment submission, distribution of material, and grading. If an instructor does not use such a teaching tool a website used for distribution of material and email for communication as well as submission of assignments may suffice. The latter approach is more time consuming and less desirable than a proven teaching tool.

Timely Feedback

Feedback is necessary to be given in a timely manner (Scott, 2003). Typically during the traditional length semester it is necessary to check emails at least twice a day. In an intensive semester the author recommends emails to be checked at least four times a day. Checking email regularly was easily done as the author checked email when waking up, right before leaving home for the office, before class, after class, right after arriving home, and right before turning in for the day. Checking email in the above mentioned habitual manner amounted to checking email at least six times. During times close to assignments being due, the author was often online checking email up until the due date and time. The author was online right before assignments due times and available for instant messaging. Surprisingly students did not clamor to talk to the author at this juncture. There were a few students that did use this method of communication.

Checking email should also be increased over the weekend. Given the recommendation to assign large project over the weekend, there were some emails that needed attention over the weekend. The author recommends at least checking email four times per day over the weekend as well. One tool that the author found useful was the bulletin board feature on Web CT Vista. The bulletin board was an electronic forum where any student in the class could post and read the posting. The bulletin board in conjunction with building student to student rapport on and offline resulted in students helping each other with logistical problems that came up during offline hours.

Grade Assignments Quickly

When grading, start grading of material right after it has been turned in. Grade tests right after class in your office. The author was able to turn tests (multiple choice tests) around in two hours. Students seemed to appreciated getting feedback on tests back quickly more so than getting feedback on assignments quickly.

Teachers Characteristics

Characteristics that are advantageous to teaching in the intensive semester include: Enthusiasm, Knowledge of material, Experience with material, and Willingness to learn from and consult students (Scott, 1994, 2003). These characteristics are typical of teaching in general and do not change when approached with an intensive semester approach.

Drop Date Approach

The approach to the drop date is a stressful time for both the student and the instructor. The instructor needs to give feedback to the students so that they may be able to make an informed decision to continue in the course or to drop the course. Continuously updating grading is essential, especially near the drop date. The course should also be set up so that a several forms of assessment of the student take place before the drop date. Multiple assessment of the student before the drop date gives the student and instructor a better picture of the student progress in the class. If possible a test would be advisable before the drop date so that the students can better assess their progress in the course.

5. CONCLUSION

The intensive semester approach to teaching is not going away soon. As more students come from non-traditional backgrounds, and other obligations such as life and work enter into the students' lives, educational institutions are going to continue to find alternative ways to offer courses. If you are assigned to an intensive semester course, keep in mind that all is not bad. There are some advantages such as focus and group cohesion. There are some disadvantages such as the time strain and loss of retention by the students in the long term. The tips given in this paper will hopefully allow future instructors to navigate such a course.

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