

In the Classroom 87

Improving Your Course by Eliminating Pinch Points

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Stan Skrabut: Thanks for taking the time to come and listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things. Perhaps, you are and you're still hanging out with me. I really appreciate it. In Western New York, where I'm hanging out right now, it is a rainy day, just a steady stream of rain. It's dark in my office. I have the windows open, so you may be hearing a little bit of rain in the background. I'm just enjoying it. It just feels like a good Sunday and I'm just enjoying it.

This week, I want to talk a little bit about how you can improve your course by getting rid of pinch points. Also, part of that is to touch on this idea of plus-one approach for making changes. I picked up this concept originally while reading Thomas Tobin and Kristen Behling's book, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone*. A wonderful book. You should get it if you don't have it. It's about universal design for learning, ways that we can improve our courses.

In that book, they specifically mention the concepts of pinch points and plus-one. I knew it was a concept that I needed to come back to, and here we are. I understood pinch points basically as bottlenecks, but I kind of liked this idea of pinch points. One way of improving your course is if you remove these barriers to learning. These barriers, they take all kinds of shapes, but one of them is this idea of a pinch point.

Now that I've mentioned it about 1,000 times, what is a pinch point? A pinch point is an area in your course where students struggle. That's it. It is where they are not picking up the concepts that you want them to pick up. They're not learning the content the way that you want them to learn it. They're struggling and they typically need help. The great thing about it is they're easy to identify if you just know what to look for.

For example, if your students stop you after class to ask clarifying questions, that's a pinch point. If they come to office hours and they're struggling with a concept, that's a pinch point. When you hand out your exams and your tests and you notice that a majority of your students are getting a certain question wrong, that is also a pinch point. It could be when they're writing papers or turning in projects that there's a certain concept they just don't get. You got it, that's a pinch point.

It's basically where your students are asking for different clarifications. All those are examples of pinch point. If you've taught your course many times, you know where those areas are that students struggle. Those are the areas that you need to shore up, you need to fix, you need to provide alternative explanations to help students better understand this material. That's the idea.

I think, back to my time in the Air Force, we had massive test banks, massive test banks and we had these quality control exams. When the airmen took these exams, there would be questions they would get wrong. We would track all these questions and those were areas where we provided additional guidance back to the airmen so they could get it right. It was important to their job that they knew what they were doing.

In some cases, it could be a life and death-type situation. Most of our classes are probably not life and death, but it is important that if you want students to learn your concepts, that you eradicate these pinch points. To do that, basically, you need to add something to your course that will help with the stumbling block for your students. If they don't understand a specific concept, maybe you have to go in and add more examples or rephrase it in a different way or provide an alternative piece of content so they can better understand this. This idea is called plus one-ing. Yes, plus-one. You add one more thing to your course to help students learn the material.

In many cases, this is just improving your content or supplementing your content. Your course may be text-heavy. What you want to do is add a multimedia component to it, or in other cases, it could be how you have your activity structured. There was an example in one of the websites and I put some examples in the show notes. I put an example where students were not providing a drawing, dealing with engineering, and instead, trying to solve the problem. The instructor split the activity into two phases, where phase one was to provide a drawing then phase two was to solve the equation.

This helped with learning, just to reinforce that idea of-- For a lot of cases in engineering, it's great to have a drawing and work off that drawing. The other way that you can improve it is maybe the sequencing of your content, that you're introducing something before you set foundational information in there. That could be a way that you can clarify a pinch point. Very often, though, you're just improving the content or adding additional pieces of content to add clarity.

This is, I want you to think about universal design for learning. When you're looking for strategies, keep UDL in mind. Like I said, if your course is text-heavy, you want to provide a multimedia alternative and this just provides choice for your students as they're going through the course. If they still don't get it, you provide another opportunity. You keep working on it until you get the content that you need so students are not struggling with that piece.

It may require you to create a job aid. Very often, we have these handouts. I'm thinking biology where you have a flower drawn on it and you have areas where students have to identify the different parts of the flower. That's a job aid. If students are not good at taking notes, maybe that you need to provide a handout where they could take better notes. Not all students are adept at taking notes and sometimes, they need that expert guidance. The fact that you are standing in front of the classroom, you are the expert. What are strategies that you would use if you were sitting in their place with the knowledge that you have and help guide them? That's what you're trying to do.

The nice thing about finding or working with pinch points is a lot of instructors, they know they need to revise their course. They often think that revision is this major task that you have to go through, but this doesn't have to be the case. By simply identifying pinch points and reducing those stumbling blocks in your course, you are making the course better. Here is where I would say the 80-20 rules apply. 80% of your problems or 80% of the issues that you're having can probably be tracked down to 20% of the total questions.

If you had all the questions that were being asked in your class and rank them based on the number of times they're being asked, the 20% of the questions are being asked by 80%. That's where you put your emphasis, is you start where the highest demand, and you start whittling away at those, and you start improving your course at those points and just keep working on those and working your way down. This will smooth out your course for you.

Other ways that you can look for pinch points, countless ways that you can do pinch points. One of the strategies that I use is, for all my assignments, my rubrics, my syllabi, everything, I create them in Google Docs. When I share them, I have lots of options. I can share with editing, I can share view-only, but there's one option that is you can share with comments.

This creates an opportunity for students to add comments where they're not clear on something. That strategy has worked out really well. When students add comments that something is not crystal clear, I can go back and improve the document based on their feedback. That's one way.

Another place to look is your in the course evaluations. Every once in a while, students will put something in there that is quite useful to improving your course, and you can go and use those, but you don't have to wait for that. You can also schedule, throughout your course, surveys to ask students what is working in the class and what can be improved. That is also an opportunity to solicit input and fix things that need to be fixed.

One strategy that's used a lot in different classes is having students submit a muddiest point submission. What this is, it's just a quick way. They take a scrap piece of paper, write one thing that is difficult or confusing, and turn that in. It takes only a few minutes to review all those, but you can identify where students are having trouble. You can then deal with that with the clarifying emails, setting up your instruction coming up, to make sure that you deal with that, or going back into your learning management system and enhancing that material.

If you do it right away, then this idea of revising your course is just an ongoing process that you keep making tweaks to it. Certainly, the other place to look is your exam and quizzes to see what questions that students are asking. Start with the ones that most of the students are getting wrong and shore up that material but look for providing alternative ways of adding clarification.

If students, like I said, if it's tech-savvy, then you will provide a multimedia alternative, or if it's already multimedia, maybe you need just to write these things out

a little more clearly. If you do this, you will continue to improve your course and your students will certainly do better in this and they will definitely appreciate it.

It goes a long way towards persistence and completion of your course because if students do not grasp foundational concepts, then it will hold them back for the whole class and they'll feel frustrated and leave. That is a strategy to improving your course, just eliminate the pinch points. With that, here's a quick plug for my book.