Book review:
Meaningful course revision: enhancing academic engagement using student learning data
Wehlburg, C. (2006). Anker Publishing.

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I approached this book review with eagerness: most of us teachers seek course improvement and ways to use student learning data to it. The book is comprised of nine chapters: the first three begin with data-based decision-making, and then move to designing and redesigning assessment activities. The next four chapters discuss the paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching, with ways to adapt existing activities or create new methods to assess student learning, how to plan the course with student learning outcomes, and how to close the feedback loop. After giving advice aimed primarily at teachers or course designers in the first seven chapters, the author addresses chapters eight and nine to department heads and institution-wide planners.

The book's strength is that the author has done a thorough job of researching the broad subject of course revision. Though it lacks some original thought, the book is brimming with brief summations of knowledgeable experts' opinions and research. This review will first point out what I deemed important concepts relevant to academic engagement and course revision, before discussing some shortcomings of the book.

In the first chapter the author establishes the idea of student engagement by citing Bowen's (2005) four ways to conceptualize engagement:

Methodology	Pedagogical tools for enhancement
1. Student engagement with the learning process	Short-term feedback, writing across the curriculum, cooperative learning, and learning communities
2. Student engagement with the object of study	Students directly examine, characterize, analyze, and evaluate the object of study, laboratory and field exercises in the field of science
3. Student engagement with context of the subject of study	Teacher asks: what ethical issues or social issues are part of the context?
4. Student engagement with the human condition	Teacher asks: how does this information help students to better understand people? Students see the course content as part of a larger whole.

How does one use engagement as a means to determine whether a course needs revision? The author suggests that a teacher should consider revising a course if, upon leaving class on a particular day, the answer to any of the following questions is "No":

- Did the students get engaged in the material today?

- Was I engaged in the material today?

- Do the students want to come back to class?

- Do I want to come back to class?

In contrast to many approaches to course revision that focus on student enjoyment, the author makes an insightful point that teachers too should enjoy their teaching, and asks: "If you are bored, can the students still be engaged and enriched by their time in class? Probably not." The author recommends a simple strategy: "Have a particular 'bright spot' in the class that you are looking forward to. Perhaps it is an example that you share with the class or a particular video clip. Sometimes it might be a discussion question or even a graphic on a slide. Whatever it is, and no matter how small it is, having a bright spot gives you something to reach for, some part of the course that reminds you that you enjoy the topic."

In chapter eight, the author discusses *authentic assessment* of student learning (beyond exams and papers) by citing Davies and Wavering (1999): "This type of measurement should mirror applications of the assessed ability in real-life, non-academic settings."   The author cites Wiggins (1989) as saying that "mass testing, as we know it, treats students as objects – as if their education and thought processes were similar and as if the reasons for their answers were irrelevant." One answer to the mass testing limitation is using *alternative assessment*, which creates opportunities for students to use higher level thinking skills.   A portfolio of student products is one kind of *alternative assessment* for collecting data. The author cites the definition of a portfolio by Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer (1991): "A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and/or achievements. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection."   Many departments assign them in an introduction course and they are expanded and handed in as part of a capstone course. Other indirect methods of discovering what students know and can do are suggested: interviewing or surveying alumni and/or employers of graduates.

The author encourages the use of many ways to measure any given outcome because "any item on an instrument or test only samples a very small piece of information." A warning from Marchese (1987) is also cited: "Assessment per se guarantees nothing by way of improvement; no more than a thermometer cures a fever."   This is a good analogy, and one that might help teachers keep a proper perspective about exams.

Chapter eight moves from course-level decision-making to departmental curriculum planning and advises departments to have a meaningful discussion about their mission statement in the context of what students are learning. The author states: "Ask the faculty to briefly describe the ideal graduating student in the department.   What abilities does this student have?   What skills can she or he demonstrate?   What ethical beliefs are held?   In what activities has this ideal graduating senior participated? The goal is to have them think not about what content they teach in class, but about what students are actually learning and doing."

The author also encourages departments to share the departmental outcomes with students and to require them to measure their own progress as they advance through the department's program.   The author cites Wehlburg (2001) as saying: "Assessment of student learning outcomes should be seen as a teaching tool. This will allow students to know more clearly where they stand in the department and will encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. Creating a culture where learning outcomes are part of the educational cycle will strengthen the department by strengthening the students who graduate."

As I mentioned earlier, I was eager to read this book: with such a promising title, I anticipated learning varied ways to improve courses using student learning data. Despite the nuggets of useful information outlined above, however, I was ultimately disappointed: in my opinion, much of the book is redundant. The text is written for teachers and administrators at the tertiary level, yet the elementary layout in large type with wide margins appears to be the publishers' way to stretch the text large enough to make an entire book.

Many of the concepts seem to me elementary. Consider the idea of course evaluations, for example. The author points out an inherent problem with student feedback from "satisfaction" types of questions at the end of a course: "This kind of data doesn't tell anything about how much a student is learning or whether there is any transfer of learning to other courses. What students aren't learning is as important as what they are learning, and the weak areas should be targeted so that modifications for improvement can be made." The book is replete with statements like this that seem to me too obvious, making the content of the book an ironic contrast to the words "*meaningful, enhancing, and engagement*" in the title.

Another shortcoming of the book is that it is already outdated. It was published in 2006 before many of these technologies were available or in wide use: class blogs and wikis, interactive websites, mobile and ubiquitous technologies, and of course, iphones and ipads. The author rarely refers to pre-2006 technology or even the internet, so if a teacher is looking for a guide on some of the hottest technology that is currently influencing course revision, this book will not have those answers.

To the author's credit, I find the most helpful sections of this book to be the last two sections: suggested readings and the bibliography. If teachers, course designers, or education leaders want specific help with meaningful course revision, I advise them to grab this book. Skim it and then delve into the original sources cited at the end.

References

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