

Book Review

Meaningful Course Revision: Enhancing Academic Engagement Using Student Learning Data

Catherine Wehlburg (Jossey-Bass, 2007)

Review by

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In *Meaningful Course Revision: Enhancing Academic Engagement Using Student Learning Data*, Wehlburg persuasively argues that letting evidence guide change and innovation is perhaps the only way to break the dysfunctional tradition of what may be termed “teaching as telling” and “grading to the bell curve.” Throughout the book, Wehlburg convincingly argues that assessment is not yet another chore that faculty and administrators are obliged to perform, but an integrated set of activities that enhances learning and provides the feedback teachers and institutions need in order to improve learning outcomes and implement innovations in teaching. In Chapter 1, “Data-based Decision-Making,” Wehlburg effectively makes the case for data-driven course redesign. Better yet, in Chapter 2, Wehlburg asserts that many faculty members are already engaged in performing assessments, they are just not aware of how to make use of the data to revise their courses.

A rich abundance of tips, techniques, and strategies for effective university teaching, as well as sound rationales for embracing assessment await the reader of this short volume. The author describes an enormous variety of teaching and assessment strategies, most in sufficient detail for the reader to feel confident enough to implement them in his or her own courses.

However, from the title of the book, I was expecting a “how to” for re-designing a college course. Since I am an instructional designer by training and experience, the sub-title, “Enhancing Academic Engagement Using Student Learning Data” seemed to correspond to the notion of needs analysis, a step which always precedes design or re-design, and in which one often examines assessment data of some sort. Given the title of the book and my professional orientation, the book’s chapters seemed out of order. I expected the author to move from Chapters 1 and 2 to a topic pertaining to planning (Chapter 6), and then on to classroom assessment techniques, the grading of assignments and activities, and use of rubrics as tools to gather data to inform course redesign. From there, perhaps, the reader would continue to Chapter 7: “Closing the Feedback Loop.”

I also expected more references to the sources of some of the fundamental concepts and philosophies underlying instructional design, on which Wehlburg relies heavily. For example, Wehlburg’s explanation of how to write an instructional objective rests squarely on Robert Mager’s *Preparing Instructional Objectives* (1984). Terms such as “schema” and “construction of knowledge” are used correctly, but with no attribution to Anderson and Rumelhart (schema theory), or to constructivists Bruner, Vygotsky, or Dewey (Piaget is cited; constructivist John Bransford is listed in the bibliography). Peppered with citations,

the prose would probably not be as readable as it is, but from my perspective, citing these primary sources would have enhanced the scholarship demonstrated by the author.

I would welcome a companion volume to *Meaningful Course Revision* for readers already convinced of Wehlburg's thesis which might focus on the practical aspects of interpreting the data gathered and how the data informs specific course redesign choices. Prospective readers would surely greet warmly specific examples of data-driven course redesign, such as the example given in Chapter 4 of the philosophy professor whose students perceived her as disorganized. Instead of using this data to re-structure the course, the professor gathered more data which led her to make a different redesign choice and preserve her effective teaching style. A practical guide to using student learning data to revise courses would help teachers hone their course redesigns more precisely.

In summary, *Meaningful Course Design* is really two books. One book is a persuasive argument for engaging learners through systematic, embedded assessment which you should read and study if you are involved in initiatives to implement systematic assessment at your institution. Wehlburg will provide you with credible rationales and arguments for integrating assessment practices at every level, from lesson to course to program to institution. The other book provides general advice and useful resources for using student learning data to systematically revise courses and engage students. Among these resources are Angelo and Cross' *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (1993), Dee Fink's *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2003), and McKeachie's *Teaching Tips* (1986). Readers will find this book a springboard for their future forays into course revision.

References

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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McKeachie, W. J. (1986). *Teaching tips: A guidebook for the beginning college teacher* (8th ed.). Lexington, MA: Heath.