Think Consequentially

Determining precisely how to use the precious minutes of each day to best reach your goals is one of the central skills of a successful professional and personal life. Whether a student or teacher, learning how to select the optimum activity for each moment is a life Critical Success Factor.

So how do you decide? If you are not sure, why not employ a consequential thinking and ranking system to make activity decisions? I have, and I’m pleased with the results. At the beginning of a new term, you have the opportunity to try new ways of thinking, organizing and managing your time and activities. Also, you can teach your students the benefits of mastering this Critical Success Factor throughout your course.

What do I mean by a critical success factor? In every project, vocation or avocation there are usually a small number of skills or tasks that are so important to master that failure to be proficient in any one of them will likely result in failure to reach desired outcomes.

In teaching and learning there are five Critical Success Factors to master: leadership, management, instructional design, communication and evaluation and testing.

To teach for success, you must master each of these success factors. To help you, TFS places at the top of each page the Critical Success Factor featured in the Super Ideas or QuickTips on that page. In addition, the front page article highlights a general success concept, principal or strategy selected to boost your level of success in life and teaching. What do I mean by success? In my view, success is the setting and reaching of worthwhile goals. How do you define it?

You choose the goals and TFS will help you attain them with practical strategies, principals and action steps used by successful people everywhere.

Thinking consequentially is one of these foremost success principles. It means subjecting each activity decision to a crucible made of the following questions:

- Will the beginning, continuation or completion of this task move me toward the attainment of my most important goal?
- Am I the only one who can accomplish this task?
- Is focusing on this particular task the best use of my time right now?

If you can answer yes to all three questions, you will avoid the very worst waste of time and energy—doing a task that need not be done at all.

In addition, consequential thinking has the dimension of persistence and taking personal responsibility for outcomes whether positive or negative. Such thinkers don’t waste time blaming circumstances and other people. They know that overcoming failures, frustrations and setbacks are common detours on the road to success.
Problem-based Learning—What You Should Know

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Modern science is not an accumulation of facts. It is the process of solving problems that explain the mysteries of the physical universe.

So, why should much of college teaching be an accumulation of facts memorized from textbooks? Problem-based teaching is a natural way to effectively teach the true nature of scientific inquiry. This teaching strategy is a successful method for training business professionals and reinforcing decision-making skills in attorneys, medical practitioners and policy makers.

What is it?

Problem-based teaching does not use the traditional lecture presentation approach to educating students. It relies on students interacting with each other and faculty in problem-solving situations. The process can be blended together with lecture and laboratory sessions to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of science. Problem-based teaching improves content retention in college sciences students and improves the students’ abilities to solve open-ended queries.

Foremost, a successful problem-based activity applies recently covered information from the lecture and the textbook to a contemporary issue. A small number of variables will reduce confusion and permit students to focus on the main goal without too much distraction. Complex problems can be used as students become proficient at problem solving.

Special considerations

It is important to convey grading criteria to students on the syllabus and project worksheet. Reinforce understanding with a discussion followed by a brief question-and-answer session. It is helpful to provide introductory science students with a sample of a good project. This should be delivered before the first hand-in activity is due. Any handed in work should be evaluated for the accuracy, appropriate focus, breadth of reasoning, clarity and depth of detail.

A factor affecting problem-based teaching is the amount of help students receive who are not skilled in the basic college-level reading, math and writing skills required for the problem they seek to solve. Problem-solving activities can be successfully carried out by unprepared students. However, it takes much more intervention by the other students and faculty.

Another factor affecting problem-based teaching is the educational maturity of the students. Students exposed primarily to traditional lecture-based education will find problem-based activities unstructured. They will have difficulty initiating the activities and may even dissent out of frustration. This problem can be handled by providing faculty instruction that directs students through one problem-solving activity. Students must be reminded not to focus on failure just because the activity appears difficult and insurmountable. Show them that the process is a real-world skill needed for further success in college and accomplishment in their careers.

Problem-based instruction is rewarding—it improves student learning and you are inculcating real-world skills that can be generalized to a variety of situations. Students can work alone or in groups, the projects can be conducted in class or as take-home assignments.

Sample PB lesson

A sample problem-based lesson outline can be downloaded in Adobe Acrobat format from TFS website <http://teachingforsuccess.com/IssueSupport2/IssueSuptIndex.html>. Additional references about this important instructional design strategy are included.

References


View larger image
Everybody likes cookies, so why not use them as a learning tool? When you bake cookies there is an opportunity to learn about the Scientific Method, the necessity of following standardized procedures and the differences between systematic and random error.

Baking chocolate-chip cookies is an excellent open-inquiry activity. The hypothesis is that if everyone follows identical recipes then the cookies should be indistinguishable. Outcomes from this activity include discoveries that hypotheses aren’t always supported, and that systematically repeated errors are different from randomized one-time errors.

I’ve seen many eye-opening responses from students when they discover that scientific predictions aren’t always supported. Here’s a chance to explain the misconception that theories are absolute statements of truth for all time.

Students also discover the differences between types of errors. Some students will systematically skip one or two steps, and others will have one-time problems such as, “I forgot the vanilla.” Thus, you can demonstrate that students have control over systematic error and can work to minimize it, whereas students have no control over random error.

The experiment

To complete this learning activity, ask your students to bake cookies at home (or at school, if such facilities are available). Handout a list of ingredients and steps and explain that experiments must follow standardized steps to ensure comparable results. Also, explain how to rank the cookies when baked. I suggest a ranking based on texture, appearance, and taste (of course!). Other traits could be ranked as well such as diameter, color, thickness, weight, average number of chips, etc.

To ensure that the cookies are ranked in an unbiased manner have your students leave the room while you anonymously label samples. This way no one judges his or her own cookies to be the best. When students analyze their choices, they discover that not everyone’s cookies are identical. Why not? The class will probably list a variety of reasons including that some students didn’t pay attention to the directions; some used only butter while others used margarine, and some students left out an ingredient or baked them at the wrong temperature.

After differences and conclusions have been discussed, it’s a good activity to determine which differences probably occurred due to systematic error, or random error. A student who uses a regular teaspoon instead of a measuring spoon has introduced systematic error. This type of error is under their control, and can be corrected the next time. Conversely, if the oven thermostat fails, this is an example of random error and is beyond their control. Discussing what might have gone wrong, either systematically or randomly, and creating new methods to solve those problems, demonstrates that scientific inquiry is a never-ending process. This chocolate-chip cookie project introduces students to importance of learning science, and the data tastes good too!

An Improvement Mindset

Jack H. Shrawder
Publisher TFS

To get the most ROE, Return On Effort, from reading TFS, you’ll need to supply the most important ingredient—an Improvement Mindset, IM. This means continuously asking, “How can I do what I’m doing better, faster or cheaper?” This means challenging present assumptions. For example, maybe you’ve accepted that it take three class hours for your students to learn the knowledge contained in chapter four of your textbook. With a strong IM, you might think, why can’t this body of knowledge be learned in two hours? What could I do to make my instructional design 33 percent more effective? With a strong IM and a challenge, you’ll start to discover solutions in TFS and elsewhere.

To help you find solutions in TFS more quickly, a CSF Label heads each page to help you determine which Critical Success Factor is highlighted in the ideas on that page. For example, the CSF Label for this page is “Instructional Design.” This means the concept, principle, strategy found in “The Science of Chocolate Chip Cookies” shares an improvement idea that will help you build your skills in to the Instructional Design category of five Critical Success Factors of good teaching. The more ideas you try, modify and adapt the more quickly you will improve your teaching and learning!
Expert Comments Increase Course Relevance

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In any applied course, up-to-the-minute words of wisdom from professionals can serve as fascinating supplements to your course materials. Often current practitioners provide meaningful insights that are not found in textbooks.

While I use this idea to teach media script writing, it also could be valuable for courses in medicine, business, law, engineering, hospitality, education, aviation, criminal justice, journalism, communication, art, sports management, theater and more.

How it works

Once my syllabus is set, I review every area we are planning to cover for potential opportunities to incorporate practitioner advice from a variety of perspectives. For example, in the news chapter of my media script writing course, I make a project of gathering names and contact information for a television news producer, a television sports director and a radio news announcer.

Once I gather the contact information, I compose a very brief and polite request letter that I send to each individual on my list. The letter explains that I'm an adjunct instructor who values their expertise. I then ask them to answer my question at their leisure. (In this particular case, the question is “What do you believe makes an excellent news script?”)

I continue through my syllabus and direct the same simple inquiry campaign to various professionals in the fields of advertising and feature/documentary film.

To my delight, all of the professionals I contacted responded in a timely fashion via e-mail, and all of their insights were worthwhile. Some validated the textbook's theories and others brought additional new and fresh perspectives to our curriculum.

With the permission of each professional who responds, I create a handout from their e-mail message in article format and distribute them to the students throughout the term.

Send thanks

On the day that we use each handout, I bring a camera and take a group photo of the students. I also circulated a large thank you card through the classroom. After class, I mail the card and photo to the professional whose handout had helped us on that particular day.

Lyrics Lead Students to Memorable Learning

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I love teaching the phases of human evolution in my anthropology course—however, students may not share my enthusiasm as they struggle to learn all of the anatomical terminology that accompanies the various species.

Therefore, I ask students to form groups (that have been established early in the semester so there is some camaraderie already developed) and choose their favorite species. Then they pick a tune and write a few lyrics about their chosen species. I always tempt them with a reward of some kind (candy or little skull rings) that goes to the group with the best lyrics.

As they pick the anatomical traits and rhyme them, they develop means for remembering the important aspects of each individual species that apply to an evaluation of the entire evolutionary line.

Sometimes groups want to submit their lyrics on paper, but many groups choose a spokesperson to sing their songs to the class. It is hilarious to hear students singing about long arms, wide and flat cheeks, and teeth that are “big in back.”

This learning activity can easily be applied to other subject areas. For instance, students could be asked to take a sonnet from Shakespeare and set it to rap music, or for students studying Psychology or Math to take concepts they are learning about and present the ideas in the form of song lyrics.

The spirit of fun never obscures the learning that is taking place, and the high energy makes the learning so much more memorable for the students!
No More Lame Excuses—Unless They’re Very Creative

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The first imperative of good teaching is to set high standards and concrete objectives to ensure discipline, direction and achievement in every course. However, a sense of humor helps, too.

One way to make a course more fun is to set a policy where one or two unexcused absences can be waived only if followed up with a creative excuse delivered in a form that fits the theme of the course. In this case, accuracy gives way to imagination, since I teach media script writing. The same principles can be applied to any course, though.

Examples

Let’s say a student misses a day in an art course. She can be asked to draw a picture of where she was and what happened. (She could be literal and draw a picture of a car with a flat tire, or go wild and draw a scene containing breathing dragons - the objective of the exercise is to not only illustrate the student’s feelings, but for them to do so in a creative fashion.)

Possibilities abound. Writing course absences can simply fit the genre—be it poetry, scripts or short stories. Foreign language or sign language courses can require an excuse using the target language.

Theater students can create a pantomime for their explanation. Music students can set it to a tune. Students of history can write a page about their day of time travel explaining who they met and what they did that kept them out of class. And, of course, excused absences, emergencies exempted, of course can be shared with the class. And, of course, excused absences, those for deaths in the family, illness, emergencies or those dealing with personal and emotional crisis are never to be made fun of.

Therefore, absences for any sensitive reason are exempt from this sort of exercise. It is imperative that you establish in your syllabus how this policy works to avoid confusion and concern with your students.

Emergencies exempted, of course

Naturally, in the spirit of fun, the most creative excuses can probably create an excuse policy that fits the theme of the course. In this case, accuracy gives way to imagination, since I teach media script writing. The same principles can be applied to any course, though.

A New Text? Uh-oh, Now What Do I Do?

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While explaining my syllabus to my new English Composition class on the first day of the term, I held up the required texts as I read off their titles. Suddenly they looked concerned, and a hand went up. “That isn’t the book we were told to buy in the bookstore. Do we have the wrong book?”

“No,” I said, now noticing the books on all the desks. “Apparently I do.”

Although the situation isn’t always this dramatic, at some point you will probably experience the inconvenience of having to change texts due to a new edition. And sometimes you’ll have short notice to adjust to the change. It’s hard to look prepared when you haven’t owned the text much longer than your students have, but there are some ways to make the transition to a new book faster and easier.

First, don’t panic. The new book probably isn’t new in radical ways. Some publishers will issue a whole new edition just to include an updated CD. Math books are periodically revised so that word problems reflect current trends.

Second, don’t hesitate to admit the glitch to your students. As long as you stay calm, they will too. When I walked into class with the wrong book, I simply said, “Oh, I’m sorry. There’s been a mix-up. I’ll have a revised assignment schedule for you by the next class.” If you haven’t had time to become familiar with the text’s new edition, ask your students to point out any discrepancies they find in your syllabus or assignments. A new book can be a great opportunity to show students that you’re still learning too and to model adaptability.

Finally, use the contents and index to quickly find out how it’s different from the one you’re used to. In addition to the table of contents and index, many texts have detailed outlines at the start of each chapter or an index of special features like illustrations or checklists. You can use these to hone in on exactly what differs in the new book. If the text is simply a new edition of the old, look for an introductory section titled, “What’s new in this edition?”

If necessary, you may be able to straddle the old and new books, continuing to use parts of the old text until you get up to speed with the new one.

Even after you’ve successfully made the jump to a new text, don’t throw away the old assignment schedule and answer keys just yet. For at least for a term or two, you may encounter students who’ve bought used books.
B**rian Tracy’s 10th law of success, “The Law of Compensation,” reads, “You are always fully compensated for whatever you do, positive or negative.” This law applies equally well to the classroom as it does to the boardroom.

In his book, *The 100 Absolutely Unbreakable Laws of Business Success* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco), bestselling author Brian Tracy describes principles or “laws” that are valuable not only to people in business, but to educators as well. These laws are separated into categories, including the Laws of Life, the Laws of Negotiating, the Laws of Time Management, the Laws of Leadership, and the Laws of Success.

**Application to teaching and learning**

This law of compensation applies to teaching and learning in several no-nonsense ways. Tracy himself reminds us that “Whatsoever a man soweth, that also he shall reap.” We can see how this law applies to teaching—the better we do, the better the results we get from our students. And we can see how it applies from the other side of the desk—if the students soweth well in class and assignments, they will reap good grades.

What’s important is the two-way nature of this law when applied to teaching. You give and give and, theoretically, you should get in equal measure from your students. And we can see how it applies from the other side of the desk—if the students soweth well in class and assignments, they will reap good grades.

What price?

What price are you willing to pay for the sake of your students’ success? What price or effort is justified to find a way to reach just one student who just never seems to care or never seems to get it? Only you can answer these questions, and maybe only on a case-by-case basis.

And what about your students? What price are they willing to pay “in full and in advance” in order to succeed in your class? This is something only each of them can decide. Keep in mind that in order for them to be able to make this decision, they need to know the price and what they'll get in return for paying that price. In other words, you must be clear at all times in describing the work, time and effort that needs to go into each assignment to earn a grade from “F” all the way to an “A”.

Mr. Tracy advises that to make The Law of Compensation work, decide on the new skills and qualities you will need to accomplish your goals. Remember, to achieve something you have never achieved before, you must do something you have never done before and become someone you have never been before.

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**Edible Graphs—a Tasty Lesson**

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Sometimes in developmental math classes, students need a hands-on experience to understand the concept. One way to involve students with graphs and charts is to turn a bag of M&M’s into a multisensory learning aid that helps students learn to plot data on pictographs, bar graphs, line graphs, or pie charts. They can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

Students begin by sorting the M&M’s by color. Then they use colored pencils or markers to make and label the axes and shade the background if desired.

Example: A bag of M&M’s contains: 15 blue, 25 green, 15 yellow, 10 orange, 25 brown and 10 red candies. The M&Ms make ideal data points for many types of graphs; use your imagination to create additional M&M learning activities, that culminate in a tasty reward.
The Four Crucial Elements of an A-plus Syllabus

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The anticipation of fall always brings about feelings of invigoration and readiness to embark upon a new term of teaching and learning. An ideal place to begin incorporating fresh ideas is your class syllabus. Whether your course needs to be revamped or just rejuvenated, four essential components should be kept in mind when constructing your syllabus:

- Course management and instructional design facets.
  - Behavioral issues.
  - Handouts and special attachments.
  - Simplicity.

Course management and instructional design facets
Your syllabus is essentially a contract; it should contain the necessary informational elements of the course and should include the following:

- Your name and title.
- Office address and phone number.
- Additional means of contact: e-mail address, home phone number, cell phone, etc.
- Course number, semester and year.
- Course title and catalog description.
- Required textbook and materials for the course.
- The class location, including meeting times.
- Explanation of your instructional strategy.
- General learning goals and outcomes.
- Class format and structure (discussion, lecture, hands-on activities).
- Grading system description and grading scale.
- A list of assignments, exams, reports, quizzes and readings.
- Course calendar.
- Assignment deadlines.
- Dates to drop/withdraw from course.
- Dates of holidays, special events.
- A list of guest speakers and field trips.

Behavioral issues
Your syllabus sets the tone for your course, while expressing your professional attitude towards learning. Your approach should be explicit, while specifically stating your student expectations. Include in this section:

- List of available Student Support Services such as counseling, accommodations, etc.

Handouts and special attachments
- Details of assignments (length, format, due dates).
- Assignment format examples (sample papers)
- Library and Computer Lab Information (hours and services provided).

Simplicity
Your syllabus should be both informative and precise. However, too much information can be overwhelming to your students. Strive for simplicity when organizing your syllabus. Provide a concise course calendar in table format. The calendar should include:

- Session dates.
- Session topics.
- Required readings.
- Assignment due dates.

Structuring your syllabus, in a simple format, unique to your personal style will undoubtedly get your new semester of learning off to a great start!

[If you would like to learn more about creating the best possible syllabus for your course, see the new Teaching For Success QuickCourse, “How to Construct an A-plus Syllabus.” This QuickCourse is available for purchase by schools, colleges and universities from Pentronics Publishing, 800-757-1183, or go to teachingforsuccess.com for more information.]

Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is thing to be achieved.

—William Jennings Bryan
Knowing how important first impressions are in the development of relationships, I walked into my classroom on the first day of the semester armed with an activity I hoped was powerful enough to set an energetic tone for the rest of the semester.

I knew that the students were going to be timid at first, but I wanted them to warm up to each other quickly. A lack of energy, I have found, will not correct itself somewhere in the middle of the semester. I wanted to set the precedent of being open, comfortable, interactive and participatory right away.

After introducing myself, I started this introductory exercise.

“I'd like you to get out a piece of paper and think of four unusual questions you would like to ask someone to get to know them,” I said, “And they cannot be: What's your name, how old are you, where do you live, where are you from, or what do you do for a living, because those questions are usual.”

I gave them examples of questions; this is crucial, so they will know their limitations or lack of limitations—questions like: What’s your favorite cologne and why? How much weight can you lift? Are you a jeans-kind-of-girl or -guy, or do you like to dress up? I told them to be as creative as possible with their questions and that they were going to ask them of their classmates and record them.

I split them into groups of four and let the questions begin. I heard some imaginative questions floating about: “Are you a dog or a cat person? Would you go skydiving? Do you like ice in your drinks? Would you rather watch the movie or read the book?” And others such as, “Do you play an instrument?” and “If you could be any animal, what would you be?”

Then I had them all go back to their seats and asked them one by one to stand up and introduce themselves to the class according to the usual information (name, age, where you live, where you’re from) and the unusual questions they were asked. Here are some of the quaint introductions which resulted:

“Hi, everyone, I’m Chris. I wish I were a bird, so I could fly (laughs) …I mean, if I could be an animal. Well, anyway, I have dreams about flying. I play the guitar in a band called the Maniacs….I use Arm and Hammer Baking Soda with Peroxide toothpaste because it feels fresh (laughs) Let’s see….I work at a loan company, I’m 19, I have a Pit Bull Terrier named Marilyn Manson, and I used to be fat.”

“Hi, I’m Maria, I get tools for Christmas every year since my very irresponsible husband left me, and I’m getting pretty good at fixing things now. I have twins—girls. I live in Cicero; originally I’m from Mexico. My dad helped me sew the pearls on my wedding dress. I’m a puppy person. They are so cuddly. Cats are evil!” (laughs, nodding heads).

“I’m Lynda. I’m a Black Belt in Karate. I can change tires and oil. I’m dating somebody I met in a chat room, Um, I like bologna sandwiches with chocolate chips and a pickle, (laughs) you should try it sometime—Oh! I was named after Wonder Woman.”

By the time the introductions were done, all the students had loosened up. The activity was a success! I learned a great deal about the students—some of them were going through the pain and anger, some of them had other issues, but all of them had unique personalities. The exercise gives the students little-known facts about each other and gives me insights into their characters the first day of class. It provides them insights into mine also since I participate, which students always appreciate. This introductory activity allows them to warm up to each other more and creates a highly energetic environment that, with a little humor on my part and theirs, we are able to maintain throughout the term.