

Reducing “Spoon-Feeding” to Promote Independent Thinking

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Introduction

Spoon-feeding through dense lectures has for many years been the traditional method of teaching in the classroom (Boyer, 1987). *What is spoon-feeding?* This type of teaching primarily consists of a teacher-centered style of instruction where the instructor provides the students with all of the information they need to know for the course resulting in destroying initiative or curbing independent thought and action (Collins American English Dictionary Online, n.d.). For a teacher, this type of teaching is the easiest and most efficient way to disseminate information to a large amount of students. Spoon-feeding is also convenient because prepping from semester to semester becomes a matter of making minor updates and changes (Samah, 2009). An instructor can express exactly what he/she wants during a lesson at the pace that the instructor wishes to teach. Students then know that all they need to do is to take copious notes, memorize the material, and hopefully, they will be able to pass tests with a reasonable grade (Dehler, 2014). As a result, students become passive learners who do not take responsibility for their own learning. They lack the curiosity to become fluent in the material and will eventually forget much of what they learned once the course is completed. Ideally, by the time students graduate, they will achieve a state of deeper learning where they can take ownership of their education. Through creative teaching, a student-centered learning environment, and by not spoon-feeding, a teacher can be successful at laying the foundation for a lifetime of independent thinking.

Key Issues

For many educators, spoon-feeding appears to be the only solution for ensuring that their students receive all of the content for their class. First of all, many believe that students have been conditioned to learn by this method and demand that they be taught in this manner. As teachers, they feel that they cannot change the way that their students think (McKay, 1997). From primary grade school through secondary school, the majority of their learning was done through the teacher breaking down the material and giving them all of the facts that they need to know in order to do well on exams. To some extent, this can be one of the best methods for students to understand the fundamentals, but this is not in line with the overarching goal of a higher education institution.

By the time the students move onto their undergraduate education, they expect to be taught in the same manner, and their focus becomes what they need to do in order to get good grades on the next test. Many times they end up learning the material through rote memorization without ever asking why or seeing the big picture (Rehm, 2010). Once a certain topic is memorized and tested, students tend to forget the subject matter making this spoon-feeding type of teaching unreliable for degrees where the graduates are expected to have a full understanding of what they

learned (i.e. medicine, engineering, etc.) Students eventually lack initiative and problem-solving skills because they have not been trained to search for data by themselves (Samah, 2009). Continuing to spoon-feed students in higher education perpetuates the issue of stifling their creative thinking and independent learning. Therefore, it becomes the role of the higher educator to take these learners of low self-direction who depend on someone to tell them exactly what they need to do and when to do it and turn them into learners of high self-direction who set goals, take responsibility for their own learning, and assess their own productivity (Grow, 1991).

Case Studies

Gow and Kember (1990) analyzed quantitative data using the Bigg's Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1987) and qualitative data through the use of student interviews in order to determine whether or not a higher education institution in Hong Kong promoted independent or deeper learning. What they discovered was that deeper learning actually reduced throughout the years at the school. Interestingly, the study revealed that much of the surface learning resulted from the students having a high work load. With the amount of lectures and required readings, students simply did not have the time to study the lecture material for a deeper understanding. In class, many students are overwhelmed by the amount of note taking they need to do that the focus is to just take the notes and hopefully understand the material later. The lecture format of feeding students the material without allowing them to digest the information, therefore, shapes the way they eventually approach learning. For many, it becomes the superficial type of learning that results in them forgetting the subject matter at the end of the term. This study shows how poor teaching styles can be the root cause of poor learning approaches. Teachers must be able to develop an intrinsic motivation within their students through good teaching in order to develop in them a deeper approach to studying.

McKay and Kember (1997) reported on a restructured diploma course curriculum at the Hong Kong university that focused on reducing the lecture content and spoon-feeding in a culture that believed that spoon-feeding was the only effective way to teach. The alternative curriculum contained more tutorial groups. Case studies, role playing and student led seminars were used to improve clinical reasoning and analytical judgment. Lectures were limited to introducing and defining topics and guest lectures. As a result of creating more student-centered teaching environments, this study proved that students can develop more meaningful learning approaches given a well-structured knowledge base, appropriate motivational context, active learning activities, and interaction with others. Students at the end of the study reported a preference to this style of teaching and demonstrated a positive approach to this type of learning.

Drew (1990) conducted a study on a dental hygiene preclinical course at Bergen Community College by changing the primarily lecture focused course into a more collaborative format, which made students more active learners. By using group inquiry where students learned from each other's questions and shared each other's knowledge, the result was students learning in a comfortable environment and at a faster pace. As students moved away from the spoon-feeding

of the lecture format towards this student-centered strategy, the learning became more of a collaborative process where both teacher and students gained from the relationship.

Techniques to Reduce Spoon-Feeding and Increase Student-Centered Learning

Overall, there are several alternate methods to spoon-feeding that can promote independent learning.

- Peer learning-teaching (Drew, 1990), case studies, role playing, and student led seminars (McKay, 1997) foster a student-centered teaching environment and encourage participatory learning.
- Asking and answering question techniques. Asking open-ended questions and divergent questions promote discussion. When able, questions should not be directly answered. Redirecting the question to another student to get more participation or asking probing questions can help the students realize the answers on their own. (Cashin, 1995)
- Group inquiry classes (Drew, 1990) and tutorial groups (McKay, 1997) increase the interaction with others. The smaller classes allow easier interaction with the instructor and groups learn to actively participate in the learning by working on assignments as a team and learning together (McKay, 1997).
- Spending more time on core topics rather than covering everything in the subject (Smith, 2008). Sometimes spoon-feeding can be a result of trying to cram a large amount of material in a small period of time. Choosing to develop a topic can pique the interest of the students and help them appreciate the material better than just providing them with a list of facts that they need to memorize.
- Demonstrating learning through claims to knowledge (Dehler, 2014) by designing assignments allows students to reconstruct what they learned and understand to develop their own insights while seeking to convey their learning.

The lecture format which typically results in spoon-feeding students everything that they need to know in a passive learning environment are still used throughout higher education institutions. Either for convenience or through the lack of faith in students, teachers continue to instruct in this manner. Studies have shown that it is possible to change the way students approach learning and that spoon-feeding can be reduced in order to promote independent thinking. There are many methods that can help foster a stimulating learning environment where students take ownership of their own learning. The best techniques are those techniques that focus on a student-centered teaching style and emphasize active learning.

References:

Biggs, J. (1987). *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Boyer, E. L. (1987). *College, the Undergraduate Experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.

Cashin, W. (1995). Answer and Asking Questions. *Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development: Idea Paper*, 31.

Grow, G. O. (1991/1996). Teaching Learners to be Self-Directed. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41(3), 125-149.

Spoon-fed [def. 3] (n.d.) In *Collins American English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved April 19, 2015, <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/american/spoon-feed>.

Annotated Readings:

Dehler, G. E. and Welsh, M. A. (2014). Against Spoon-Feeding. For Learning. Reflections on Students' Claims to Knowledge. *Journal of Management Education*, 38(6), 875-893.

The author makes a case against spoon-feeding and for integrative learning emphasizing that facts are the starting point for developing knowledge. The end result should be a student who is engaging with claims to knowledge rather than full of random facts. Difficulty in incorporating integrative learning stemmed from students being too ingrained in the traditional spoon-fed method of teaching which resulted in the inability to truly master the complexity of course content. Though a struggle, spoon-feeding can be overcome with hard work and dedication.

Drew, C. P. (1990). *Are You Spoon-Feeding Your Students? A Paper on Facilitating a Collaborative Learning Experience*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Merced County Community College on Student Retention in Two-Year Colleges, Trenton, NJ.

This paper presents the results of a classroom experimentation implemented and assessed in Dental Hygiene preclinical course. The experiment involved using strategies of group inquiry and peer learning-teaching and moving from the lecture format to a collaborative format. With students being more comfortable from learning from each other and becoming more active learners, the instructor is no longer an authority figure but a resource person. Students learned to accept and share the responsibility of the learning process, and the bonding created from the peer-teaching resulted in students having a higher chance of staying in college.

Gow, L. and Kember, D. (1990). Does Higher Education Promote Independent Learning? *Higher Education*, 19(3), 307-322.

The paper discusses the extent to which higher education promotes independent learning by analyzing qualitative and quantitative data from a tertiary institution in Hong Kong. Creating independent learners begin with them adopting a deep approach. The deep approach is strongly related to having intrinsic motivation. Students tended to use surface strategies for multiple choice or short answer and used deep strategies with open-ended assignments. Also, students with a higher workload and an overwhelming curriculum also tended to use surface strategies. Furthermore, a lecturer who goes to quickly results in students mindlessly copying information.

Laird, T. F., Seifert, T., Pascarella, E., Mayhew, M., and Blaich, C. (2014). Deeply Affecting First-Year Students' Thinking: Deep Approaches to Learning and Three Dimensions of Cognitive Development. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 85(3), 402-432.

This article discusses a study that analyzes the effects of a deep approach to learning for first-year students of higher education. The author emphasizes the focus of what it means to take the deep approach to learning and the importance of this type of learning for student success and the eventual success of applying this knowledge to real world situations. The results prove that deep learning does have an effect on the students' need for cognition and their attitudes towards lesson material. If critical thinking skills are a priority, deep learning should be used more for developing those skills.

McKay, J. and Kember, D. (1997). Spoon Feeding Leads to Regurgitation: a better diet can result in more digestible learning outcomes. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(1), 55-67.

This article takes a case study for a diploma course based on the assumption that students expect to be spoon fed and are only capable of regurgitating the information and proves the assumption incorrect. The course was originally a memorization course but was altered in order to incorporate more clinical reasoning, problem-solving, and analytical judgment through the use of case studies, role playing, and student led seminars. Overall, the student-centered strategies stimulated the students to learn and gave them a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

Rhem, J. (2010). Deep/Surface Approaches to Learning in Higher Education: A Research Update. *Essays on Teaching Excellence: Toward the Best in the Academy*, 21(8).

This essay discusses much of the reasoning for students why students take the deep vs. surface approaches to learning. Many times, the type of learning approach was based on what they were going to be expected to know, whether it be just the facts of the course or deeper meaning of the course. Individual students' learning styles and learning environments also affect the preference to deep or surface approaches. Rewarding reflection and understanding strongly encourages students to pursue deep learning. Because it can be difficult to motivate students towards the deep approach, teachers much create a learning environment that supports student learning and understanding.

Samah, S., Jusoff, K., and Silong A. (2009). Does Spoon-feeding Impede Independent Learning? *Canadian Social Science*, 5(3), 82-90.

This article addresses the issue of spoon-feeding in higher education from dense lectures to providing learning materials to students in order to save the time and effort of both the teachers and the learners. The author points out the advantages of spoon-feeding but also emphasizes the limitations. Because spoon-feeding results in rote memorization where knowledge is easily forgotten after the exam, this type of teaching is not beneficial for disciplines that are expected to have a deeper understanding of the subject matter. The author then promotes the collaborative approach as an alternative teaching process to spoon-feeding.

Smith, H. (2008). Spoon-feeding: or how I learned to stop worrying and love the mess. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(6), 715-718.

In this article, the author compares spoon-feeding students to the more literal metaphor of spoon-feeding her infant. In both cases, the receiver depends on the higher authority figure-one for knowledge and the other for nourishment. Just as it can get messy teaching an infant to self-feed, there can be a mess as students become confused or frustrated attempting independent learning. Though it is not easy, teachers must take the responsibility to provide their students with the opportunities to learn for themselves without fear in order to diminish the extent of spoon-feeding.