The Course Curse

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The Course Curse

By DALE PORTER

The course is the backbone of American higher education. Curricula built around sequences or selections of courses are almost universal in our colleges and universities. Attempts to move outside the course structure are still regarded as experimental or as exceptions to the rule, and their achievements are not generally understood unless translated into the language of course requirements. For example, when students demanded the opportunity for political involvement in the November campaigns, university officials obliged them—with a course. When college teachers think of educational reform they think of changing the content or the scheduling of courses, or at most the sequence of courses which makes up the curriculum. They do not question the course structure itself. Yet the tradition, the habit, the continuing presence of courses acts as a withering curse upon educational reforms of every kind.

Courses first developed when the transmission of information was the most important, and the most difficult part of education, that is, when the teacher possessed the only copy of a valuable manuscript or the official version of the prevailing truth. The transmission of information can now be mechanized and individualized, yet the medieval course structure is still with us. Surviving with the course is the equally archaic myth that a liberal education is achieved by satisfactorily completing a curriculum made up of courses.

There are three general consequences of using such an archaic structure in higher education, and the curse will not be lifted until those consequences are recognized. Each consequence has several ramifications, and virtually all are bad for students. However, each consequence does benefit the people who operate the system, the teachers, administrators, and staff. Thus when we understand why the system
fails, we will also understand why it cannot easily be reformed from within.

The first consequence of the course structure is the inhibition of learning. The course structure is built upon the assumption that all students learn at the same pace, regardless of the material to be learned or the conditions of learning. That assumption is wrong. Students learn in a non-linear fashion at an individual pace which changes rapidly throughout the day, even by the minute. In courses, therefore, some students either move ahead of the group (for which they may be punished) or lapse into boredom. Other students fall behind. The middle group of students does both. Interesting lectures do little to counteract the inhibition of learning, as will be seen later.

Courses imply classrooms, because there is a tendency to assume that people moving at the same pace must do so at the same place; especially when the pace is determined, not by students but by the teacher. Finding places—seats and classrooms—for people who attend courses on a standard schedule constitutes the basic job of university administrators. It is no good pretending that place-finding is a special task allotted to only a few. As college and university presidents know, the search for financial support and the management of the university community is intimately tied up with the quest for spaces—on schedule. The whole operation is insane: we must figure out how to move several thousand people between several hundred classrooms and offices, many times a day, five days a week. Up to one-half of those people will move at the same time. Furthermore, all the people will arrive on campus, and depart, at the same time of the year. All will register at the same time, most will take examinations and demand grades at the same time, and many will graduate and seek job counseling and transcripts at the same time. As one result, a significant number of students will select courses not on the basis of what they want to learn (which, courses being what they are, is probably wise) but on the basis of class schedules, artificial prerequisites, eating and sleeping habits, and so on. As another result, faculty utilization of office and classroom space and audio-visual resources is incredibly wasteful. Teachers cannot be assigned classrooms appropriate to their methods or subject matter in many cases, because too many teachers need the same classrooms at the same time.

The conditions mentioned here are only a sample of what are everywhere regarded as unavoidable evils and as challenges to ingenuity by administrators. They are a direct result of the course and classroom structure. Administrators will not change or challenge that structure, however, because for them it is perfect. It presents a problem in human analytical geometry, whose variables are not only infinite but also annually renewed, and whose solution is not only impossible but quite irrelevant to the professed goals of higher education. Hence, the task
itself cannot be questioned nor the various attempts at completion evaluated, from the standpoint of educational objectives; and every attempt at improvement must necessarily result in greater administrative complexity. That is why colleges and universities have special offices or officers for registration, orientation, room and office assignments, and catalogue revisions.

Most courses either have no stated objectives or have vaguely worded intentions which change frequently and are unknown to the curriculum committee after their initial approval; yet invariably graduation requirements are stated in terms of course completions. That arrangement makes it impossible to find out whether anything is being accomplished by the curriculum. At the same time, it makes possible endless administrative manipulation of the course structure, usually in the name of reform, without the slightest danger of affecting the overall quality of education.

This does not mean that administrators are Machiavellian hypocrites. On the contrary, it is their very sincerity that makes them redouble their efforts when the system fails. Administrators can't even be blamed for the impersonal quality of higher education; lack of personal awareness is inherent in the course concept to begin with. Administrators may make their living from the consequences of the course structure, but they cannot be held accountable for what goes wrong, because administrative failure is inherent in the course system.

If the course structure is at once so damaging and so rewarding to administrators, what shall we say of its consequences for teachers? We shall say, as our second general contention, that teachers are personally fulfilled and professionally defeated by courses. Assume for the moment that most any course is a series of regularly scheduled meetings between a teacher and a group of students (we will see later that the apparent exceptions are irrelevant or illusory). Group meetings are useful for only two educational activities: the development of group-oriented skills, and the distribution or display of individual knowledge or skill. Most activities carried on by individuals may be carried on in groups with appropriate changes. For example, group problem solving differs from individual problem solving in that members of a group must listen to and tolerate each other, seek a consensus, or find generalizations which override their individual emphasis. Singing in groups is different from singing alone.

It would seem that the course structure is admirably suited to the development of group-oriented skills in our students. And, except for the arbitrary selection of group membership, topics of inquiry, time and location which courses imply, it is. It is also adaptable to those displays of skill or knowledge which build confidence in the student and improve his ability to organize and communicate ideas and information. But the course structure is not often used for these purposes. It is
used for individual displays of knowledge by members of the faculty.

Displays of knowledge occur under many disguises: as students, we knew them well. Dissemination of information is the most innocent. "Socratic questioning" is more subtle but often yields a more impressive display. Discussions are also useful, whether the teacher dominates them with his special information or merely exposes the ignorance and awkwardness of the students. Displays of knowledge by individual students are allowed only with careful restrictions on grounds that such displays usurp time and prerogatives of the teacher. Besides, as most students will blindly affirm, student displays are never as good as teacher displays.

College faculty, however, do not openly seek these conditions. The professional ideals and myths of American higher education forbid the arrogance of power, seeking instead the development of a critical intellect and an active ethical judgment within each student. We want to wake them up, make them think, disturb their confidence. Many teachers think this way so habitually, in fact, that they describe their classroom activities in terms of accomplishments instead of intentions. Today they "really shook them with Zeno's paradox" and yesterday they "drove them to desperation by supporting Eldridge Cleaver all the way." And so on. This is not just egoism. The fallacy lies in believing that the display of knowledge or the distribution of information is the same thing as the acquisition of knowledge; that if one takes place, the other does, at the same time. The whole bulk of educational research for the last fifty years proves the opposite.

The acquisition of information in usable form is not a group process. It is an individual task. The individual student perceives and acquires information within the framework and through the categories of his own experience. You can change that framework with difficulty, through group experiences of a carefully arranged kind. But you cannot substitute another framework arbitrarily and still maintain the ingestion and digestion of information by the student. Yet every effort by faculty to display knowledge or distribute information in the classroom (and many times outside the classroom as well) involves an attempt to impose an arbitrary framework.

There is a further fallacy apparent in faculty behavior in the classroom: the belief that displays of knowledge are the same as the distribution of content information. Every teacher has bad days in the classroom. The students become bored, restless, sleepy. Discussion lags. Socrates turns over in his grave at the feeble dialogues. And you can guess, in those circumstances, what you would find in the class notes of your students. The distribution of information has been a failure, or so it seems.

But what about those memorable days when the hall is hushed with involvement in your words, when your lecture is a performance
worthy of description by Thomas Mann. Every eye is upon you; furious scribbling attests to the impact of your thought upon the notebooks of your students; it is a marvelous time! And the distribution of information has still been, professionally, a failure. What has taken place is a memorable display of knowledge. The students have not displayed their knowledge, so no one can tell what they have learned. Testing them at a later date is irrelevant to the evaluation of the lecture, because they might have acquired information and ideas in other ways by then. Even discussions and questioning fail to demonstrate that learning has occurred as intended by the teacher, because the teacher seeks more than mere answers.

I am saying two things: that the professed goals of most teachers, and of liberal education, cannot be reached via the course system with its classroom consequences; and that the attainment of those same goals by any other means cannot be demonstrated in the classroom so long as the course system survives. This double failure has a double cause. First, courses systematically inhibit learning by encouraging professorial displays of knowledge to the detriment of group interaction. Second, courses perpetuate a morbid fascination with content as an administrative convenience.

These two causes of faculty failure, like the causes of administrative failure, feed on one another. We have already pointed out that the course structure is not well suited to the individual acquisition of information. Why not then use it for group interaction or student displays which reinforce the learning process? Because the course is a standard unit capable of being administered; and the only process accepted as "educational" which is also capable of being formed into standard units is the distribution of information, or the display of knowledge, by the teacher. By a variation of Parkinson's Law we can say that subject matter either expands or contracts to fill the time allotted to it. Not so with group interaction of the kind which develops intellectual and other skills. The development of group-oriented skills cannot be arbitrarily cut off by the end of a class period or a course without endangering the whole enterprise, and in some cases, the emotional stability of the students themselves. Subject matter, on the other hand, may be distributed on any basis whatsoever, because the mode of distribution is irrelevant to the mode of acquisition and digestion.

Many exceptions may be offered to the rule of content-dominated courses, but they are, after all, exceptions. The dominant tendency in the course structure has to be toward the distribution of information. Such a tendency forces many group-oriented operations out of the classroom, and forces many individualistic discovery processes, such as laboratory work, into the classroom mold. There is no special value in having a whole group of students perform experiments in the same
room at the same time if those experiments are aimed at developing individual skills. The availability of the teacher may be more hindrance than help in that situation because it tends to perpetuate the students' reliance upon authority. Besides, the attempt to schedule individual learning is futile.

Since the course structure inhibits any other activity we should not be surprised to find faculty distributing subject matter. But as in the case of administration, the course structure not only defeats the intentions of those who operate it, but rewards them at the same time in ways which tend to perpetuate the problem. The course system rewards teachers by providing them with regular audiences for their displays of knowledge. In other words, the most powerful motivation for learning academic subjects is systematically reserved for the teacher—not the student. Teachers often admit to the ego-boosting effects of the classroom experience; they can do so with impunity because they believe that such rewards are compatible with the attainment of their educational goals. There is not a shred of evidence to show that brilliant displays of knowledge enhance the distribution of information—that the inspired lecturer “teaches” better than the dull one—but the effect of a good performance is usually an ego-satisfying reaction from the students. And why not? Given a choice between two equally irrelevant classroom experiences, most people would choose the more entertaining one. After years of such experiences both teacher and student have come to believe that the quality of the faculty display of knowledge determines the quality of education. Faculty, therefore work very conscientiously to upgrade the quality of their displays, whether lecture or lab, and in so doing they strengthen the system which is defeating their goals. Moreover, most faculty cooperate fully with administrators to perpetuate a bias toward subject matter even when they are aware that this bias is detrimental. They can’t see that a subject-matter orientation in the classroom is endemic to the course system.

By this point the third major consequence of the course system should be clear. In parallel with the teacher and the administrator, the student is both defeated by the process of rewards, and rewarded in the process of defeat.

The student is rewarded for attending class according to the course schedule. He is rewarded for appreciating faculty displays of knowledge, especially those which distort the distribution of information. He is rewarded for displaying his own knowledge in a manner obviously inferior to that of his teacher. As we have seen, all of these activities tend to defeat the goals professed by the teacher, which the student is assumed to share. If the student takes the professed goals too seriously, or acknowledges his rejection of them, he finds both faculty and ad-
ministration working against him. Thus he too is caught up in the wretched paradox of American education.

The process of rewarding activities detrimental to liberal education is a natural consequent of the course structure. Since the structure is based on, and encourages, displays of knowledge and the distribution of information on a standard schedule, only these activities can be accurately measured within the system. All other measurements are purely arbitrary: that is, whatever else is measured has little or no relevance to the kinds of activity permitted or encouraged in courses. This includes activities outside the classroom, such as reading and writing assignments. The student, then, is tested for and granted credit for his ability to do that which his particular course, and the whole course system, tries to inhibit. He is asked periodically to display his knowledge and distribute information.

But there are further inconsistencies. In most examinations the student is asked to proceed in a manner which most teachers would find intolerable. The display of knowledge or skills is restricted by the audience, channelled into arbitrary, fragmented forms, and further inhibited by boundaries of time, place, and personal involvement chosen for their administrative convenience. To top it all off, the content and procedure for the examination are secret. The student may be told what the examination will "cover," but he is seldom told what the correct responses will be, or even what type of response is considered correct.

The result is that the student knows how a teacher displays knowledge and how a teacher asks questions, but not how a student displays knowledge. He will not find out how to behave like a good student until after his final examination, when his performance is evaluated. Even then he cannot be sure how to correct his deficiencies. This is also true of writing assignments for the most part. Since subject matter is of prime importance, considerations of style tend to be ignored except in the English department. The schedule-bias of the course system leads faculty to assign and receive writing assignments in periodic heaps, making helpful responses difficult. The student's performance, rather than his progress, then becomes the focus of attention and evaluation. That's why seniors in college read and write only slightly better than they did in the twelfth grade.

Because the curriculum of courses demands and rewards a kind of schizophrenia it is not surprising that students develop their most useful skills in extra-curricular activities. How do you act like a student? The professor won't tell you but other students will. And if the professor is shocked at the cynicism of the advice on courses exchanged among students, he must be ignorant of the fact that the type of behavior testable and rewardable in the course structure is not the kind of behavior he professes to desire from his students.
Students understand very early in life how the system works. My six-year-old wrote for his mother a random series of numbers, and insisted that she circle several numbers even when she failed to discern a patterned relationship between them. These “answers” were then compared with an equally arbitrary set of answers on his own paper and pronounced incorrect, simply because they did not match! When questioned about this procedure, he responded with a principle which operates from first grade to Ph.D. programs: “If your paper does not match the teacher’s paper, it’s wrong.”

The arbitrariness of the system reflects the degree to which behavior desired by teachers and administrators is inhibited by the course structure. Teachers perversely try to reward imagination, sensitivity, thoroughness, and other qualities whose identification and evaluation is entirely subjective; while students perversely insist upon conforming to patterns of behavior that can be identified and measured within the course structure. The strange result is that few people in the system are credited with distinction even though most people display an amazing degree of resourcefulness, imagination, determination, patience, and compassion just trying to cope with it. There is a lesson here about misdirected energy.

I do not want to argue about the thousands of exceptions which might be offered to the situation described above. In a university with a curriculum of courses, as in any bureaucracy or system of laws, the real action occurs between the lines of definition. The danger lies in thinking that the action is a response to anything within the structure. The work of the teacher and administrator in the course system is best expressed by the Arab proverb, “The dog barks—the caravan passes.”

The fact that the caravan moves at all in American universities is due mostly to the ingenuity of students in ferreting out the things that count and preparing themselves to be counted. If we ever redefined the things that count in terms of the professed objectives of liberal education, or, to the same end, redefined the professed objectives in measurable terms, the students would undoubtedly apply the same effort and ingenuity to the program.

Why don’t we let that happen?

I suggest we don’t let it happen for three reasons, each of which points to an uncertain future for higher education in America. In the first place, as I have tried to show, people involved in the course structure are rewarded for failing in their professed goals. Every attempt at correcting the failures, moreover, only makes things worse. Because the course structure is dysfunctional at all levels, each group tends to blame the others for its own misfortunes. There are calls for increased participation in everybody else’s decision-making, and the structure escapes serious criticism in the ensuing confusion. This situ-
ation will continue developing until legislators and patrons refuse further subsidies. There are signs of such a revolt even now, and it isn’t due just to rioting students.

The second reason why educational goals will not be redefined in measurable terms, is the traditional assumption that courses do meet those goals in an undefined but unquestionable fashion. As I pointed out before, the paradoxes of the course structure make it impossible to measure progress of any sort. So no one can prove or disprove the assumption that courses do their job.

One might raise a question, however. If a bright student should develop and manifest the desired abilities before meeting all of his course requirements, could he be considered educated? In most colleges and universities, the answer is no. The final degree demands the same number of credits from every student (except for waivers based on non-educational premises). If students cannot even stay together in one class period, how can they reach the desired overall goals at precisely the same time? The answer is obvious, the requirements are all that can be reasonably expected of an average student, engaged “full time,” for four seasons with the course structure. Students who learn quickly can be given more subject matter for “enrichment.”

Escaping from such tautological reasoning is difficult since it requires both a sense of humor and a whole new perspective. In order to state educational goals in measurable terms, for instance, one must take the following preliminary steps:

1) Stop thinking about courses (that’s like: stop thinking about the opposite sex).
2) Distinguish your ideals from reasonable expectations.
3) Get rid of the notion that the fulfillment of your goals involves a mysterious element susceptible only to intuitive judgment.
4) Get rid of the notion that you know best how to reach the objectives you set.
5) Prepare to grant credit, or a degree, whenever a student fulfills your objectives, not sooner or later.

Few people already involved in the course structure can make such changes without great personal difficulties. People outside the structure, such as businessmen, have less trouble defining traditional educational goals in terms of measurable objectives; and they are already getting rich by contracting to do what public schools cannot do, on a money-back guarantee basis. Within ten years they will be threatening the jobs of university faculty and administrators who find the personal rewards of the course structure more compelling than its objective failures.

The final reason why university personnel may hesitate to clarify their professed goals is the enormity of the possible consequences. Hu-
man nature has a way of qualifying even the most radical reforms, but if administrators can be prevented from standardizing procedures, students will find effective, cheap, non-bureaucratic ways of fulfilling the new objectives. Faculty may keep their status (and their jobs) only by becoming more ingeniously helpful to students than anyone else. Most of the effluvia of the course structure, which includes dormitories and faculty office buildings, will disappear. So, for most of the time, will students.

The consequences of the course structure of higher education may, in fact, be preferable to the consequences of actually achieving its goals. And not only for those who now operate the universities. Who, after all, is ready for a whole generation of liberally educated people?