



The T in Teaching

00:07–00:36

Andrew Coletti: Hello and welcome to this episode of the T in Teaching. This episode is focused on adapting courses and materials to achieve better outcomes for students. I'm Andrew Coletti, and in this episode, I spoke with Doctor Curtis Gregory to ask him how he revamped one of the most important courses in the business school at temple. Thank you for listening and please enjoy.

00:36–00:52

Andrew Coletti: All right, Doctor Gregory, thank you so much for taking the time to join me today for this episode. I'm really excited to talk about a course that you took over a few years ago. That's the business administrative capstone course. Now, Capstone is the final course that the undergraduates do. So it's a big course. It's really what ties everything together.

00:52–01:08

Andrew Coletti: So, when you took it over, it was before 101, but you made some changes and revamped the course in a lot of different ways. So let's start with what it looked like beforehand before you got to make changes. What was the course trying to do and how did it try to do those things for its students?

01:08–01:43

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Well, of course was supposed to be kind of a review of things they had already learned in other courses. For example, business communications was one course they take early in their journey. And I remember hearing about the six-by-six rule, where you could have more than six sentences and more than six words per setting for PowerPoint presentations, but it was also an extension of another course I used to teach called Integrative Business Applications 3103, that use the computer simulation model to simulate students running about \$100,000 or \$100 million.

01:43–02:15

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Company. Some of the critical analysis tools were introduced to them early on. Everybody's familiar with the infamous Swot analysis strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, but it also used other tools like Porter's Five Forces value chain analysis. And I can go on and on and on Pestel analysis or GPAs, depending on who you're talking to. But the course in the original design was very heavily graded oriented, not leaving the professors or the instructors a lot of time to plan the classroom experience.

02:15–02:28

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So I wanted to shift that from being so heavily manually grading to having them spend time making the classroom experience more robust and bringing their own personal touch to that, to the classroom.

02:28–02:35

Andrew Coletti: What were you thinking when you saw all of the materials for that course? Where were you looking to make changes when you initially took over?

02:35–03:02

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Well, one of the benefits or opportunities I got was I was able to participate in the capstone course for the MBA students, and I saw a lot of parallels between what we were doing with the MBA students and what we could be doing with undergraduate students. This represented a difficult path for some

students, because we're now talking about critical, critical thinking, and it's not about just regurgitating what you read.

03:02–03:33

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So I think throughout most of their academic journey, they've, number one, been led to believe that problems and solutions are categorized by major. And what the capstone course shows them, hopefully demonstrates to them, is that it's a combination of things you need an understanding of accounting, finance, marketing, operations management, human resource management, and all those things. Work in collaboration to come up with a viable solution.

03:34–03:54

Dr. Curtis Gregory: The problems are not going to be so neatly categorized, so this takes them away from just regurgitating what they read. But using the case study is almost like a memo of understanding what we would call it in the real world, as a springboard of information for them to go out and do external research and come up with, here's what this company should do.

03:54–04:14

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So it changes the dynamic, because I'm telling them or coaching them to we're presenting or writing a memo to the board of directors in the senior management team. So the common mistake I see students make is, well, you know, McDonald's was started by Ray Kroc back in 1960, but they don't need a history lesson. They know how to company start.

04:15–04:26

Dr. Curtis Gregory: We don't want to fall into the trap of writing the book report. We want to get into. This is what we discovered about your organization from our research, from external sources. And here's your way forward.

04:26–04:44

Andrew Coletti: Sure. So would it be fair to say that collectively, for that 15-week course, you were trying to streamline the assignments to be more continuously focused on creative problem solving and critical thinking, rather than trying to do so many different things. Again, tying together that undergraduate experience, that'd be fair to say.

04:44–05:10

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Yeah, because what I discovered early on was, even though I was led to believe they already had this students for whatever reason, either don't remember what was taught to them, or maybe they're transferred from another institution, and they never got the opportunity to learn about what a Porter's Five Forces analysis is. So we redesigned the course, and I say we because it was a collaborative effort with some of my colleagues and other professors.

05:10–05:32

Dr. Curtis Gregory: I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am from the people from McGraw Hill in helping me redesign this course into something that is much more manageable. And of course, agility became important because when we were coming out of Covid, average classroom size was about 35. Then all of a sudden we started getting classes in the 4547 range.

05:32–05:50

Dr. Curtis Gregory: And the way the previous design was, it caused us to have to scramble to reassign group assignments so that we did have groups of six and seven students in them. So we had to do some things to make the course easy to administer. Whether you had 50 students in it or 30. Yeah.

05:50–06:07

Andrew Coletti: So you mentioned two things that I both want to get to in their own respect. The first is the student experience. Right. And it sounds like you're very well tuned in to how at least the students experience. BA 4101 the course prior to it. And obviously you have a good understanding of the courses you teach now where students are out with it.

06:08–06:30

Andrew Coletti: But the other thing I want to talk about, I'm glad you mentioned it, was the other people involved in revamping this course, because if anybody's ever tried to do that, they know it is a very hard task on their own. It's just so much content and so much work. So tell me a little bit more about the people that were involved in helping you revamp this course, and what role and what significance they played in revamping this course.

06:30–06:51

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Okay. Well, I'll start with the representative of McGraw Hill. I had a, I call our sales person business person that came out and initially pitched their package of, textbook and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. But there was another faculty member, Doctor Wayne Williams, who's in the accounting department, you know. Wayne. Yeah, okay, I do too. It's a brilliant man, brilliant guy.

06:51–07:15

Dr. Curtis Gregory: You know, we got together one night happy hour, and he started explaining to me how his course work with McGraw Hill, and he took the accountability or put the accountability on reading the materials on the shoulders of the students, as opposed to us trying to nag them and getting a read. So it changed the classroom experience from the standpoint of students now have grading incentive.

07:15–07:29

Dr. Curtis Gregory: I'll use that term to read the material before they come to class, so that when they're in class, you're pretty much guaranteed that everybody's actually read the chapter or chapters, and you can have, as a result of that, a more robust dialog. Yeah.

07:29–07:51

Andrew Coletti: I really like that. The way that you talk about kind of incentivizing students to do the work prior to class and really getting that flipped classroom approach, which is what exactly. But you get it to work. Well, right? There's a difference between expecting students to do the work before class and having it that integrated into the lesson when they are in class, versus actually getting them to do the work before class.

07:51–08:08

Andrew Coletti: Let's talk a little bit about the student experience, because you sound like you have a really good idea of what the students were going through before, and a lot specifically for the students that I feel like often get neglected by professors. And that's the students who don't speak up. So how do you get so in tune with what the student experience is like in your class?

08:08–08:13

Andrew Coletti: You just asking them and building relations. Is it talking to other professors? What does that look like for you?

08:13–08:38

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Well, I think it starts with I'm not asking questions that require memorization of the text or the chapter they just read the questions I'm more likely to ask her. How do you feel about this? Tell me how you react to this. Because instead of regurgitating in a lecture what they just read in the classroom, I've had the added benefit.

08:38–09:04

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Like I said before, of teaching the class at the MBA level, where instead of cases we're doing, we were doing actual live projects. Yeah. So I can say, okay, let me tell you a story. By the time we actually use this tool, or the client asked us to use this tool and how it actually gets used as opposed to, not as opposed to, but in addition to what the textbook is telling you.

09:04–09:27

Dr. Curtis Gregory: The other thing, and I forgot to mention it, McGraw-Hill did for me was, I think it was at the Academy of Management conference. They introduced me to the author of the textbook, Frank Rothman, doctor Frank Rothman, who was nothing like what I thought he was going to be. I mean, I knew of him from my research. So this guy was like a superstar.

09:27–09:51

Dr. Curtis Gregory: I couldn't wait to meet him. And I think he's going to be an academic wonk and put me to sleep. Nothing could be further from the truth and his understanding of how theory, informed practice, or how his text in his case studies had application was mind blowing to me. So having that as another additional resource was tremendously beneficial.

09:51–10:16

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So we used to have them just do presentations on the case recommendation, financial analysis, blah, blah, blah blah. But he came up with the idea of creating a debate format where the students would have opposing views on one particular case, and I got to own it. It didn't work well for me, but some of my other colleagues have found it to be, tremendously valuable in getting student engagement up even more.

10:16–10:21

Dr. Curtis Gregory: That added a competitive component to it really has gotten them charged and energized.

10:21–10:39

Andrew Coletti: So let's talk now about this revamped course. You've talked a lot about the theory behind it and the thought behind it, and you've even given examples of assignments that you've revamped and why you did that. Tell me about how it's gone now that you've made these changes, how are you experiencing it? What is the student experience look like?

10:39–10:56

Dr. Curtis Gregory: You know, Andrew, that's a great question. I went into it going, okay, we're going to have some hiccups. We're going to have some problems. It's just, you know, it goes with the territory. To my surprise, we didn't really have a lot. Okay. They're tiny little things. The only thing the course is not perfect. I don't think any course ever really is.

10:56–11:14

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Right now, it's skewing to pretty high grades. So we've had conversations. I say we I mean, my colleagues on the faculty teaching this course about making some of the exams a little bit more challenging. Okay. We went to an open book format where they can look it up, recognizing that in the real world they're going look up answers anyway.

11:14–11:39

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So that seemed to change the dynamic quite a bit. It gave us more flexibility. Back to that course agility I mentioned earlier. I know that I've got nothing but positive from the faculty, because that burden of grading essay, you know, heavy exams got replaced by, quizzes that to a certain extent use I to grade them. Yeah.

11:39–12:00

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So that they really get a, we get a pretty accurate assessment of their understanding of the materials before they even come into the classroom. So that part I think they like a lot. We used to administer

a financial ratios exam, was the first exam they took in the course. And the scores historically were coming in on average around 50 or 60.

12:00–12:21

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So to start your last class, maybe for many of them, their last semester, their first time out of the gate to show, you know, comp competency is a soul crushing financial ratios exams. It just destroyed everybody. And that was only about 4 or 5% of their grade. But it was not the right way, not the desired way to start a semester in my mind.

12:21–12:43

Dr. Curtis Gregory: So we didn't intentionally make it easier. But when we made it multiple choice and just took out some of the questions that really, really students struggled with historically, now it's an exam that's got more of a normal distribution curve. So that was one of a few things that I think, is working really, really well for them right now.

12:43–13:02

Andrew Coletti: That's a really great example to bring up, I think, because it reads into two parts of it, the academic part that you're kind of starting students off with a, as you called it, soul crushing exam. I'll take your word for it. I don't want to take that exam to find out how soul crushing it is, but obviously, maybe that content is really important and you do want to assess it.

13:02–13:19

Andrew Coletti: But there is something to be said about realizing that it might not be the right time and place to test students on that, and then it may affect how the rest of the course goes. If the first experience the student has with your course is getting their butt kicked, you know what I mean? Yeah. So I think it's really great to see intentionality in the way that you design your course.

13:19–13:29

Andrew Coletti: Still saying that we are going to assess it because it's an important skill, but we're just going to do it a little differently because of the context of where we're doing it. We don't teach in a vacuum. It's like what I like to say.

13:29–13:50

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Well, Andrew, I will say the financial grace exam. In my humble opinion, I'm a banker by trade. That's where I made my bones. So I know I feel like I know a little bit about finance. If, Temple University ever funds my grades from finance, I may be thrown out of the classroom. But, you know, But I didn't think it was measuring the right thing.

13:50–14:14

Dr. Curtis Gregory: I don't think finance is about memorizing a bunch of ratios. It's knowing what these ratios mean and what they're measuring and how they can help you do either a financial review or what we call on them to do in this course, a financial analysis where we're talking about, okay, here's your recommendation. Now, I want you to answer the question, how much is that recommendation going to cost and how are we going to pay for it.

14:15–14:37

Dr. Curtis Gregory: And that's where your analysis really, really triggers in. So the new financial ratio exam really kind of measures their understanding of these ratios and when to use them. If I'm looking to measure the liquidity of a company that's an easy one. Usually they know okay current ratio. They still have to do the calculations, but at least they know this is what, I'm using it for.

14:37–14:55

Andrew Coletti: Really simply the way I see what you're describing is students have gone from essentially rote memorization and being able to, input something to being able to process something, explain the functionality of something, rather than just be able to do the function. That's what it seems like to me. Is that fair to say?

14:55–15:13

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Yeah. But I will say they start the process of there for some. There are different stages for where I really noticed that with the MBA students, particularly the ones coming out of like engineering, they are used to two plus two equals four. And in the business world, those that come from practice will tell you what two plus two equals.

15:13–15:36

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Well what do you want it to equal. Yeah. What do you need it to equal. So it's not an exact science. And seeing how you can, use research and empirical data to inform a defensible strategy is a shift in thinking. Commonly, what they'll do is they'll come up to me and say, this is our recommendation. Is this right?

15:36–15:52

Dr. Curtis Gregory: And I have to tell them, we don't have to answer keys for the case study. There's no right or wrong answer. I want you to shift from what's right and what's wrong to can I defend it? Do I have enough research or data or empirical data to defend this recommendation? And that's a different way of thinking. For a lot of them.

15:52–16:03

Andrew Coletti: Yeah, I think that is a different way to think. And it obviously fits into your model of the agile classroom. So I really like that. Let's end on one thing that I normally try and end on a happy note and say, what's a great example?

16:03–16:05

Dr. Curtis Gregory: It hasn't been happy to this point. Well.

16:05–16:20

Andrew Coletti: That's my thing is it has been actually. So I'm going to ask you then to talk about those hiccups. You said you didn't have a ton of them, but you said that when you did start your class, you expected some. And I just want for other professors who are thinking about maybe doing something similar and they're thinking about doing it.

16:20–16:36

Andrew Coletti: Now, you've talked about the rationale and the process and the people involved, but again, those hiccups are still going to happen. You talked about even the debate format that worked for other professors, but it didn't work for you, maybe. What was it like experiencing one of those hiccups, and how did you just overcome it? Because they're going to happen.

16:37–16:57

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Yeah. So one that I'll throw out is they have, assignments they have to do each week. If they fail to complete that assignment, it just shows up on the grading thing as blank. And we had to manually go through and add zeros for when they didn't complete an assignment. And that was just an extra step that I hadn't counted on.

16:57–17:21

Dr. Curtis Gregory: When I went back to the McGraw Hill people, they showed me how to fix it so that the template was set up to automatically assign to zero grade if they failed to complete the assignment. So that was one of, one of the hiccups that I remember. The one thing I will always tell students is there's always going to be something, you know, I missed something, or I got an old memo in there or whatever in canvas.

17:21–17:37

Dr. Curtis Gregory: But the one thing I can commit to is whatever it is, it won't be detrimental to your grade. It won't be detrimental to your experience. Yeah, I'd make a mistake. Or there's something messed up in how the course is laid out. It's not going to be a disadvantage to you.

17:37–17:52

Andrew Coletti: Yeah, well, thank you so much for taking the time today to come here and explain all of this. Thank you. People involved, the processes, the pedagogy, all of it. You've done a great job, and it's really awesome to just hear an educator excited and passionate about the work that they're doing. So thank you for joining me.

17:52–17:54

Dr. Curtis Gregory: Thank you Andrew, I appreciate your time.