ACUE Student Success Through Exceptional Teaching

Identify Relevant and Transferable Skills and Concepts

The first step in designing (or redesigning) a course is to identify the core set of skills and concepts that you want students to develop and master (Nilson, 2016). You may want to start by asking, "What do I want my students to know and be able to do when the course is over?" And, "What is the big impact I want my course to have on my students two or three years after they have finished college and are in their post-college life and profession?"

Relevant and Transferable Skills and Concepts

According to Pallas and Neumann (2019), the core or transferable skills and concepts students learn in a single course are like building blocks for developing the knowledge and skills that they will need in future courses and in their lives. For instance, if your course is an introduction to photography, you may begin with the evolution of the camera to help students understand lighting and shutter speed because you feel this transferable skill will help students learn how to manipulate light and time on contemporary digital cameras in the future.

Although identifying the core transferable skills and concepts is important, creating outcomes that are relevant for your students is also important. Relevant knowledge and skills often connect to students' prior knowledge, their social capital, and sometimes to recent events.

The sets of questions below can help you ensure that your course outcomes are both relevant and transferable.

In *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004), Ken Bain suggests exploring the following questions when identifying transferable skills and concepts:

- What big questions will my course help students answer?
- What skills or abilities will my course help them develop?
- What type of critical thinking skills must students have or develop to answer the big questions that the course raises?
- What information will my students need to understand to answer the big questions of the course and challenge their assumptions?

Additionally, you may also want to consider these questions:

- What skills and concepts do subsequent courses in the program or department require?
- Is your course providing entry into a specific industry, profession, or field? If so, what skills will benefit students in their long-term goals?

To work toward creating concepts and skills that are relevant to students, consider the following questions:

- What prior knowledge do you assume your students already have as they begin your course?
- Are there key learning gaps that need to be addressed through course content early on?
- Are there any common misconceptions that students typically hold about the field or discipline that your course content can challenge?
- What experiences do your students have that can be incorporated into your course?

Examples of Core Concepts Shared by Pallas and Neumann (2019)

- Statistics: Middle and spread of a distribution
- English Composition: Articulating a claim and positing a solution to a problem
- Earth Science: Formulating testable ideas and relying on evidence to assess their accuracy; the scientific process
- Western Civilization: Collect and analyze historical evidence to argue for or against a historical claim

Sources

Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Harvard University Press.

Nilson, L. B. (2016). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Pallas, A. M., & Neumann, A. (2019). *Convergent teaching: Tools to spark deeper learning in college*. Johns Hopkins University Press.