

Subtractive SOLUTIONS

Don't believe anyone who tells you that applying the principle 'less is more' to your teaching amounts to laziness, says **Colin Foster**...

Now more than ever, teachers are constantly expected to 'do more with less'. School schemes of learning bulge with content that must be taught, and both formative and summative assessments that must all be prepared, administered, marked and fed back on.

With students having so many diverse needs, teachers are vulnerable to the emotional pressure that comes from knowing – and being regularly reminded – that their students only get one chance at their school education. It seems as though teachers must always do more and more, with diminishing support and ever fewer resources.

And if one dares object to climbing this endless mountain, they're seen as somehow conforming to the 'lazy teacher' stereotype beloved by some politicians, but which runs completely counter to reality among all the teachers I know.

Additive solutions

Perhaps part of the problem is that we tend to assume every new problem or situation requires something additional to address it. According to a recent paper published in the journal *Nature* (see go.nature.com/3PmB44E), when presented with a range of different kinds of problems, most people's natural default tends towards suggesting *additive solutions*.

In other words, people will think of something extra that can be done to improve the situation, in the form of new strategies or alternative approaches, while systematically overlooking potential *subtractive* changes that could address the issue equally well, or even better.

Imagine a doctor with a patient who turns up complaining of side effects resulting from medications they've been prescribed previously. The doctor's first thought might be to propose yet more pills to deal with said side effects, with a view to possibly prescribing further pills later on to address any side effects caused by the new medication.

This might occur more naturally to the doctor than questioning whether some of those existing pills might instead be discontinued, and

if that could address the problem instead.

Subtractive solutions

It can be hard to spot situations in which less really is more – areas where we might see improvements through the act of removing. However, it could be well worth investing the time and effort needed to discover these opportunities for deletion.

When setting essay assignments, teachers will often encourage students to be concise and cut out unnecessary words. This can make their writing more precise, easier to read and punchier, hence the written feedback sometimes given by English teachers to *'Remove unnecessary words you don't need from your writing!'*

But it takes time to carefully perform this kind of editing, and it requires effort. Yes, we may be reducing in order to hopefully end up with an improved piece of writing – but there's no getting around the fact that the process of reducing will itself

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entail having identify where and how it can be performed.

Mark Twain is said to have once written, “*I didn’t have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one instead.*” Yet investing time in thinking about what might be removed could well provide us with subtractive solutions which, in the long run, will improve things for

both teachers and students alike. Subtractive solutions are also likely to be cheaper in terms of both time and resources, and therefore less wasteful and more sustainable.

Finding subtractive opportunities

So, where might we find those situations where subtracting something from teachers’ duties will be more beneficial than adding something new? It’s often said that when someone asks you to do something extra, you should consider responding with, ‘*What should I stop doing – or do less of – in order to create the time and space for this new thing?*’

If we were to simply try and incorporate every good new idea we encounter into our existing practice, we would quickly become overwhelmed and perform our existing tasks less well, to the detriment of our wellbeing.

The possibilities for subtractive solutions will be different for different teachers, and vary depending on subject areas, specific situational circumstances, your school’s overall context, teaching styles and so on. There are no one-size-fits-all suggestions.

The important thing is to actively look for your own subtractive opportunities, rather than assume that those I’m about to suggest below will work for you. But for illustrative purposes, here are three ways in which you could initiate the process of thinking about subtractive solutions.

1. Stop planning lessons from scratch

Why burn time trying to reinvent the wheel late at night, when suitable lesson materials could be available online or collaboratively-produced with colleagues? Always look to prioritise the modifying and improving of existing resources over starting with a blank sheet of paper. There should be no shame in making good use of existing materials, instead of feeling that everything must be designed and then redesigned all over again by you and every other teacher.

2. Delegate your marking to students wherever possible

If students are unable to tell whether something they’ve written is right or wrong, or good or bad, how can they be expected to be able to produce high quality work?

Far from being the ‘lazy’ option that it might initially seem, engaging students in the business of evaluating their own responses will help them better identify the strengths and weaknesses of their work – and thus, how it might be improved.

This kind of role switching can be especially valuable where assessments are concerned. Assuming the

mantle of an examiner can help students see how their work is likely to be perceived, and what they might be able to do to enhance it.

3. Hold fewer, shorter meetings

Just because a meeting is happening at break time, that doesn’t mean has to occupy said break time’s entire duration. Similarly, if a meeting is scheduled for a ‘free’ period, it needn’t fill all the time available to you within that slot. Meetings should be as long as necessary, and no longer.

Even finishing a meeting just five minutes early will give everyone a welcome break before whatever is due to be happening next. What’s even better is if, through careful preparation, a meeting can be avoided altogether, with the relevant information instead circulated by email to those who need to know.

Being subtractive

These above three suggestions may not be right for everyone. In other schools, they may already be commonplace. Yet the point remains that looking for subtractive solutions will help us to reduce workload and make what we do leaner.

This will in turn help us to clarify our priorities, and consequently focus our attention on doing fewer things better – which is surely desirable for both teachers and students.



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