5 Things You Should Know About 

Teaching accelerated courses

1. Do students learn as much as they do in traditional-length courses?

Many people believe that accelerated courses are less effective or contain less material than courses spread over 16 weeks, but the research shows that is not the case. Student learning and student satisfaction are generally as high as, or higher than, that reported for traditional-length courses. Students report that they like the opportunity to focus on the content in-depth, without distractions.

2. How should I approach a summer course?

The research shows us that certain attributes, when present, result in better student experiences. They appreciate a relaxed instructional environment in which they can help make some of the choices about course content and assignments and also interact informally with instructors. They value instructors who share their real-world experiences with the subject matter. They also appreciate instructors who are willing to learn from students by integrating student experiences and perspectives.

In accelerated courses, students prefer fewer, more substantive assignments. Students prefer to focus on fewer concepts in greater depth. This helps make space for reflecting on the subject matter rather than managing multiple assignments. Clear organization and an instructional pattern that repeats from week to week are essential. Don’t be afraid to convey the same information—such as due dates—in more than one place. Use a similar pattern for the structure of your modules or units throughout the course so students can focus on the content instead of spending their time figuring out how the course works.

3. How do I decide what to keep and what to leave out?

The Understanding by Design© framework might help. To use this ‘backward design’ approach, first determine the two or three most important things that you want students to be able to do when they finish your course. Next, determine the evidence that you need in order to be assured that they are able to do the things that you have decided are the most important. Finally, select the learning activities and teaching methods that are most likely to help them generate the evidence you have decided upon.

Using this framework helps ensure that you are teaching for impact by focusing on your primary objectives, rather than having students learn lots of facts that can be quickly forgotten. This framework—with its focus on a few concepts explored in-depth—aligns well with the preference that students express for focused, experiential learning in accelerated courses.
What teaching methods work best for summer courses?

When possible, use experiential teaching methods by which students can uncover the ideas that are central to your discipline. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), core ideas may be counter-intuitive. Students are more likely to find the ideas meaningful, persuasive, and memorable if they have discovered them for themselves. Lectures may be important for background knowledge, but try to minimize them, keeping them to 20 minutes or less. Instead, set up experiences by which students research and discover information for themselves. Select learning activities or projects that are similar to the real-world situations to which you would like students to transfer the things that they have learned. Giving students feedback on these projects helps prepare them for the assessments that you will use in your course.

What assessment methods work best for accelerated courses?

Consider minimizing the use of multiple choice or true/false quizzes. Rather than testing the recall of isolated facts through quizzes, consider having students apply what they know in context. Have students engage in case studies, presentations, and individual or group projects in which they put to use the concepts that they have learned in your course—just as they might put the concepts to use on the job or in their lives. Consider assessments that require students to figure out which concepts are applicable and how to apply the concepts in an environment that is not fully structured. You may want to make the criteria for the assessment known in advance so that it guides student work, just as the criteria for performance are usually specified in the workplace and used to guide one’s activities.

For further reading...

For more information about accelerated courses, see:


For more information about the Understanding by Design framework, see: