

Semestered Out

Semestered high schools are popular, but semestered teachers can cover less of the curriculum.

By Don Cropp

Some time in the mid-eighties, a new craze known as semestering drifted down the 401 to Kingston from the Palace of the People's Education in Toronto. My principal, who never saw a fad he didn't like, wasted no time in jumping onto the bandwagon.

After all, what was there to dislike about a three-period day in place of six? Hadn't I frequently complained of the lack of a weekly double period (80 minutes) for senior experiments in chemistry and physics?

Biology teachers could now show complete movies on the burrowing habits of furry animals or the ecology of the flood plains of southern Africa in single periods.

The administration cited the administrative advantages of scheduling fewer classes a day. As well, they claimed that, with fewer class changeovers, students would spend more time in class and hence more time in the process of learning.

Of course, a three-period day meant that a teacher would have a maximum of three different preparations to cover. Fewer teaching periods, fewer student contacts per day, and no mid-term examinations were selling points to harassed teachers.

For the students, there was an additional bone. The second semester would provide an opportunity to improve on a mark gained in the first semester — at the expense of another subject, it was true, but that was deemed a small price to pay for the possibility of enhancing a student's chances of gaining admission to university.

What the administration did not point out to the students was the doubly devastating academic effects of class absences. A few missed 72-minute classes, especially in a series, puts a student well behind in his/her studies, and few can make up for this lost time.

There were a number of other unforeseen side effects. For example, some astute OAC students saw an advantage in scheduling their more difficult subjects in the second semester, since "estimated marks" have to be submitted in March to support university applications.

There was also the issue of the havoc that the passage of time wreaks on teenagers' memories. Since a full year often intervened between the end of one math course and the beginning of the next, sequential subjects generally required significant review at the beginning of the new semester.

Indeed, one ministry report described the findings of a group of math teachers who discovered that in semestered classes the amount of course material covered was about 75% of that covered in the old 40-minute format.

Part of the difficulty was that, as alert readers will already have noted, two 40-minute classes actually total 80 minutes of instruction, which is 8 minutes more than 72. In this way, the time devoted to learning was reduced by 10% at one swoop. But there was yet another assault on learning time.

The 72-minute periods do not take into account the fundamental problem of adolescent attention span. Few teenagers can stay on task for 72 minutes at a time. Even the universities, which teach the academic élite, do not ask students to attend for more than 50 minutes at a time.

To a student who does not see an intrinsic value in physics, 72 minutes might pass like so many hours. Despite my employment of changes of style of delivery and of pace, many of my less committed students signaled their unwillingness to continue at about the 60-minute mark.

One of my principals prescribed an "all singing and dancing" form of teaching which would captivate (but

not necessarily educate) all of the students, through exciting demonstrations, experiments and short quizzes performed at the very beginning of class.

The folly of the 72-minute period becomes even more evident when classes of the least academically-able students are considered. My own experience illustrates the disaster of such a class.

When the Ministry of Education permitted 'undestreaming' of grade 9 classes, the science department to which I had been assigned for the last semester of my teaching career decided to collect together the least able students (based on their first semester performance) in one class.

Of the 27 students, 21 had been identified with learning/behavioural problems. Despite my undisputed talents at singing and dancing, after about 30 minutes a large core of the male students would begin a systematic destruction of the laboratory.

Of course, no one seriously thought that these students would actually learn some science, and thus the baleful effects of semestering pertained only to crowd control problems.

It was another story, however, when it came to my university-bound students. From my first year of teaching, I had found that it was impossible to complete the course material in the senior science subjects, and my concerns were echoed by others within the department.

While I do not have any data other than my own experiences, my colleagues and I found that we were able to cover even less material under the semester system. My impression is that the 75% figure quoted in the Mathematics Teachers' Report to the Ministry is about right.

(In 1998, Mr. Cropp retired to the Peterborough area where he reverted to 40-minute periods.)