

Best Practices – Multi-Section Courses¹

April 28, 2015

Concordia is committed to academic freedom of the individual professor to design the presentation of the course(s) and to teach the course(s) assigned to them provided that the course content agrees with the authorized university calendar description. Multi-section courses taught by several instructors can be a special challenge for both students and instructors. In addition to the customary responsibility to provide a welcome and supportive learning environment, multi-section courses also require the professors to demonstrate an equitable treatment of students across all sections of the course. “Equitable treatment” includes similar course content, similar evaluative exercises, and a similar grading scheme. Pronounced differences in any of these areas can lead to a sense of unfair treatment from a student’s perspective.

Since no formal university guidelines or best practices document exists at Concordia concerning multi-section courses, a task force was formed in Winter 2015 to consolidate and refine best practices. The task force was composed of Associate Deans, Student Academic Services from the Faculties of Arts and Science, Engineering and Computer Sciences, the John Molson School of Business as well as a representative from the Concordia University Part-Time Faculty Association, and was chaired by the Vice-Provost, Teaching and Learning. The task force took as its mandate the creation of best practices as a means of guiding Departments and Faculties in the teaching of multi-section courses and the evaluation of students and students’ final examinations in multi-section courses. The draft of the guidelines was also circulated to the Associate Dean, Academic Affairs, Faculty of Fine Arts for input. These guidelines are presented in accordance with Concordia University Full-time Faculty Association and the Concordia University Part-time Faculty Association Collective Agreements.

Faculties and departments should clarify their own “best practices”, in accordance with the principles of this document for multi-section courses, in a written document which is readily available to all faculty members.

Multi-Section Course Advisory Committee (MSCAC)

To ensure consistency and equity across the sections on various topics (e.g., textbooks, examinations, course outlines), it is recommended that an advisory committee be called periodically by the head of the unit. Membership may include, but is not limited, to the following:

- One or more full-time faculty member who teaches in the program in which the course resides;
- One or more part-time faculty member who teaches or has taught the course(s) in question;
- The course co-ordinator, if applicable;
- The head of the unit, ex officio;
- The undergraduate program director or undergraduate program advisor, as applicable.

The Multi-Section Advisory Committee (MSCAC) discusses issues such as the format of the final examination (whether a common, or separate final examination, an open book or closed book examination), the choice of textbook(s), the grading and grade conversions schemes

¹“Multi-section” refers courses with two or class sections in one term.

(<http://www.concordia.ca/academics/undergraduate/calendar/current/sec16/16.html#b16.3.3>) and the teaching qualifications.

MSCAC also receives recommendations for improvement from all professors teaching the multi-section course(s). The MSCAC oversees that the teaching plan is effective and being followed appropriately.

1. Course Outline

The Office of the Provost has created and disseminated a course outline guide for instructor's use (insert link here). The MSCAC ensures consistency in course outlines across all sections.

2. Textbooks

The MSCAC approves the choice of textbook(s) for a multi-section course. The adoption of a single textbook or a choice of textbooks is ideally done by consensus.

3. Examinations

The MSCAC approves the process for the creation and marking of common examinations.

Any time there is common examination, it is recommended that all professors teaching the course in any semester have input into the creation and marking of the final examination. It is critical to allow sufficient time for faculty members to give feedback to the common examination questions and to allow for revision before the examination script needs to be finalized.

Input into and creation of the examination can be achieved by different models, such as:

1. One designated individual (course co-ordinator or professor) makes a call soliciting potential questions for the common examination; the questions are collected into one format; the questions are then reviewed by all. Sufficient time to allow for this revision is necessary in order to make any stipulated submission deadlines.
2. The course co-ordinator prepares the examination script after consultation with the instructor(s) of the course in question. Sufficient time to allow for instructors to give feedback before any stipulated submission deadlines is necessary.

4. Marking of Final Examinations

The following examples detail some of the practices which may be useful in guiding departmental practice in the marking of final examinations. Only a selected number of examples are presented here, as other practices may be more effective depending upon departmental or disciplinary circumstances. In all cases, faculty members are expected to use their professional judgement.

A marking rubric (evaluation guide), for ensuring consistency and fairness across all sections, is prepared in consultation with all faculty members teaching the relevant course in that semester. Once the rubric has been finalized, arrangements for marking common examinations fall into two basic categories:

1. The faculty members are responsible for marking the examination scripts of their own sections using the rubric distributed to them by the course co-ordinator, after the consultation process described above.

Faculty members mark the common examination independently at different times. This allows for the faculty member to mark at his/her own schedule.

2. While consulting the rubric, one faculty member marks question one across all sections; another faculty member marks question two, etc. Each faculty member tallies the grades for his/her section.

Faculty members voluntarily meet together in one area to mark the common examination at one time. This has the advantage that faculty members can discuss anomalies on the spot and resolve potential difficulties.

Faculty members mark the common examination independently at different times. This allows for the faculty member to mark at his/her own schedule, but necessitates the exchange of examinations between faculty members.

3. While consulting the established rubric, faculty members exchange examinations so that faculty members do not mark the examinations of students from the sections which they have taught.

Faculty members may mark independently or together as described in 1. and 2.

4. In order to familiarize themselves with the established rubric, professors voluntarily meet to mark a select few examinations together. Professors then subsequently complete the marking of the examinations of the section which they have taught on their own.