



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING THE OLD FASHIONED WAY: HAVE THEM READ THE TEXTBOOK

“Students don’t read the textbook!” This is a consistent faculty complaint. I, too, have been exasperated by students who have not looked at the course material since the last class meeting. Why don’t they read assigned material? Despite all of the rants and raves about the subject, I think the answer is quite simple: they don’t have to. This is a lesson I learned quickly in college. I confess I did not read a textbook as an undergraduate. I found that I could pass my classes without doing the reading assignments; like my students, I wanted to do only what I had to in order to get the grade I wanted and use the remainder of my time for recreation.

In my first three years of teaching, my students found they could pass easily without opening the text. My frustration over their lack of preparation was not diminished by the confession of my own similar behavior. The opposite was the case. I resolved to construct a syllabus that would encourage students to read the text material and come to class prepared to think about the assigned ideas. I assigned specific sections of the text, required students to take notes on those sections, and had them turn in their notes to be graded. This process was simply too labor intensive, both physically and mentally; I wanted to get all of their notes graded and returned promptly.

However, I had seen improvement in student involvement, so I didn’t want to give up on the note-taking assignment entirely. I finally hit upon the idea of collecting only a handful of student notes on very brief readings. Using an electronic grade book, I randomize the class; and instead of collecting the usual 35-40 student notes each class period, I only collect notes from the top five on the randomized list. Now, for each class period I assign between one and four very specific readings and randomly collect notes. These notes are graded and returned by the next class period, far easier

to accomplish than when I was trying to grade and return 30+ right away. Of course, some students invariably escape having their notes collected via the random selection process, so occasionally I manipulate the process to make certain that an appropriate number of grades will be earned by every student.

Students’ notes must include the key vocabulary terms, a summary paragraph of what they learned from the reading section, and any questions, comments, or observations they have about the section. While each note collection is only worth a small number of points, I have found that the points provide a sufficient incentive for a significant number of students to prepare for class.

After about six semesters of assigning and collecting text notes, I began to wonder if it really was making any difference in student learning. So, I discontinued the process for one semester. The change in student comportment was immediate and profound. I had grown accustomed to students asking questions and “running” with the material, and what I had returned to was a classroom of 30-40 students who were hearing material for the first time. I reinstated the process of requiring note taking, and now I cannot imagine teaching a course without it.

If you are frustrated by your students’ disregard for reading the text, create the appropriate incentives for them to read. Grading their notes about assigned reading material has worked for me. Of course, I have discovered that some students do not participate, but most open their texts, write down terms, and give some thought to what they have read—that is much more effort than I used to get from them. Best of all, I am free of that dreaded faculty angst over student performance.

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WRITING IS A KEY TO LEARNING

As important as writing is to the learning process, grading written assignments is a time-consuming activity, further complicated by students' woeful lack of basic grammar and punctuation skills. A professor's time spent grading a written assignment increases in direct proportion to the lack of the student's skills in writing it.

Yet, with all the benefits that eventually can come from writing, we should not just give up. Faced with the growing conviction that my history students needed these benefits, I began to experiment with various writing assignments. Over the years, these assignments have included essay questions on exams, critical book reviews, and research papers.

Each of these assignments had its set of problems, however. Essay questions not only required an enormous amount of my grading time, but the time constraints during an exam did not encourage polished essays. On critical book reviews, I found the tendency simply to report the major facts was an overwhelming temptation to my students. In order to foster *analysis* of what they had read, I gave them a series of questions to answer in their reviews. Unfortunately, that only led to a mechanical style of writing rather than the more fluid style I was attempting to solicit. Regarding research papers, I was troubled that successful completion of English Composition I or II was not a prerequisite for enrolling in my history courses. Therefore, was I penalizing most of my students simply for not having taken one or both composition courses?

During the last two semesters, I have modified my research paper assignment and become more comfortable with it. While I have structured the assignment so that it cannot hurt students' final grades, as long as they write a paper and hand it in on time, it is possible for the paper to boost final grades by a letter if students follow the detailed instructions contained in the course syllabus, including samples of title page and bibliography entries. In addition, the paper must reflect good grammar, punctuation, and spelling standards; and it must contain at least a one-half page summary of the student's own thinking about the topic. In this way, a student who does not test well may be motivated to seek help with the paper and ultimately develop his writing abilities.

I also allow students to choose their own topics and encourage them to expand their ideas about the subjects they can address, including all aspects of human cultures—e.g., music, art, drama, and sports. They are surprised to discover that there is more to history than

they first believed. And, I hope that these surprises will help strengthen their interest in their assignments, in particular, and in history, generally.

At first, I was somewhat concerned that this new assignment would result in grade inflation. However, it has become obvious that for the research paper to boost a final grade, the student's current grade must be very close to the higher. Also, there are some students who find a way not to pay close attention to instructions or who do not make sufficient effort to help themselves. Although I need more data, early indications lead me to believe that my grade inflation fears were unfounded.

The testimony I offer to my colleagues who have not ventured heavily into writing assignments is to accept the challenge. America's workforce needs to develop thinking skills—a by-product of learning to write and write well. And even should writing-across-the-curriculum in college go out of educational style, thinking—and written communication—never will. Spread the word—English is not just for English class!

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