



PRINCIPLES OF INTEGRATING LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Because coming to class is never sufficient, however, college teachers should give careful attention to what they ask students to do on their own. This is the subject of this article. Three kinds of outside activities instructors commonly require of students – reading, writing, and observing – are discussed in the material that follows, and specific suggestions are offered on ways to integrate these activities with classroom lectures and discussions to produce superior learning and motivation.

KEYWORDS

Written Assignments, Reading Assignments, Objectives, Many courses, Contemporary photocopy technology;

INTRODUCTION

Attending class is akin to regular religious observance: The ritual or sermon is less important for what it teaches directly than for its motivational impact on what believers do between services. Coming to class is essential to mastering the content of a college course, yet most learning actually occurs outside the classroom. Recall and recognition of specific information most often result from solitary reading and concentrated study. Independent thinking about

course content is also fostered by written assignments that students complete on their own. For some subjects, firsthand observation of the phenomena, research methods, or artistic performances under study provides an essential framework in which to organize learned facts. Most courses can benefit from occasional field trips or observations that students make on their own. Do not let this book's emphasis on college teaching as artistic performance in an

interpersonal arena obscure the fact that the abilities to read and write critically have long been the fundamental skills of an educated person, and these are developed largely through individual efforts outside the classroom.

Students do learn some content details during class, but such learning is superficial and temporary' if their only exposure to information is lecture. To get the most out of class presentations and to master the content most easily, students should read something about the topic both before and after class. Even if assignments are read after the lecture or when an exam draws near, reading gives students a second exposure to the ideas presented in class. Having written materials available is essential for learning of depth and permanence.

If so much learning occurs outside class, why do we hold classes at all? Coming to class introduces students to a mature lecturer's perspective and models the thinking skills they need in order to evaluate what they read. Skilled instructors can demonstrate ways to pose a literary or intellectual argument or design a scientific study and to view the results from the distance of time and competing explanations. Nothing aids students' understanding and evaluation of what they read so much as a professor who reveals the way he or she thinks about a content area. Whether lectures or discussions are used to increase students' intellectual appreciation of a topic, the end result makes coming to class a valuable aid to what students learn on their own.

Still, most of the benefits students gain from attending class is motivational. College classes at their best have an aura of magic— they are exciting and pleasurable experiences that engage students' attention and stimulate their imaginations richly. Such classes create a positive emotional response to the subject that

makes it much more likely that students will eagerly perform what is asked of them outside of class. If nothing else, coming to class regularly reminds students they are taking a course and have duties to perform, assignments to complete. [1]

Reading Assignments - Like the topics chosen for a course, readings should be selected both for their importance and for their interest. Considerable deliberation is required to assemble reading assignments that meet these dual criteria. Readings should be clearly written and at an appropriate conceptual level for the students being taught. One initial decision is whether to use prepared textbooks or a collection of individual readings chosen by the instructor.

Most reading for college courses is done in prepared texts. Yet some instructors are reluctant to use textbooks, believing that they will appear shallow or unintellectual unless they assign original sources or put together their own set of readings.

Contemporary photocopy technology has made it easier than ever for teachers to design their own texts, though tightened copyright guidelines have restricted this option. The choice of a prepared text or original sources should be determined by one's objectives more than anything else. In lower or introductory level courses a college teacher must ensure that students master a body of information. The reading skills of freshmen, especially, are usually not sufficiently developed for them to work independently for most of the semester. For these courses a single comprehensive text is probably best.

If an instructor wants students to increase thinking skills and gain mature opinions, he or she should have them read original materials. The abilities to weight evidence and to contrast various points of view are



most easily taught by having students read isolated materials and discuss them in class or in writing. For this reason, original materials rather than textbooks are usually used in advanced courses or small seminars. [2]

Many courses fall in between the introductory and advanced levels. Fortunately, factual and evaluative objectives are not mutually exclusive. Both goals can be pursued if the characteristics of the students and the nature of the content are taken into account. For many courses the best choice is a single text to present the meat of the content, supplemented by readings to give students a taste of the original sources, to enhance their interest, and to serve as the basis for critical thinking.

Which readings should students own individually and which should they share? Reserve readings save students money, but waiting for available copies at the library costs them valuable time. Sharing readings also decreases the probability that students will read and study them sufficiently. Many students dislike going to the library and devote little time to reserve reading. Experienced instructors usually ask students to purchase major works (texts, literature), but they place on reserve short supplemental papers (critical essays, research reports, newspaper or magazine articles).

Other considerations are important in deciding which readings students should buy. For example, cost is always of concern to students. A teacher should always find out what different books cost and choose the cheaper work of comparable quality. A hardcover book should rarely be assigned if a paperback version is available. If an instructor believes a book should become part of students' permanent libraries, he or she should order both covers so students can choose. Having a personal copy of a book increases the probability that a student will reread and underline it,

so most teachers encourage purchases. However, if the book chosen is much more expensive than other texts, many students will not buy their own copies.

Readings should be integrated with class activities. A teacher should tell students why particular texts and reserve readings were chosen and what he or she expects the students to do with them. Students are more likely to read assignments day by day (rather than must before exams) if the readings are pegged to particular lectures. A written outline handed out on the first day that pairs class meetings with specific reading assignments will help students pace their reading. As much as possible, instructors should avoid skipping around in texts, because some students will inevitably read straight through and thus cover the wrong chapters for class or exams. [3]

Written Assignments - Term papers are common in college courses, but many students – and instructors – do not enjoy them. Independent thinking and clear writing are very difficult for many students, so they avoid subjects or courses that require substantial written work. Even students who write successfully may be reminded of past difficulties with choosing a focused topic, finding materials in the library, or simply getting themselves to begin writing. Written assignments put stress on all students because they involve independent thinking self-revelation on paper, and, inevitably, evaluation many college teachers also are ambivalent about written work. Some avoid assigning papers at all; most dread grading them. For some, disappointment over the worst papers more than offsets the pleasure of reading the best ones. Late or sloppy papers are nuisances, and possibly plagiarized papers can kill enthusiasm for ever assigning certain topics again.

In spite of these drawbacks, written assignments are unmatched for getting students to think

independently and critically. Students will improve their writing only by continuing to write long after composition courses are over. Fortunately, it is possible to overcome many of the negative aspects of written assignments. First, a word is needed about the objective's papers can meet.

Objectives for Writer Assignments. One objective for written work is to help students hone their writing skills. Writing is an essential skill of educated persons, and its development is the responsibility of all college faculties.

A similar technique involves asking students to keep a journal of their experiences in class, while reading, or while observing a subject on their own. Critical autobiographical notations are particularly useful when teachers ask students for their personal reactions or attitudes. For example, students in a criticism course may be asked to evaluate their reactions to plays or films seen on their own rather than to simply list those reactions. Again, what students write is less important than the fact that the journal motivates observation and evaluation of their own experience. [4]

Teachers commonly assign written papers to teach students to use the Library. Written assignments may require students to search card catalogues and research indexes, locate books and scholarly articles, and scan various works for passages relevant to their topic. The quality of the students' conclusions may be less important to the instructor than the intimate familiarity with library resources gained in the process.

Some instructors ask students to apply course concepts to specific problems or issues through written assignments. For example, students may be given literature to read and evaluate using the methods demonstrated in the course. In the sciences,

students may be asked to solve specific theoretical or applied problems. For any subject, students may be asked to contrast and compare different research methods or theories and draw independent conclusions. Bloom's objectives of analysis and synthesis are both met by these "thought papers." In such application assignments, the complexity, sophistication, or creativity of students' thinking is of most concern.

As instructors' objectives for students' written work become more abstract and complex, grading criteria and procedures change. Logs or journals are most appropriately graded pass-fail; students either did what was asked or not. Though an instructor may be tempted to grade research papers on their length and on the amount of library research a student appears to have done, it is better to assign grades on the quality of the student's organization and integration of ideas. Grades on thought papers are typically based on the quality of original thinking – a very difficult determination. Evaluative papers are even harder to grade, and it is critical that a teacher evaluate students' thinking processes rather than the degree to which they share the instructor's opinions.

College teachers may assign written work for many reasons. In assigning a paper, the first step is to state one's objectives for doing so. Many students do not recognize that there is more than one type of written assignment, so it is wise for the teacher to spell out what type of writing he or she has in mind. Clear objectives and instructions help students understand an assignment and complete it properly.

Teachers can also help students with their writing by making examples of particularly good papers available for their inspection. Many students have never read an excellent paper and can benefit greatly from examining the writing style and conceptual level of

their classmates' work. Students who write fine papers are invariably flattered that theirs were chosen as models and willingly allow them to be copied for students in later courses to see. [5]

Much of the aversion that many students feel toward written assignments stems from a lack of knowledge about what goes into producing a good paper. The suggestions offered here will not make all students relish writing papers, but they can make students more likely to learn something about writing (and rewriting) as well as reach the other objectives that the instructor has for assigning written work.

Group observations or field trips are more structured than individual observations and are therefore less voluntary. It requires less initiative to take part in an activity the teacher has organized than to seek a personal experience. Scheduled field trips give students valuable firsthand contact with interesting events, people, or situations. An instructor should try to schedule field trips in the last half of a term when the class has developed some cohesion. [6]

If at all possible, the teacher should accompany the class. He or she can answer questions and lead discussion about what the students see and relate the experience to course content. The trip to and from the site also gives students and instructor many opportunities to interact informally, for students to ask those personal questions they may have wondered about all term. Coming after the first exams and initial period of unrealistic expectations, this social interaction aids students' progress toward independent relationships with an authority figure. Informal contact with the instructor also motivates students to work harder on remaining papers or exams. Group observations improve interpersonal interaction and raise morale in addition to giving

students firsthand experience with examples of course content.

If these activities are so positive, why not require them of everyone or give credit to participants? Much of the value of optional activities comes from the voluntary nature of students' participation. Requiring a field trip denies students their independence and the chance to see themselves as seeking learning on their own. Also, field trips are too likely to conflict with some students' time commitments to justify requiring them. Encouraging students to learn on their own and giving them attention when they do is fine, but using the carrot and stick contingencies of grades is unwarrantable for optional experiences of the kind discussed here.

The teacher as decision maker is an area for exploration which includes a vast, and yet poorly understood, dimension of language teaching. Many scholars suggest that teaching is decision making. This means that teachers must make sound decisions in their interactions with students. The number of decisions teachers have to make daily is astonishing. An American educator Murray estimates the number at 1,500. Skilled teachers not only make numerous decisions but also make them well. The effective teacher structures the classroom so that it runs smoothly and efficiently.

This enables more teacher time to be devoted to the most important decisions – decisions that will improve student learning. For example, “How much lecturing should I do?” “How many questions should be asked?” “How much reinforcement should be used?” “What is the best method to assess students' skills?” “How can Tanya be motivated?” “Can Peter do better in class?” and “Are students interested in the lesson?” represent only a few questions a teacher may ask himself on a normal day. Also, note that these decisions are made



before, during, and after instruction time. What theoretical knowledge does a teacher need to be an effective decision maker? [7]

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