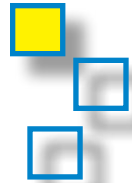


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Encouraging Students to Read Before Class ... Is It Hopeless?

This is a topic on the minds of many of my faculty colleagues (and me!) -- how to get students to complete the assigned readings before class...or at all. My initial thoughts on this have always been that the readings have to be relevant:

- To achieving the learning objectives
- To completing the assignments and projects of the course
- To student assessment

To the world outside of the course (whether in support of future study, of being a professional, of being a citizen)

Beyond this, however, there are important considerations that have to do with student readiness and time, and faculty expectations and habits.

Student readiness and time

Are students skilled at reading academic text? They may do a lot of reading (of materials like blogs, Facebook/MySpace pages, text messages, popular media text, and so on), but that sort of reading doesn't translate well to academic reading (see previous post on October 2, 2008). Also, students may not know the difference between skimming, scanning, directed reading, deep reading, and so on. Being clear about what we want students to do with their reading, and how to do it requires our attention. So, we need to scaffold students' reading via modeling and think-alouds, and providing them with examples of how we would mark and/or take notes on the text. In addition, we need to assist students in translating their approach to reading to an academic approach to reading. Spending some time on this sort of prereading instruction will help students learn how to process academic text.

Related, we also need to keep in mind that we have prior knowledge -- the schema -- to process new reading on topics we know about. Students may not. So, it takes them

longer to process. An additional thing we can do is help students connect new reading to what they already know.

Do students have time to read the text? An interesting study by Ronald Carver several years ago (1985, How good are some of the world's best readers, Reading Research Quarterly, 20(4), 389-419) compared the word count and comprehension rate of strong student readers with people who read as a consistent part of their profession (such as faculty). There was a 150 word per minute difference between the strong student readers and the professional readers. The takeaway for me is the realization that some students do not read as fast as we do, which means that it may take them much more time to complete an assigned reading; something that takes us an hour to read, may take students 2-4 hours to read. If we are asking students to do other things between classes too, we need to take time-on-reading/task into consideration.

Also, students often have legitimate constraints on their time. Many of them work 15-20 hours a week, some have dependent care responsibilities, and many are concurrently taking several courses. The last thing they need are reading assignments that are not directly and clearly relevant to the work of the course (and beyond). I deal with this by making sure that the reading is critical to being able to complete assignments, and I tie the reading into those assignments in terms of assessment. And, I scale back my reading assignments so that students can deeply process, engage with, and apply a few readings, as opposed to assigning many readings and finding that they barely remember anything they've read and cannot apply the content of the readings to assignments.

Faculty expectations and habits

Are we clear about why we are asking students to read something? We need to remind (and keep reminding) students about the connections between the reading

assignments and the course assignments and assessment (and the connection to the profession, etc.). Also, it doesn't hurt to share your enthusiasm for the reading -- why you think the reading is good, what some of the "a-ha" excerpts were for you, what you would like them to focus on, and so on. It sure would be nice to instill a love of reading in the process...

Do we lecture on (or provide students with a summary of) the same material that's in the text? When we do this, students quickly learn that they don't need to do the reading as long as they attend to the lecture and/or summary.

Do we engage students in activities that require them to apply the readings? Again, another thing students figure out quickly is that if we do not actively have them do something with the readings in class or for projects, that they don't need to read. And, it has to go beyond asking for volunteers to share their thoughts about the reading. Students need to know -- preferably in advance -- what you will be asking them to do with the readings during the next class meeting (for example, involving them in small group discussions using discussion protocols). This way they know how to prepare, what to prepare...and that everyone has to prepare (so, no hiding in the back of the room). [Note: I have several blog posts on facilitating discussions and using discussion

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4th of July Holiday: July 5, 2010

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Dealing with Difficult Students: The Narcissist



*Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from the whitepaper *Coping with Seven Disruptive Personality Types in the Classroom*. This post deals with the narcissistic student.*

STUDENTS WITH A narcissistic personality style are apt to challenge instructors on relatively minor matters, as well as cast scathing aspersions on their professors' characters and their very qualifications to teach.

For example, one rather young, unmarried, and childless psychology instructor at a Midwestern college once complained about how some of her older students who were parents would blister her with complaints that she did not know enough about the psychology of children because she didn't have any.

A pertinent question here is how they even knew that she had no children. In this particular case, she had shared this personal information with them when they pressured her to disclose it. Clearly, there was no reason for her to share this information with her students, and they were crossing personal boundaries by pressuring her to disclose it. Had she remained tight-lipped about her personal life, she might have averted this particular form of attempted denigration and devaluation.

This struggling instructor merely needed to be reminded that there are many people with children who have poorly understood and atrociously raised them. Conversely, there are many people who do not have their own children but who, like she does, understand the psychology of children exceptionally well. In other words, having children does not necessarily qualify a person to teach child psychology, and not having children is not a disqualifying factor for this assignment.

How to Respond

This type of student can be very hard on an instructor's confidence and sense of self-worth. When confronted with a student who challenges your worth, remind yourself that

you were hired to do your job based upon the strength of your qualifications.

Keep in mind, for your own protection, that self-entitled students do not respect personal boundaries or privacy especially well. They may attempt to intrude on your privacy by asking inappropriate questions. Try to refrain from answering personal questions asked by students with personal self-disclosures unless you are absolutely certain that your disclosures provide an absolutely relevant and positive contribution to the topic under discussion.

A short, straightforward comment to inappropriate inquiries is all that is required, such as, "I'm sorry, but information about my personal life is neither relevant nor essential to the topic under discussion, and therefore I prefer to maintain my personal privacy here and will do all I can to respect and protect yours." That should suffice.

There is some indication that this current generation of college students includes more people who exhibit self-entitled behavior. Assuming this is correct, we can expect to have to deal with more narcissistic traits than we might have seen a mere generation ago. In the past, students seemed to be somewhat more deferential, more conforming, and more self-sacrificing than are some of the students we are seeing on campuses today. If this is the case, then instructors will have to adjust their behavior accordingly to accommodate the growing presence of certain narcissistic characteristics among their students.

Narcissism is just the beginning. If you're struggling with difficult students at your institution, *Coping with Seven Disruptive Personality Types in the Classroom* will provide the practical and effective solutions that will prepare college officials to handle the full range of student misbehavior

Magna Publications in Effective Classroom Management, April 7, 2010, [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/dealing-with-difficult-students-the-narcissist/], April 7, 2010.

READING

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protocols. I use discussion protocols all the time, and find them to be highly effective in establishing expectations for reading.]

Do we hold students accountable for completing the readings? This gets at assessment. If we are going to ask students to complete readings, how will we determine if they have been completed and what is the students' reward or payoff for completing the readings (beyond the "learning is reward enough" payoff)? I prefer more authentic approaches to this, so I require students to use the readings to defend their instructional design work; for example, students have to submit design documents in support of a lesson they have developed, and in those design documents they have to use the readings to support their decisions (and I often require them to triangulate their citations so they can demonstrate how more than one author/reading supports each decision). But, I also like assessment strategies that focus on specific readings, such as having students:

- Write one-minute papers summarizing the readings -- I then assess and award points for those summaries
- Assign *inspiration points* to each other for contributing valuable perspectives, ideas, counterarguments, summaries and so on to the discussion -- I track those points and apply them to the final grades [Note: For more on inspiration points, see the [post in this blog](#).]

Getting students to read in preparation for class is difficult, but if you attend to issues related to reading preparation, reading assignments (in and out of class), and assessment, you can take appropriate action and help students be more successful.

Joni Dunlap, Encouraging Students to Read Before Class, Blog: Thoughts on Teaching, October 24, 2008, [http://thoughtson-teaching-jdunlap.blogspot.com/search/label/Design], April 7, 2010.

If a doctor, lawyer, or dentist had 40 people in his office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn't want to be there and were causing trouble, and the doctor, lawyer, or dentist, without assistance, had to treat them all with professional excellence for nine months, then he might have some conception of the classroom teacher's job.

~Donald D. Quinn