Faculty who assign writing in their courses know that it enhances student learning, yet many do not require written assignments because they have learned that evaluating student work takes a lot of time. Even the most seasoned writing teachers often spend five minutes per page responding to student texts. With 20 students in a class and a three-page paper, that comes to five intense hours of grading per assignment. For teachers who have less experience responding to student writing, grading consumes even more time.

Too often conversations about efficient grading focus exclusively on the process of marking final drafts. Approaches such as minimal marking or grading sheets can reduce the amount of time involved in marking those drafts; however, they are not always effective. To make student writing a rich and enriching component of a course, it must be embedded in the course’s design and classroom activities. We must think of designing assignments, working with drafts, and grading final drafts as an interconnected process. The following strategies make grading shortcuts on final drafts more likely to work for everyone:

Designing Assignments

• Sequence written assignments from less to more complex intellectual work. Think of your assignments as guides to the kinds of thinking and writing that your discipline requires. If, for example, you want students in a psychology class to write a literature review of five recent studies on the effects of antidepressants on children, start with a short assignment that asks students to write a one-paragraph summary of one study and a one-paragraph analysis of that same study. When the student is asked to synthesize five studies, she will know how to begin. In fact, she will have already started.
• Discuss sample responses to major written assignments. Sample papers should offer a clear fit with the assignment at hand, but should not be so successful that they intimidate students. Usually a solid “B” paper makes an effective sample draft. As for the content of sample papers, topics based on previous course material or on engaging examples from popular culture are much more effective than a direct hit on the assignment’s topic.
• Use grading criteria or rubrics to set a tone of encouragement rather than punishment. Define the terms that you use in these rubrics. If you ask for a “reasonably complex” thesis statement, provide an example of what one looks like. If you require secondary sources, list a few sources so that your students can distinguish them from primary sources. Format with hollow boxes instead of bullets, ask questions rather than giving commands, emphasize what an effective paper does rather than what a lousy paper does not do, and arrange criteria from most to least important.

Working with Drafts

• Personalize your responses to student work. Instead of automatically responding to every students’ work, a process that often reinforces a tell-me-what-you-want mentality, require that students ask you two questions about their drafts. The more time and effort that they put into their questions, the more useful your feedback is likely to be. This sends the message that you respect the student’s ownership of her ideas and want to provide feedback that makes her draft a better paper rather than a closer version of some perfect paper that exists in your own mind.
• Emphasize your role as a reader rather than an evaluator. Rather than saying, “This essay lacks effective transitions,” say: “Sally, I was interested in the point that you make about Hamlet’s insanity in paragraph two, but as a reader, I was confused about how this point is related to the quote from Claudius that you discuss in paragraph three. How does Claudius’s language affect our reaction to Hamlet’s behavior? This is the question that you need to answer at the beginning of paragraph three.” This example offers a question that guides the student to the next step in the revision process.
• Make writing a communal problem that everyone in the class is working together to solve. Encourage students...
Designing Assignments to Minimize Cyber-Cheating

Take the plethora of information available online, add the cut-and-paste feature, throw in lots of pressure to get good grades, and plagiarism becomes an appealing option to almost any student. Arthur Sterngold (citation below) holds students accountable, but he doesn’t place all the blame there. Some of the blame, he contends, belongs to us and the way we design assignments — take the traditional term paper, for example. It requires strong research skills, critical thinking, and clear discursive prose. “Yet most undergraduates have weak research and writing skills. . . . Most college students do not know how to formulate workable hypotheses or research questions, evaluate the quality and appropriateness of source materials, or integrate data and ideas from multiple sources.” (p. 19)

Some professors believe that students should come to college knowing how to write research papers. With as much content as professors have to cover, they can’t take time to teach research skills, assuming they have the interest and skills necessary to teach those skills. In these classes, the term papers get assigned at the beginning of the course, they’re worth a lot of credit, completed outside of class, and due in final form at the end of the course.

And it is in those classes students are often the most motivated to plagiarize material. Sterngold maintains that the term-paper assignment can be designed so that it is almost impossible to plagiarize. Here’s a sample of the design features he recommends:

- **Break up major research papers into smaller assignments** — “Dividing a research assignment into a series of more manageable components forces students to work on the project over time instead of trying to write the entire paper at the last minute when they may be most tempted to plagiarize.” (p. 18)
- **Require students to write about course-specific topics** — The advice here is to tie topics closely to course objectives and content. “I often require students to write research papers relating to course topics to campus speakers or current news events.” (pp. 18-19) The more course-specific the paper topic, the more difficult it is to find material that can be directly pasted into the paper.
- **Choose some required source material for your students** — Select major reference works in your field and sources you know well. Students are less likely to plagiarize if you have demonstrated your knowledge of the sources.
- **Incorporate assignments into class discussions and tests** — “I frequently call on students during class discussions to give examples from their . . . research that relate to the day’s topics.” (p. 19) This practice encourages students to work more persistently on their papers at the same time it makes clear who is not working on their paper.
- **Meet with students to discuss their research** — This reinforces the importance of the assignment and helps students develop the kind of comfort and familiarity with their topic and sources that ends up making them confident enough to rely on their own ideas and opinions.
- **Require students to submit printouts of source materials** — This all but ensures that students won’t plagiarize from these sources. If it sounds cumbersome and daunting, Sterngold reports, “Reading over the students’ article-packets is less tedious and time-consuming than you might fear if you assign research topics that interest you.” (p. 20)

If a student is determined to plagiarize, no set of strategies is failsafe. But careful assignment design can decrease the motivation and make the plagiarism process a much more difficult one.

An Update on Learning Styles/Cognitive Styles Research

Research on learning styles now spans four decades. The amount of work ebbs and flows with more flowing recently. Interestingly, work on learning styles continues to occur across a wide spectrum of disciplines, including many quite removed from psychology, the disciplinary home of many of the central concepts and theories that ground notions of learning style.

With research happening in so many different places on the disciplinary map, the collected body of work looks diffuse and fragmented. Nonetheless, there is agreement about some central issues. “There is general acceptance that the manner in which individuals choose to or are inclined to approach a learning situation has impact on performance and achievement of learning outcomes.” (p. 420)

About terminology there is wide disagreement. “The terms ‘learning style’, ‘cognitive style’ and ‘learning strategy’ are...frequently used imprecisely in theoretical and empirical accounts of the topic.” (p. 420) And that imprecision is reflected at the practitioner level as well where, for example, learning style and cognitive style are often used interchangeably. Some experts also do not make a distinction between them but when distinctions are made, they typically follow these lines. Cognitive style reflects “an individual’s typical or habitual mode of problem solving, thinking, perceiving and remembering.” (p. 420) Comparatively, learning style reflects “a concern with the application of cognitive style in a learning situation.” (pp. 420-421). The distinction is captured this way by another researcher: “Cognitive styles are the ways in which different individuals characteristically approach different cognitive tasks; learning styles are the ways in which individuals characteristically approach different learning tasks.” (p. 421)

When researchers make distinctions between learning styles and strategies, they are trying to sort through an old psychological argument about whether something is a trait or a state. Is a person’s learning style stable over time, something akin to a structure, therefore a trait, or does it change with experience or situation, something like a process, therefore a state? Some argue that what actually occurs is like the motherboard-software computer relationship. Learning style may have structure but that structure is responsive—the demands of a situation allow for change and adaptation. Those who make sharp distinctions between learning styles and learning strategies view learning style as a trait and see learning strategies as being what changes when students select between strategies.

The article referenced below lists, describes, and discusses 23 different instruments. The article’s purpose is not evaluation in the sense of trying to identify the best or ideal measure but to use description and comparison to help researchers and practitioners make better decisions about which measures to use when.

The author references and describes an onion metaphor as a way of organizing how the various measures get at the different constructs considered part of learning and cognitive style. At the outer layer, meaning they are most observable, at the same time they are most susceptible to influence, therefore making them the least stable measures are instruments that rate student’s “instructional preference” or their “preferred choice of learning environment.” (p. 423) Next in are instruments that measure how much social interaction students prefer during learning. The third and most stable layer of instruments seek to measure “information processing style.” The well-known Kolb instrument falls into this category. And finally are innermost measures of “cognitive personality style” like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator.

How students go about learning, the approaches they use and the results they net is such an important part of tailoring teaching effectiveness to meet learning needs. It is also an area that illustrates how nascent the scholarship of integration continues to be. Nonetheless, as an article that brings together, organizes, and characterizes the measurement instruments used both in research and practice, it makes a valuable contribution and is definitely a resource worth having in one’s file.


...Use familiar examples and storytelling to create a shorthand way of talking about common writing issues. In class I might say: “Good conclusions are more like buffets than plated dinners. An effective conclusion offers a clear focus—Chinese, Indian, or Italian—but doesn’t force you to eat your moo-shu in a pancake.” Later, when a student offers a conclusion with no clear controlling idea, I might say, “I feel like I’m being served beer at a breakfast buffet. You offer a lot of good ideas, but I don’t understand the logic of how they are related to one another.” Examples like this not only take the edge off the criticism, they also help students understand shorthand comments on final drafts—“Conclusion lacks focus and is too repetitive.”
Why I Like Freshmen

By Barbara Mezeske, Hope College, MI
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In my college, there are some who look upon classes filled with first-year students as the penance they must pay in order to qualify for the real business of education: teaching juniors and seniors. Freshman composition is the assignment you must bear in order to teach critical theory; intro chemistry is how you pay your dues before you are assigned research students of your own; general math goes to the part-timers, the pros teach calculus. But I would like to suggest that this sort of academic snobbery is misguided. Freshmen students are one of the delights of a teaching career.

When those traditional-aged freshmen arrive on campus at the end of summer, coming in caravans of SUVs filled to the brim with all the earthly belongings an American teenager thinks she needs, they know that they are beginning something different. They are keyed up and ready for new living arrangements, new responsibilities, a new life. Whatever their high school experience has been, they know that what is about to happen to them will be a change from the status quo. They expect to be challenged because, after all, college is the last stop before the real world, and that makes them nervous.

So they sign up for calculus because their high school math preparation makes them ready for it, never minding that an easier course might “satisfy the core.” They are curious and willing to tackle new areas of study like philosophy and art history — courses rarely available in American high schools. They regard the array of potential courses with wonder, and wish they could fit in one more course than they are allowed to take. Expecting newness and challenge, they do the best they have learned to do, simply because they think that’s the way college is.

In class, they are malleable. Smart teachers recognize this and set the bar high. I tell my freshmen writers that their end-of-semester projects must be interesting to them and to me. I tell them to be creative, to discover something new, and to involve the rest of the class in a meaningful way. So they generate all manner of technological enhancements to their classroom presentations. They invest time, invent humor, and engage with their material. I want them to work to discover and satisfy their own passions, and the best of them do just that.

Being game for new challenges is the clearest indication that freshmen have not yet learned to excel at the game played by more experienced students: the game of “just enough.” They generally don’t take first-year Spanish because they have had three years in high school, counting on an easy grade. They assume they will have 8 a.m. classes because they have always had 8 a.m. classes and don’t rule out courses based on their meeting times. They don’t know enough to shop for the easiest grade or the prof who always cancels Friday classes. They are more likely to over-achieve than to under-perform.

Of course, for some students, their tenure as freshmen lasts just about as long as it takes to scope out the scene: in some cases this is a matter of weeks. But for the lucky few, freshness remains a part of their identity all the way to graduation. And those are the students all of us, in whatever kind of institution we practice our profession, remember.

Long live the freshman in each of us!

Student Recommendations for Encouraging Participation

We regularly revisit topics in the newsletter, especially those that represent perplexing instructional problems, and getting students participating in class is certainly one of those. Across the years we highlighted work of various kinds that analyze the issues and propose solutions, all of it pertaining to the undergraduate classroom. Are there significant differences in the graduate classroom?

A recent qualitative study generated and analyzed responses from students in two graduate management accounting courses. Class context here was an important part of the study. In both courses the development of critical-thinking skills that apply to management situations were emphasized. Class discussion occurred mostly around case studies. “Students in these classes were told orally and in the syllabus to expect to be called on when their hands were not raised.” (p. 106) And, participation was graded in these courses. On the last day of the class students completed a questionnaire that asked what professors do or say that increases student participation and what professor do or say that increases or decreases the effectiveness of discussion. (p. 106) The questions used to solicit responses on these topics included both closed and open questions.

Responses clustered in six areas and identified a variety of faculty behaviors or characteristics that students said influenced participation and discussion.

• Required/graded participation — Students suggested that both participation and discussion were positively impacted when participation was required, when it counted for a significant part of the grade and when instructors used “cold-calling,” as in calling on students regardless of whether or not they volunteered. [This finding is different than other research highlighted in the newsletter where undergraduate students reported that being allowed to volunteer motivated them to participate more. See reference below]

• Incorporating ideas and experience into discussion — Students value instructor responses that elaborate on their ideas, taking them further and
Using Popular Game and Reality Show Formats to Review for Exams
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To review exams, professors often provide basic outlines, review difficult materials, and answer student questions. Students also may practice some exam questions. As an alternative to these traditional exam reviews, professors can create games based on popular television shows, particularly game and reality shows. I feel such games are valuable exam review tools because they make the exam review session unique and fun, most students are familiar with the shows so learning the rules is easy, games promote active student participation, and professors can provide immediate feedback to students. Professors can create their own versions of many popular game shows. Students can play individually or in teams. Here are several examples of games I’ve adapted successfully.

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire® (Buena Vista Entertainment)

This game allows students to practice multiple-choice questions. The professor provides a multiple-choice question. The first student to raise a hand gets to answer it. If the student answers it correctly, he or she is placed on the hot seat in front of class. The student is then given multiple-choice questions that have four possible answers but only one is correct. The student continues in the game as long as he or she gets correct answers. The first student to get 10 correct answers in a row wins the competition. If a student misses a question, he or she leaves the hot seat. Students again compete to see who will be on the hot seat.

Each student on the hot seat receives four (not three) lifelines that provide assistance in answering the questions. Each lifeline may be used only once per student. The lifelines are:
1. 50/50—the instructor narrows the possible answers to two.
2. Poll Audience—the class is polled on what they think is the correct answer.
3. Contact a friend—the student asks a friend what he or she thinks is the correct answer.
4. Open Book or Notes—the student is allowed to open his/her book or notes for 30 seconds.

Family Feud® (Fremantle Media Ltd.)

This game allows students to organize and quickly retrieve a variety of terms. The professor completes a survey of students. Questions may include what is the most important law discussed in class, what is the most significant case study discussed (both of these options provide the instructor feedback on how students orient to the content), and name a textbook term that begins with “A”. The professor compiles the information and in the next class, he or she has students (or teams) compete based on survey results. Students compete by trying to name the top five words or phrases in each category of questions. The team with the

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applying them to course content. They also believe participation and discussion benefit when they include real-life examples and experience.

• Active facilitation — A variety of strategies were grouped in this category, including challenging students to answer more in depth, not letting people dominate the discussion, and stopping folks who are just participating for the sake of participating.

• Asking effective questions — This is related to the old adage about the quality of the questions being predictive of the quality of the answers. But there was also this student observation about a response that decreases discussion: “when a facilitator is looking for specific answers and does not consider alternative concepts.” (p. 109)

• Supportive classroom environment — The word “encourage” appears in many student comments as well as admonitions to be patient with students, giving them time to find their way to a right or better answer.

• Affirm contributions and provide constructive feedback — Recommendations here ranged from stressing how the class benefits from wrong answers to making reference subsequently to student answers or writing good student responses on the board.

The authors raise a number of interesting questions about the “cold-calling” strategy: Is it inherently undemocratic because it takes away a student’s right to choose whether or not they should participate? Or is it democratic because it equalizes the amount of participation across students? How should an instructor use the strategy? Does the approach influence students’ comfort levels, perhaps even their learning? Do different student populations respond differently to being called on?


A Viable Literature for College Teaching

I am just finishing up a book on pedagogical scholarship, more specifically a review of previously published work on teaching and learning authored by faculty in disciplines other than education and its related fields. If you read this newsletter regularly, you know that I have no quarrels with folks in education. In fact they are the pros—the folks trained to study teaching and learning and advance of our knowledge of both. But this book is devoted to the scholarship of practitioners—the work that is written by college teachers for college teachers. Up to this point, I don’t think anybody has looked at it as a body of applied scholarship and asked what we might learn from it.

As I read, reviewed, and struggled to bring together a diverse collection of literature, I discovered that we haven’t asked some fundamental questions: What kind of literature do practicing teachers need? What would support their efforts in the classroom, help them teach better, help themselves? Would we consider a different kind of writing? A style not quite so disconnected and “academic” sounding?

Beginning with Boyer, many folks have been convinced that scholarly work on teaching can be done by practitioners. As a result this work is getting looked at in places where it hasn’t counted before, like research universities. Obviously, there are a great many concerns about its quality.