Establishing Relevance

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Students frequently wonder and sometimes ask, “Why are we doing this? Why do I need to know this? Why are we spending so much time on this? Why do we have to do this busywork?”

When students don’t see the connection between the content and activities of the course and their future lives, they question what’s happening and what we ask them to do. Research confirms that perceived relevance is a critical factor in maintaining student interest and motivation. It also contributes to higher student ratings on course evaluations. Three straightforward practices can help faculty establish the relevance of course content and activities: faculty should 1) regularly share and discuss the learning outcomes of the course; 2) clearly tie those learning outcomes to the required activities and assignments; and 3) orient students at the beginning of each class period by discussing the “What, Why, and How” of that day.

Learning outcomes—in the syllabus and during class discussions. Clear learning outcomes are the foundation of a learning-centered syllabus and a basic tenet of all instructional design. Many faculty (perhaps with “encouragement” from accreditation commissions) now include course learning outcomes in their syllabi. If you don’t, consider doing so. Outcomes help clarify what students will learn and do when they complete the course. Moreover, faculty should do more than just list the learning outcomes. They should also clearly and frequently discuss the relevance of the outcomes with students. Students need to know why the knowledge and skills identified in the learning outcomes are important in their future lives. We know that the content is relevant, but we shouldn’t assume students see how it relates to what they will be doing.

Link assignment descriptions and learning outcomes. Most faculty do not regularly tie the assignments described in the syllabus to the learning outcomes. Faculty may think that the links are obvious to students, but that’s not always a valid assumption. Every assignment should be clearly defined in terms of how it should be done, and each assignment should be clearly justified by answering questions such as “How does this assignment relate to the course outcomes? How will this assignment help fulfill them? What should the student be able to know or do better after completing the assignment? Why was this assignment chosen to achieve the learning outcomes?” For example, I explain to students how the assignments are tied to the learning outcomes and how I designed each assignment to exercise different intellectual skills in Bloom’s Taxonomy. When students understand what the assignments are helping them accomplish, they see the assignments’ utility and find the work more meaningful.

Establish relevance at the start of every class period. Some faculty members present an outline of the day’s material on the board or in a PowerPoint. This is a useful practice that can aid student note taking, but students are even more motivated when the day’s content and activities are placed in the context of the course and their lives. Kicking off class with a simple orientation that answers three questions—What? Why? and How?—can get students on track, motivate them, and help them put the day’s content and activities into context.

• What? What are we doing in class today? What questions will we try to answer? What concepts will we address? What questions will we answer? What activities will we do?

• Why? Why are we studying this? How are today’s content and activities tied to the course learning outcomes? What should I know or be able to do after today’s class? How can the information and skills be used in everyday life?

• How? How are we going to address the content? Will we use lectures? Activities? Discussions? How will different learning styles be accommodated?

When students understand clearly the value, purpose, and procedures for course activities and the logic by which teachers arrived at their design, they are more likely to see the value of what they are being asked to learn and consequently will participate more fully in the course.
Five Habits—Easy but Often Neglected Practices That Improve Outcomes

By Roben Torosyan, Fairfield University, CT – rtorosyan@fairfield.edu

Given the daily grind of teaching, it is easy to forget that little practices can make a big difference when the goals are more learning and better teaching. Here is a reminder of five easy habits to practice mindfully (‘mindfulness’ comes from the Latin word for having a good memory).

Wait—After asking a question in class, most teachers know they need to wait, but they do not accurately perceive how long they wait. Often, in less than a second, they call on someone, pace nervously, or rephrase the question. With mindful practice, teachers can increase wait time to three to five seconds. When they do, more students speak up, they answer more fully, and they ask better questions.

Kick-start your opening; shout before you walk out—Too many class es fail to start or end with anything memorable. Drama and action can motivate learning in class and after it’s over. Kick-start your opening with an especially dramatic example, an unob -

Grade smarter, not just harder—Many faculty spend lots of time grading. They write comments only to discover that students are making the same mistakes in the next assignment. Feedback often makes no impact. Instead, try returning problem-sets marked only right or wrong, and have students find and correct their errors before points are assigned for the work. Mark one page of a draft paper, noting problems that appear elsewhere in the paper. Challenge the student to correct them for the next revision. Offer feedback that is concrete and specific. Instead of calling something “unclear,” guide the student to “expand, explain, and give examples.” Sandwich critical comments with strengths: “This letter showed passion and used primary sources thoughtfully. Now have it add an opposing view. That way its passion and thought show fair-mindedness too.”

Mix it up—It’s easy to fall into ruts—to use the same pet activities over and over. I’ll have my students “write/pair/share” one too many times. I need to place reminders in my planning materials: “Move from pairs to small groups; move from small groups to large ones; then move back to pairs.” Not only do we need to use a mix of activities, we need to mix presentation modes (visual, aural, kinetic) so that the content comes to students in a variety of different ways.

Do less and do it more deeply—Imagine a list of 12 course learning objectives, things like learning fundamental principles, acquiring team skills, and developing writing skills. Next, imagine that you must rate each as essential, important, or of minor or no importance. What if you did that but were then challenged to select not more than three to five as essential and important? Most faculty find that difficult to do. All objectives seem essential, despite the fact that when we do more, we often do things less well. A daily plan should include no more than three to five vital takeaways that students will understand, be able to do, or think differently about.
Learning from Classroom Experiences

When things don’t go well in a class, it never generates good feelings. It takes courage to address the reasons why. What if the teacher discovers it’s her fault? It takes even more courage to explore with a colleague what happened and the most courage of all to share in print the tale of a class gone awry. I have a small but growing resource list of just such public disclosures—they attest to how much an instructor can learn by facing what happened and how much others can learn by reading these accounts. I have a new article to add to that collection.

It is especially disconcerting when you expect a class to go well and then it doesn’t. That’s what happened to Cheryl Albers, a sociology professor at Buffalo State College. The class in question was an upper-level honors social science seminar that Albers had volunteered to teach. “I spent months excitedly designing a course I believed would be both challenging and engaging for the most select students on campus.” (p. 270)

Her syllabus for the course is included in an appendix, and it looks like a course any of us would love to take or teach. She started the semester with 17 students. After the second week when the first graded essays were returned, two students dropped.

By the third week Albers was concerned enough to initiate a discussion of how the course was going. “To my bewilderment a third of the class expressed dissatisfaction with the grounding of the class in student-directed learning. They wanted a more teacher-directed experience—clearly not the reaction I anticipated while I was enthusiastically designing the class.” (p. 270-271)

What Albers had planned for the course was “a classroom environment focused on knowledge creation rather than the transmission of information where students felt part of an intellectual community that balanced support and control.” (p. 270) More specifically, students wrote essays (that were graded) and wrote letters to classmates commenting on the essays of classmates (and those were graded). They participated in what Albers called “open-ended seminars” where students led the discussion and brought to it questions prepared in response to class material, as well as in research/writing groups, with each team determining the focus of their study and methods of analysis. Does any of this seem out of line for an upper-level honors seminar? Albers writes, “I believed that the Honors students represented the most intellectually talented students on our campus, and as such would welcome a new approach to learning.” (p. 278)

But the students continued to resist her approach. The article includes a variety of written comments provided by students. Albers sought to understand this response by using a variety of approaches, all explained in the article. Here’s what she concluded. First off, “I underestimated the power of normative student and teacher behaviors operating in the wider institutional context.” (p. 278) Students didn’t see this as an opportunity. Instead, they resented the need to comply with what looked to them like a set of idiosyncratic expectations.

Students find great comfort in being able to predict what teachers will require them to do. “It is a lot of work and an inconvenience to students when what occurs in a single class is significantly out of step with the expectations encountered throughout the majority of the institution.” (p. 278)

Second, instead of being the most receptive to change, honors students may be the most resistant. “Honors students are granted that designation specifically because they are skilled at understanding and enacting/exploiting the institutional and normative student role.” (p. 278) “Knowing what to expect from a professor and what was expected of them was ... something they relied on.” (p. 278)

A couple of student quotes illustrate this point. Keisha wrote, “I also find it ironic that such emphasis on ‘deep learning’ as opposed to good grades is being conveyed to Honors students who NEED that high grade to succeed. To us, the grade is necessary; personally, I would be willing to sacrifice deep learning to keep my scholarship.” Isabella offered this observation: “As a group, Honors students seem to prefer a variety of general, mediocre learning experiences which provide them with the ever important A, a title, and scholarship.”

It would be easy to digress at this point into a discussion of bright students, honors programs, and self-directed learning. It does need to be pointed out that not all the students in Albers seminar resisted her approach. Some understood what she was trying to accomplish and valued the experience. But a significant portion did not. And from this experience Albers and the rest of us can learn. “Such investigations can reveal our miscalculations or interpretive errors. More importantly, they also provide the insights and understanding necessary to make the activity integral to most of our careers more intentional and consequential.” (p. 279)

Using Focused Drafts to Improve Students’ Assignments

By Susan Taylor, Andrews University, MI tsusan@andrews.edu

Clarity often turns to confusion somewhere between students’ expressive writing in their first drafts and the “finished” assignment. Teachers set students up for failure when they require students to start with an assignment, end with a finished paper, and receive no guidance or feedback during the writing process.

Writing is a process, not merely a product. The teacher’s task is not just to grade a final revision but to work with students on their drafts or, better yet, a series of drafts. The key is to emphasize what the writer is doing rather than what has not yet been done. Setting goals for the final product is, of course, necessary, but even more necessary is focusing on what the writer is currently doing to get there.

Writing assignments should be designed to allow the student writer to focus on a few task components in each draft. Early on in the writing process, the concern should be with substance, and teachers should not respond to first drafts as if they were final drafts, commenting on substantive, stylistic, and mechanical problems all at once. The teacher should make focused responses about the content in early drafts, saving stylistic, mechanical, and other communicative concerns for later versions of the paper.

Focus on ideas rather than grammar and mechanics

In the early stages of the writing process, writers are more focused on working out ideas than they are on fine-tuning their prose. Thus, feedback should focus on developing and organizing ideas: discussing the demands of the assignment, examining the writer’s response so far, and questioning what else the writer is interested in or planning on doing.

Drafting is often a messy business. Even so, teachers frequently find it disconcerting when the draft is without a thesis, randomly paragraphed, and riddled with lapses in grammar and mechanics. Unfortunately, students often pick up on our concern about all the errors, and they start to worry too much about “making mistakes” in drafts. Student writing frequently suffers when feedback on the mechanics occurs too early in the writing process.

A good thesis takes time

Early drafts often lack a finely tuned thesis or main point. This absence is, however, pretty much inevitable. Although a thesis statement generally appears in the introduction of a finished paper, a thesis concept doesn’t come into focus until later in the writing process, after a writer has thought through a wide range of ideas and options and wrestled with the necessary complexities. If a draft doesn’t have a main point or sense of purpose, teachers should try to help the writer discover the implications of ideas in order to discern the thesis concept implicit in the draft.

Provide students with a safe place in which to write

Responding to ungraded drafts involves more than simply withholding a grade; it also requires attention and sympathy to the necessary process of writing.

Teachers need to provide a safe place to practice writing. Feedback on drafts can help students have successes at each stage of the writing process. In this regard, I have four recommendations that have come out of my experiences trying to provide safety and constructive feedback simultaneously.

• I prioritize feedback on the most important analytical problems on draft assignments. Focusing on analytical deficiencies helps students understand that substantive problems must be corrected before writing and stylistic problems can be effectively addressed.

• I talk less and ask more. Rather than telling students what they have or haven’t done correctly, I ask them why they have included the details that they have and what they want to try next. I ask about their concerns and what they think can be done to address these concerns.

• I respond to partial drafts by outlining what I think will happen next and why. This kind of response works well early in the drafting process, especially with narrative papers or arguments. I generally write two short paragraphs. The first summarizes what happens in the text up to the end of the draft. The second makes guesses as to at least three things that I think might happen next.

• I use journalist’s questions to structure a response—not all the examples are questions, strictly speaking, but they provide a nice paradigm for moving through feedback to a draft. I modify the questions as appropriate for the draft and assignment. For instance, the “when” question works best for a draft that is close to completion. If you were working with an earlier draft, you could change the question to something such as “When I read the details in your draft, I ...?” I use these as thinking questions, asking students to respond, entering a conversation about their text. This conversation helps take pressure off the writing process.

When teachers require students to write focused drafts, the students are encouraged to master the content of their research analysis before moving on to the content-dependent questions of style and mechanics. Focused drafts produce higher-quality finished assignments—at least they do in my classes.
Pecha Kucha: A Quick and Compelling Format for Student PowerPoint Presentations

By Valerie Bang-Jensen, Saint Michael’s College, VT – vbang-jensen@smcvt.edu

Our students probably don’t remember school without PowerPoint. When they are faced with a presentation, it seems to be second nature to turn to the templates readily available on their computers for format, design, and style. But it is also true that many of those presentations would benefit from editing, revision, and an awareness of audience. To accomplish those outcomes, I’d like to recommend that you consider introducing your students to a brief, tightly structured version of PowerPoint called Pecha Kucha.

What is Pecha Kucha?

Pecha Kucha, Japanese for “chitchat,” is a briskly paced, carefully planned sequence of 20 slides, each shown for 20 seconds (set to advance automatically), culminating in a presentation that is exactly six minutes and 40 seconds long. The story is told, argument made, question explored, or concept developed using this precise structure. The 20 x 20 format forces the presenter to keep pace, matching content with the timing of the slides. Developed in 2003 by architects Mark Dytham and Astrid Klein in Tokyo, the Pecha Kucha format was initially adopted by those in the art and design world.

Some students do create interesting presentations using PowerPoint, but the ease of this software tool makes many of their presentations overly long and text heavy. The students often end up reading the text or depending on the slides to prompt them in their oral narration. When I ask students in my courses to use Pecha Kucha, I find that the format compels them to choose images carefully, compose text for narration, and rehearse their delivery.

Need to know: planning, rehearsal, delivery

To help my students approach this task, I invite them to come to class having done some simple Internet research on Pecha Kucha. YouTube offers numerous examples, and students grasp the concept quickly. In class I present an example related to our course work, and we discuss logistics and their needs as audience members. I have found it useful to share a simple table with 20 blank cells (representing the 20 slides) for their use in planning. We also discuss criteria such as the relationship of the narration to the images, the breadth and depth of the content, structural criteria (20 slides x 20 seconds), and the quality and delivery of the narration itself.

Everybody wins: benefits for presenters and audience members

Students are generally positive about our use of Pecha Kucha. They note benefits for both those who present and those in the audience. The pace is brisk for the presenters, which forces the audience to pay close attention. One student wrote, “It makes the material very clear and concise so the viewer only gets what’s important; it helps with time management and it helps you categorize information, deciding what is or isn’t important to share.” Students reported that using the Pecha Kucha structure helps them use precise language and search for images that convey major points. They note that the 20-second timing is “spectacular for keeping audience attention.” Rehearsal seems important because of the imposed timing, and both presenters and viewers benefit from carefully practiced narration. “I loved the very structured and timed presentation. I was able to rehearse exactly so I sounded natural.”

Beyond the class experience, many students saw potential future uses for the Pecha Kucha format for topics that are clearly defined and limited; some also planned to design Pecha Kucha presentations for nonacademic venues like clubs or student government meetings.

Successful group presentations using Pecha Kucha

Students discover that the traditional “divide and conquer” approach to group work does not achieve the best results for this task. The narration must be planned and rehearsed enough so that the 20 seconds allotted to each of the 20 slides is smooth and relevant. This means rehearsing together several times, even if they each prepare a number of slides separately.

Tips for using the Pecha Kucha format:

- Choose topics that are limited enough to be addressed in a short presentation (for example, an aspect, rather than the entirety of a topic).
- Develop an example to show students.
- Create a planning grid with 20 slots.
- Discuss with students the criteria for the successful use of Pecha Kucha: images and narration inform each other, the narration is well rehearsed and engaging, and the content conveyed meets course goals.
What Do I Need to Know About and Do for Students with Learning Disabilities?

By Karen Eifler and Melanie Gangle, University of Portland
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At the beginning of each semester, among the flurry of papers flooding my mailbox are a handful of accommodation plans for students in my classes who have learning disabilities. Some of them must have exams read to them. Some must have extra time provided for exams. Some need handouts to be printed in 28-point font. Whatever happened to “I teach, they learn, I test, and they tell me what they’ve learned”? I confess to some crankiness. Are all these accommodations really necessary? I decided I would call Melanie, the coordinator of our Office for Students with Disabilities. The conversation was enlightening, and I thought I would share some of it with you.

Karen: What is the point of these accommodation plans your office sends me each semester?

Melanie: Each institution may have a slightly different system, so I recommend that faculty contact their local disability services office for clarification about policies. In general, if a student does not have an accommodation plan in place, you may provide exam accommodations but are not required to do so. However, I think students benefit when they don’t have to rush to complete exams. Many students without disabilities need more time on exams, such as ESL students, students with temporary illness, or those distracted by a difficult family situation, for example. And all students benefit when there is time to check their work.

Karen: Some of these accommodations make me feel as though I’m enabling bad habits, especially if other students aren’t getting extra time and start complaining that it isn’t fair. How do you recommend I respond to complaints from other students?

Melanie: You must protect the confidentiality of students with disabilities, although tension always exists between providing accommodations and ensuring confidentiality. If you hear another student complaining about exam accommodations, the best response is that everyone has unique circumstances. In advance of complaints, it helps to review your policies with the class on the first day and as exams get closer. Explain your course expectations and offer to discuss individual student concerns or requests for extensions on a case-by-case basis. For example, you probably allow time extensions for other reasons also, such as a death in the family or temporary illness.

Karen: A lot of this just seems like extra work to me. Do I really have to prepare separate sets of materials for students or record reading materials for students with visual impairments?

Melanie: You don’t have to do these things yourself. Our office can assist you in preparing alternate electronic, large-print, or Braille formats for students with visual impairments. When planning your courses, prepare your handouts and readings in accessible formats, even if you don’t have a specific student who needs alternate materials right now. Another great idea: some faculty record their lectures as podcasts to allow students to listen to lectures at home while studying.

Karen: What if I make all these accommodations and the student still doesn’t do poorly? Am I liable in any way? Even if students have a learning disability, they are, after all, adults and in college. Shouldn’t they be managing their own learning?

Melanie: It is indeed the student’s responsibility to advocate for his or her own learning needs and to work with you for support. If you have a student with a disability who is not doing well in your course, I recommend that you follow your usual protocol—if you offer warnings, you can also refer that student to my office for help. Each student should be assessed on the standards you have set for your course, whether they have a disability or not. It does not benefit any student to receive a grade that he or she has not earned.

Karen: One last question: it seems as if every year there are more students with learning disabilities in my classes. Is the number of students with learning disabilities really going up?

Melanie: Over the past 10 to 20 years, the K-12 educational system has improved identification of many types of disabilities, including learning disabilities, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and psychiatric/psychological disorders. National statistics show that 11 percent of postsecondary students experience a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). According to other sources, this number has nearly doubled between the academic year 1999-2000 and the academic year 2007-2008.