What Students Understand Isn’t Always What the Professor Means

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For most of my 19 years as a teacher, I retained rather rigid control over assigning grades in my classes. My students did not participate in the process until recently. A couple of summers ago, I read a book on learner-centered teaching, and it, along with some urging from my program, persuaded me to try releasing a modicum of that control. To that end, I developed an “Attendance and Participation Self-Evaluation Form.”

This optional end-of-semester self-evaluation asks students to do a basic analysis of their attendance and participation in regard to specific course requirements. For instance, in addition to asking students whether or not they participated in class discussions or exceeded the permitted number of absences for the semester, the form inquires about whether students brought texts to class with them, and completed required blog or discussion board assignments. In addition, the form leaves space for students to comment on their performance and argue for the grade they propose. I award one grade for a combination of attendance and participation.

I used this form during the 2009-10 academic year, and more than 50 percent of my students proposed their own non-binding grades for the attendance/participation portion of their final grades. I was generally pleased with the rate of response, and I felt some measure of satisfaction at having given students the opportunity to play even a small role in the assessment process. However, an analysis of the fall semester forms revealed that some students did not interpret participation the way I do.

After considering the feedback provided by 43 students during the fall semester, I raised 16 percent of the proposed attendance/participation grades, maintained 37 percent, and lowered 47 percent. Some of the proposed grades were lowered because students had not completed other work, such as blog assignments. However, some of the students had proposed grades based on a different interpretation of “participation” than my own. For instance, about 21 percent of students interpreted listening or being attentive as “participation.” Indeed, one student observed that she “always took notes and paid attention to the lecture and discussion.”

In my fall syllabi, I had written that the attendance/participation grade was a combination grade, and I went on to explain that “exuberant participation” did not guarantee an “A” if “excessive absences” were also part of the record. I assumed that the phrase “exuberant participation” and, indeed, the word “participation” itself, were self-explanatory and denoted vocal participation. I also assumed that the simple differentiation between the two facets of the grade—“attendance” and “participation”—implied that denotation.

I decided I would further clarify “participation” in my spring semester syllabi in the hope of preventing further misunderstanding. Specifically, I noted, “The instructor does not consider attentiveness to be participation. Rather, participation includes vocally engaging the instructor and the class during discussions, and contributing to group work.” The student responses from the spring semester suggest that this explanation helped. During that semester, based on self-evaluations received from 39 students, I raised 15 percent of their proposed grades, maintained 49 percent, and lowered 36 percent. (Again, I lowered some grades because of missing work.) For this semester, a greater percentage of students and I agreed on their participation grades. More to the point, the forms revealed a decline in the number of students (8 percent) who specifically associated listening or attentiveness with participation. (In fairness, another 8 percent suggested that they had participated by taking notes, which could be construed as a variation on the “listening” argument.)

This article is not about whether a teacher should or should not grade “participation,” nor is it about the virtues of student self-assessment per se. The message of this article is that student interpretations of what constitutes fulfillment of a requirement like “participation” can differ from teacher interpretations even when a teacher assumes the requirement is self-explanatory. To avoid miscommunication, teachers need to make themselves aware of their own assumptions and work to clarify their expectations for students.
Making the Review of Assigned Reading Meaningful

By Sarah K. Clark, Utah State University - sarah.clark@usu.edu

The typical college student dreads hearing, “Let’s review the chapters you read for homework.” What generally ensues is a question and answer drill in which students are peppered with questions designed to make clear who has and hasn’t done the reading. In reality, these exchanges do little to encourage deep thought or understanding of the assigned reading. They produce awkward silences during which students squirm in their seats, hoping to become invisible. Other times students decline to answer for fear of giving the wrong answer. Almost all the time a negative tone permeates the classroom during this review. I decided to restructure the way that I approached reviews of reading assignments, and found that by doing things differently, I could change both the tone and outcomes of the review activity. I’d like to share some of the ideas and techniques that I have found useful:

The Top Ten - Ask students to create their own “Top Ten List” of important concepts presented in the chapter(s). I encourage student collaboration in the creation of these lists. The activity provides a nice review of the material, and you’ll be amazed at what students consider to be most important. I use these lists as a starting point for discussions. They also let me know what areas of content need further explanation. For students who didn’t do the reading, the lists expose them to ideas in the text and that prepares them at least a bit for the subject of the day.

Secondary Sources - Gone are the days when the textbook is the only source of information available to students. With blogs, research articles, journals, informational pages, and news websites at the touch of a fingertip, students can easily learn more about the subject. After they’ve done the assigned readings, have students locate another viewpoint on the subject and bring it to class. In class, set a time limit (say 15 minutes) and have partners/groups discuss the reading material and their secondary sources. As you circulate around the room, you may hear some good examples that you can use later in the period. Interestingly, students often (without being asked) continue to bring in outside resources on the topics we study, which makes for rich and healthy discussions.

Journaling - For the ideas presented in the readings to become relevant, students need to articulate thoughts about what they are reading and they need to hear how others responded as well. I encourage my students to write journal notes, which I describe as what the brain is thinking while reading. Example: “Wow! I never considered how George Washington must have felt during this turbulent time in the nation’s history. I always thought of him as liking his role as president.” Students can share their journaling with a partner or small group. This exercise helps students get past initial impressions, and it connects what they already know to the new information.

Divide and Conquer - Divide up the next reading chapter among small groups of students. Student A reads the first section in the chapter, Student B reads the next section, and so forth. The next day, students meet in small groups and report on the section they read. Or you can have groups of students that read the same section meet with students who read different sections. Students become dependent on one another to create the full picture of what was in the reading material.

My students seem to enjoy these group discussions, which are a way to become familiar with the material
Avoiding the Blank Screen Blues

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Starting at a blank screen the night before the research paper was due—this was the dilemma faced by my upper-level science students. This paper, the product of their independent research projects, is an important part of our curriculum and one component of our assessment of their scientific writing skills. However, the products of these last-minute efforts suffered. Students were unsatisfied with their grades, and reading these hastily prepared papers was painful for me. Even worse, when I returned this work, students flipped to the final score on the paper and never bothered with my comments. Buried in the final frantic weeks of the semester, amid other assignments and final exams, the learning potential of this experience was largely lost.

Good writing is a valuable skill that students can take from college, and we work to develop it in our curriculum. Our majors read several texts that provide insights on scientific writing. We spend considerable class time discussing the construction of a scientific paper. However, student writing doesn’t improve with talking; students need to practice both writing and revising. The way to ensure that students revise is to make revision a required part of the project.

In response, I adopted a new strategy. During the final month of classes, some facet of the project is due every period. I have deadlines for the methods section (which is submitted first in list form), a properly formatted annotated bibliography, a hierarchical outline for the introduction, the paragraphed methods section, a rough draft version of the introduction, an outline of the discussion section, rough results that include graphs and tables, a complete rough draft, and the final paper. Because students create the final product piecemeal, they never face the dreaded blank screen for a large project. They write and revise their papers over the course of a month, instead of two or three nights before they’re due.

This may seem like a daunting grading task during the already hectic last month of the semester. As it turns out, I do not grade each draft. I start with a checklist indicating each item due from the student. I check them off as they are handed in. No late drafts are allowed for any item. I write brief comments. For poorer drafts, the comments are fewer but broader in scope. For example, I do not comment on specific wording or structure when the whole section requires major revision.

I periodically ask the students to meet with me so that I can interpret my comments (this is easily accomplished during a laboratory meeting). My comments on early drafts focus on framing their work in a broader context. Comments on later drafts focus on more detailed facets of their wording or ideas. The main goal is to get students to revise their work.

Because I do not grade each draft, the students need to be motivated to do serious revision. To encourage students to pay attention to my comments and revise appropriately, their final project is due as a portfolio, with all of the drafts appended to the final product. As I mark the final paper, I can see whether I have already made a recommendation and whether students have acted on it. Their response to early criticism constitutes 15 percent of the final project grade.

Even though I don’t grade the draft versions, the amount of effort it takes to read them is substantial and I make modifications elsewhere to account for this time. For example, I reduce the writing requirements for weekly laboratory assignments; instead we might discuss a related paper, produce scenarios in other systems, or use some other form of discourse. Despite initial misgivings, student response to this approach has been overwhelmingly positive. They appreciate having the opportunity to improve their work on a project that constitutes a large portion of their course grade.

Their papers have dramatically improved. Students appear to learn more about the writing process as they are forced to rectify shortcomings in earlier drafts of their work. Stress levels seem lower. Their final week is spent in assembly and revision rather than literature review and draft-writing. Given the quality of their papers, I’m convinced their better writing is worth the effort.

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before being graded on it.

Using these and other strategies has really made a difference in my classes. More students are engaged in and contributing to class discussions, and they are moving beyond a simple repetition of facts and details. Students are digging deeper and connecting their world with other viewpoints, and that gives them a richer understanding of the content.

These new approaches are having an effect on me, too. I am more calm and confident in my role as a teacher and a learner. I find it easier to be more patient and thoughtful with my students. Most important, I have noticed that the classroom feels like a safe and positive place. Students show greater respect for one another and more appreciation of the material. In my opinion, all these responses make these changes worthwhile!
Opening Intentions

By Lawrence M. Lesser, The University of Texas at El Paso – Lesser@utep.edu

I was the invited outside speaker at a professional development event for schoolteachers. The day’s lunch was preceded by a public prayer that inspired me to consider parallels in “callings to serve” that can be found in both education and religion. Sometime later, I happened to read a poem in a Jewish prayer book that expressed noble intentions for a worship space. The poem didn’t reference a particular faith—it was really just a set of intentions. Immediately, I thought of what professors hope for in their classroom spaces.

Without reopening any debate on prayer in public school, I’ll say that I don’t think any of us would object to a worship space. With the idea that it could be used by any college teacher. To extend set of intentions tailored to teachers getting paychecks.

So may you be curious and open to how this course may count in life—beyond a degree plan—even if this kind of course has been a source of struggle.

Together, may we use the time we have in this room as a creative, intentional, supportive learning community:

May the door of this classroom be wide enough to receive all who seek understanding.

May the door of this classroom be narrow enough to keep out fear or closed-mindedness.

May its threshold be no stumbling block to those whose knowledge—or language—is shaky.

May the window of this classroom inspire us to connect our learning to the world beyond these walls.

And may this classroom be, for all who enter, a doorway to growth and purpose.

Welcome!

While retaining copyright for the above poem, the author gladly grants faculty permission to read it in class to students. This set of intentions (especially the last section) was inspired by Sydney Greenberg’s “May the door…” in R. Elyse D. Frishman (Ed.), Mishkan T’filah: A Reform Siddur: weekdays, Shabbat, festivals, and other occasions of public worship, p. 6. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis Press, 2007.
The Teacher of Westwood

By Larry Spence, Penn State University - lds7@psu.edu

The idea wasn’t a bulb, but it flashed. I walked in the first day of class wearing a ball cap, whistle, and clipboard. “I’m your coach. Your performance is the focus. My job is to help you get better.” We’re going to learn to think critically and creatively about the toughest problems in political science.

Horror tugged at every face in the room. I hurried into the opening exercise of the class—to discuss elements of the students’ best learning experiences. I took off the hat, put the whistle in my pocket, and shed the clipboard. At the end of the class I thought all was well, until two students approached to ask if maybe they should drop.

So much for being a guide on the side, I thought. And yet coaching seemed like the best metaphor to describe the way I wanted to teach. Putting the cap on was just drama. Something was wrong, but I think I’ve figured out what. By the time kids are 12, about 70 percent of them no longer play organized sports. Experts think lousy coaching is a major cause. Bad coach badgering destroys the joy of playing, and most players flee.

What were the best coaching practices? I questioned colleagues in the kinesiology (formerly physical education) department. The answers were scattered. Successful coaches motivated, facilitated, marketed, or delivered therapy. They yelled, prayed, hugged, talked heart to heart, or inspired with sermons. That didn’t seem like an answer.

Then I stumbled on to the obvious. John Wooden was deemed the best coach of the 20th century. He won 10 national basketball championships for UCLA and a record 88 consecutive games. Most “great” coaches don’t come close to his accomplishments. Two education researchers, Ronald Gallimore and Roland Tharp, observed his practices in his last (1974-5) season. The sessions were exactlying choreographed and loaded with terse information. There were no pep talks or elaborate praise. The coach never mentioned winning.

Wooden thought coaching was teaching. His method was to present a model performance, observe how players performed, and then intervene to highlight errors and show ways to correct them. His teaching started with his careful preparation and planning of practice. He kept track of how warm-ups, demonstrations, corrections, and exercises worked. Reading about his diligence put me to shame. What seemed small stuff to some—scheduling, timing, pace, and even the correct way to put on socks—were major things to him.

During practice, Wooden emphasized repetition with variations in resistance and intensity. His model was to demonstrate, then practice, practice, practice. He called this a part/whole design. You first introduce the whole context of a play, then break it down into skills to be practiced, and finally recombine the parts in a scrimmage. He didn’t see a conflict between drill and motivation.

As for how he interacted with his players: always the perfectionist, he corrected every mistake quickly. He addressed the act, not the actor. Players were kept focused on improvement rather than rewards. He did not strive to avoid errors but exploited them as clues to players’ misconceptions. When a player mastered a skill, Wooden raised the pressure or assigned a new skill to learn. The goal was for players to think and have options to improvise. For his players, Wooden’s practices were harder than the games.

The researchers found that 75 percent of his comments were information about how to do something or improve something. On average, the comments lasted less than 20 seconds. He did not say, “Good job” or “Bad job.” He did not go in for elaborate explanations. His attention was on the little steps that lead to improvement.

He dealt with players individually, working to deliver instruction when it would produce learning. His success depended on knowing the limits and capacities of each player. As he said, “The most unfair thing to do is to treat everyone the same.” Wooden was shocked when a UCLA faculty colleague said that his job was to present knowledge and the student’s job was to get it. He believed that if you didn’t pay attention to what students did and then correct and instruct them, there was no teaching. As he put it, if the students have not learned, then the teacher has not taught.

Our classrooms are a long way from Wooden’s practices. But shouldn’t they be more alike? Shouldn’t they be learning spaces where students can try, fail, and be instructed? What I learned from the coach was the necessity for a teacher to enter the learners’ experience. I need to observe and listen until I know each student’s strengths, weaknesses, and uniqueness. That requires intense work, but doesn’t it reflect the duties of our profession?

At Wooden’s death at age 99 on June 4, 2010, commentators recounted his incomparable records and his impact on those he coached. Renowned for modesty and dedication to his principles, Wooden seemed a wizard to most. But to me he was a teacher; maybe the best.

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The Teaching Professor

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A New Kind of “Space” for Quizzes

By Audrey L. Deterding, Indiana University Southeast - audlde@ius.edu

Quizzes are standard in many college classrooms, and determining how best to use this learning format generates a variety of discussion and suggestions—if you regularly read the Teaching Professor you’ve seen any number published here. I, too, continue to search for ways to inspire the often dull quiz routine. In an effort to bring new strategies to the classroom and keep student engagement high, I have recently discovered a successful strategy that encourages a sense of community in class, offers students an opportunity to engage in collaborative learning, and motivates students to come to class prepared. Let me explain how it works.

First, the chalkboard or whiteboard in the classroom becomes what I call a “community space.” Two students are selected to use the space. They have three minutes at the beginning of class, before the quiz, to write anything from the materials assigned for that day on the board. I use a random process to select the students who write on the board. I allow students to decline the offer to participate, but I do not select the class roster and start with the name of the person who gave me the number and then I count up or down by that number. That’s the first student selected. From that student’s name I continuing to count up (or down) using the same number, and that’s the second student.

Although students have the opportunity to decline, I have yet to have a student do so. Sometimes the information they provide is limited, but very rarely it is inaccurate. I’ve found the expectation that they may have to share information in the community space motivates most students to closely read the assigned materials. They want to help their classmates perform well on the quizzes, and they don’t want to appear lazy or irresponsible to their peers. The three minutes allocated limits the amount of help fellow classmates receive. Consequently, students who do not prepare for class will not perform well on the quiz, even though they have access to this information. I’ve observed that this approach encourages collaborative learning and creates a sense of community among the students. It also gets students coming to class prepared, and I think it makes the quizzes a more positive and useful learning experience.

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