Learning to Read with the Eyes of a Writer

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How many times have you provided feedback in the margins of students’ papers, only to find that you’re providing the very same feedback on the next set of papers? As a new faculty member, I was left dumbfounded by this experience. I couldn’t understand why my students continuously made the same errors and why my feedback did not improve their papers. I was also surprised by the number of students who requested meetings to discuss why they felt their papers warranted a higher grade. My colleagues assured me that I wasn’t alone in these experiences, but I knew there had to be alternatives to this unproductive cycle.

After some time, I realized that if I wanted better writers and my students wanted better grades on written assignments, then I had to teach them the qualities of effective writing and empower them to improve their written work. Now this may sound like a daunting task to some, but it’s not as time consuming as you might think. Let me explain the approach I’ve developed.

In advance of the first major writing assignment each semester, I provide students with a benchmark paper from a previous semester. (I secure the students’ permission to use their papers and remove all the identifying information from them.) In class we read this paper with “the eyes of a writer.” In other words, I ask students to notice what the author did to make the piece effective. If students have difficulty identifying these qualities, I point out things like a clear statement of purpose, a strong organizational structure, and effective use of sentences and paragraphs. Next, I share a piece of work that doesn’t have these characteristics. Again, we collaboratively mark up the text and observe what the writer did well and where the paper fell short. After comparing the two papers, I ask the students to assume the role of editor and provide the second author with specific feedback and suggestions to improve the paper. At the end of class I collect this feedback so I can gauge how well the activity worked. Such an activity could also be given as a homework assignment.

Since implementing this approach, I have seen a measurable improvement in students’ written work and an increased sense of agency among them. One student recently remarked, “The rubrics you provide tell us what you expect, but the benchmark texts show us.” Another student said, “I am less overwhelmed about assignments when you show us a benchmark text, because I know what you expect and I say to myself, ‘OK, you can do this.’”

Even though this approach helps many students, some still struggle as writers. For those students, I have developed an extension of the first activity. I meet with these students, but before we get together, I ask them to do some reflection. They reread the benchmark paper for that particular assignment and list at least five things that make the paper successful. Next, I have them reread their own papers, including my comments, and make another list of at least five things they noticed about their own work (i.e., strengths and/or challenges). Finally, after comparing the two papers, they use a graphic organizer I’ve provided to develop a list of specific things they need to work on to improve their writing.

When students come to our meetings having done this analysis, it changes the overall tenor and efficiency of our meetings. Rarely do students contest the grade, although some do ask to rewrite the assignment—a practice I don’t generally encourage. However, I do want students to learn from this experience and stay motivated to improve their work, so I encourage them to apply what they’ve learned to their future papers. When grading those papers, I make a point of noticing their improvements and they earn credit for their efforts. This practice reinforces that learning is the goal and it honors students’ growth over time.

In sum, providing students with
What’s Real in the Classroom?

Because much of what goes on in college classrooms lacks vitality, urgency and realness, students often draw a distinction between their classroom life and the real world.” So writes biology professor Christopher Uhl. He calls his solution “steering into the curve,” which he describes as the “antidote to the deadness that pervades many college classrooms.” (p. 108) He claims it has “the power to transform classrooms from tedious, lifeless places to alive, authentic relationship-rich environments.” (p.105)

Uhl defines steering into the curve with examples. Here are a couple included in the article. It’s the first day of class. Uhl opens by sharing assessments of his course that appear on the “Rate My Professor” website. The assessments he selects are widely divergent—from best class ever to this class sucks. “I steer into the curve by acknowledging what is real in the room ... on the first day of class, college students are sizing up their professors—they are shopping!” (p. 105)

Uhl’s goal on this first day is to create an atmosphere of candor and authenticity and at the same time make a distinction between observations and judgments. He builds that point by asking students to look at him and say judging them. He builds that point by asking students to look at him and say what they see—a balding male wearing a sports coat and bow tie. And from that they tell him they suspect he’s a formal, conservative, eccentric, aging professor. They influence decision making. Uhl defines steering into the curve with examples. Here are a couple included in the article. It’s the first day of class. Uhl opens by sharing assessments of his course that appear on the “Rate My Professor” website. The assessments he selects are widely divergent—from best class ever to this class sucks. “I steer into the curve by acknowledging what is real in the room ... on the first day of class, college students are sizing up their professors—they are shopping!” (p. 105)

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Uhl describes how once he attempted to use a guided meditation experience. He had students explore the anatomy and musculature of each other’s hands as he offered a guided visualization of the evolutionary history of the human hand. Students giggled and fidgeted but Uhl carried on even though he knew the activity was not achieving the goals he intended. He contrasts that to another classroom experience in which two students were presenting and doing poorly—his assessment confirmed by the bored, confused looks of students listening to the presentation. He decided to name the “elephant” in the room. He raised his hand and asked the presenters how they were feeling. They were confused, but after he inquired further, they admitted that doing the presentation felt like torture. It was not fun. He also got the class to acknowledge their boredom.

“It is fear that diminishes us and keeps us pretending. And, if you haven’t noticed, fear is everywhere on college campuses—in administrators, in teachers, in teaching pedagogies, in classroom layout, and in students.” (p. 108)

For me steering into the curve is ultimately about letting go of my small-minded, fear-directed agendas and steering into the unknown, with all its risks and opportunities for transformative learning.” (p. 108)

The Internet and Individual Knowledge

Larry Sanger, cofounder of Wikipedia, is no stranger to the development and use of Internet-based educational tools. Even so, he believes “it is a profound mistake to think that the tools of the Internet can replace the effortful, careful development of the individual mind—the sort of development that is fostered by a solid liberal arts education.” (p. 16)

In this article he objects to three common beliefs about education and the Internet. “First is the idea that the instant availability of information online makes the memorization of facts unnecessary or less necessary.” (p. 16) The argument advanced by those who support this belief rests on how easily answers to “trivial” facts can be found online. Does anybody really need to know that the Battle of Hastings occurred in 1066? A quick Google search yields that date. Filling one’s mind with bits and pieces of information no longer serves any useful purpose.

“To claim that the Internet allows us to learn less, or that it makes memorizing less important, is to belie any profound grasp of the nature of knowledge. Finding out a fact about a topic with a search ... is very different indeed from knowing about and understanding the topic.” (p. 17) “Being able to read (or view) anything quickly on a topic can provide one with information, but actually having a knowledge of or understanding about the topic will always require critical study. The Internet will never change that.” (p. 17). He buttresses his argument further by pointing out how basic knowledge in most fields does not change all that rapidly. Students must start with the basics, and those need to be memorized—not in the sense of dull repetition without any understanding, but memorized with understanding so that they can be used to support further learning.

Next Sanger argues against the idea that collaborative learning is superior to individual learning. He readily acknowledges that the online environment offers students the chance to exchange ideas with other students. They can review each other’s work as well. But the content of a discussion held online is not necessarily better than one held face-to-face in a classroom. Both can be “disappointingly perfunctory.” (p. 18)

But Sanger’s main point is that most learning skills must be developed by the individual. Groups and peers can contribute to that process, but learning is essentially an individual activity. “No one else, certainly no group, can do your reading for you, no matter how helpful they may be in discussing it or summarizing it. Either you read/process it or you don’t.” (p. 20) “It is one thing to engage in a discussion—whether online, in a traditional classroom, or in a study session—and thereby be inspired to think fascinating thoughts, but it is quite another to think creatively and critically for oneself.” (p. 20)

And finally Sanger objects to those who believe that students no longer need to read lengthy, complex books. Some now argue that books are “old-fashioned.” (p. 22) They aren’t interactive but are rather “a single, static, one-way conversation with an individual.” (p. 22) Those who argue this way seem to think that because Twitter posts and Wikipedia and YouTube contributions have become dominant, “pre-Internet modes of expression, like books, are going by the wayside.” (p. 22) Sanger responds with this question: “Is knowledge, even the knowledge contained in great books, now something that can be adequately replaced by the collaborative creations of the students themselves?” (p. 22) He counters the opposing argument with this assertion: “When it comes to getting a solid intellectual grounding—a foundational, liberal education—nothing is less dispensable than getting acquainted with many books created by the ‘complex, dense’ minds of deep-thinking individuals.” (p. 23)

This is one of those articles that not only ought to be read, but merits sharing and discussing with others. It’s thoughtful, the arguments are skillfully crafted (Sanger has a Ph.D. in philosophy), and it’s provocative. You won’t agree with all of Sanger’s points; you may not agree with any of them. Either way, the Internet revolution has educational implications that those of us who care about learning ought to be committed to exploring.


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benchmark texts and teaching them to read with the eyes of a writer helps them internalize a rubric for effective writing. It also moves the responsibility from faculty having to defend grades on written work to students being empowered to positively affect the grades they earn. Making the transition from expecting good writing to teaching the qualities of good writing has improved not only students’ engagement and written work, but also my relationship with them and my sense of efficacy as a teacher.

We’d like to know what you think!
Please share your thoughts on this issue in a four-question online survey located at www.surveymonkey.com/s/TTPN.
Students on Incivility in the Classroom

We know from the literature, and more directly from conversations with colleagues, that most college teachers are concerned, annoyed, frustrated, and occasionally angered by the way students behave in the classroom. But are these behaviors of concern to other students in the classroom?

A survey of more than 3,600 students at a public university in the Midwest provides an answer to that question. After reviewing previously published work on incivility in the classroom, faculty researchers identified 23 uncivil classroom behaviors. The list is included in the article. Students were asked, “To what degree do you consider the following behaviors to be uncivil?” Respondents ranked each behavior by using a five-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being not uncivil and 5 being extremely uncivil.

Four of the 23 behaviors had means above 4.0. They were continuing to talk after being asked to stop (4.50); coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs (4.45); allowing a cell phone to ring (4.14); and conversing loudly with others (4.09). Nonverbally showing disrespect for others followed closely, with a mean of 3.94. The two behaviors ranked lowest were nose blowing (1.72) and yawning (1.88). Just above them was eating and drinking, with a 2.03 mean.

Some of the midrange behaviors, those not of great concern to students in terms of classroom civility, still do compromise the climate for learning in the classroom and therefore must be of concern to teachers. Examples include using a PalmPilot, iPod, or computer for nonclass activities, with a 3.25 mean; getting up during class; leaving and returning (2.99); doing homework for other classes (2.88); and reading nonclass material (2.70). Although students may not consider these behaviors seriously uncivil, they are behaviors indicative of a lack of engagement with the content of the class.

Students were asked to respond to a second question that inquired about the frequency with which the behavior was observed. As might be guessed, texting topped the list, with a 4.00 mean. It was followed by packing up books before class is over (3.76), yawning (3.47), and eating and drinking (3.39). Those behaviors observed least often included coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs (1.65), continuing to talk after being asked to stop (1.97), nonverbally showing disrespect for others followed closely, with a mean of 3.94. The two behaviors ranked

Two Strategies for Getting Students to Do the Reading

Getting students to come to class prepared continues to be a challenge for teachers. Regular readers know that we are always on the lookout for relevant ideas and information, and the article referenced below contains some.

Many faculty use regular quizzing as a way to keep students up with reading and arriving in class prepared. But is this an effective strategy? That question gets answered when quizzing is compared with other strategies, as it was in this research. Quizzing was compared with an approach the authors called Readiness Assessment Tests (RAT). These tests, done on paper at the beginning of the period or online before class, employ open-ended questions. In this case, students answered two or three of them. The questions were purposefully broad “to prevent students from skimming though the readings in search of answers to detailed questions.” (p. 182) Answers to these questions were graded, with each answer earning up to four points.

In this study, conducted in an upper-division psychology course, students completed the RAT assignment in two of four course content units and they did quizzes in the other two. The quizzes, like the RATs, were administered online. They consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions and had to be completed Friday before midnight. The quizzes were also graded, an amount equivalent to the RAT assignment.

The faculty researchers compared the effectiveness of these two approaches by using several different measures. They found that students rated the RATs significantly higher than the quizzes in terms of enhancing their ability to participate in class. But the RATs and quizzes were equally effective at encouraging students to read assigned materials thoroughly and helping them prepare for
You should know that evidence supporting learning styles is being challenged. Find below the reference for a research article authored by a respected collection of educational researchers that disputes the fundamental assumption that students with a designated learning style (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic, for example) learn more when the instructional methods match their style. Also referenced is a brief, nontechnical article authored by Cedar Riener and Daniel Willingham, who begin their piece with this nonequivocating statement, “There is no credible evidence that learning styles exist.” (p. 33)

They do go on to point out that there are claims inherent in the notion of learning styles that are supported by the research. The learning style theorists do have this correct: “Learners are different from each other, these differences affect their performance, and teachers should take these differences into account.” (p. 33)

Riener and Willingham identify four areas of difference that exist between learners. First, learners vary in their ability to learn certain kinds of content. We may call this talent, ability, or intelligence, but we have all seen those students who master the material easily and others who struggle with it mightily. Second, and not entirely disconnected from the first, students have different interests. Some love music, others like to solve problems, and still others find their passion in sports. These interests motivate their involvement in and commitment to learning. Third, students bring to any learning task different kinds and levels of background knowledge, and what they bring influences their learning. If a student doesn’t bring basic math skills to a college calculus course, success in that course is highly unlikely. And finally, some students have specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, for example) that directly influence how they learn. Clearly, not all learners are the same.

However, proponents of learning styles go further. They believe that “learners have preferences about how to learn that are independent of both ability and content and have meaningful implications for their learning.” (p. 34) One learning style is not assumed to be better than others, but is rather preferred by the learner. “However, when these tendencies are put to the test under controlled conditions, they make no difference—learning is equivalent whether students learn in the preferred mode or not.” (p. 34) So, what learning style proponents have long advocated—matching the mode of instruction to the preferred learning style—is not supported by research. The review of research articles identifies the problems with much of the research that has been used to support the need for teachers to accommodate learning style differences.

Riener and Willingham point out that the idea of learning styles is widely known among postsecondary teachers and students. They cite research showing that 90 percent of the students agreed that “people have their own learning style.” This belief can constrain learners—if a student thinks she’s a visual learner and the instructor is not supporting the presentation of material visually, then the student may think she can’t learn it.

Assessing students’ learning styles and not soliciting feedback on their background knowledge is a waste of time, according to Riener and Willingham. They conclude with what they call the “punch line”: “Students differ in their abilities, interests, and background knowledge, but not in their learning styles. Students may have preferences about how to learn, but no evidence suggests that catering to those preferences will lead to better learning.”

If you’d like to learn more, both of the articles referenced below are worth consulting.

References:


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Magna Publications and The Teaching Professor are proud to sponsor the Maryellen Weimer Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning Award. We encourage you to submit an article you’ve authored or one you’ve read that impresses you as an excellent example of scholarly work on teaching and learning. Additional details about the award, including rules and submission criteria may be found at this website: www.teachingprofessor.com/conference/teaching-and-learning-award. Submission deadline is February 15, 2011.
A Course Metaphor

Here’s an interesting way to refresh a course you may have taught too many times. Identify a course metaphor and use it to create a number of activities that use the metaphor to aid understanding of course content.

The author who describes this idea did not adopt it to refresh his course. He developed the approach to help students in a course with content they often struggled to master. In this example, the course was marketing research and the metaphor was jazz.

You need a metaphor that fits the goals and objectives of the course. Here’s how that worked with the jazz metaphor. “Within the improvisational jazz medium skillful performance requires full knowledge of (a) the context, (b) techniques, options and creative application of those techniques, (c) virtuosity and artistry, (d) creative listening to work with others in the group, (e) leadership (in whole or part), (f) confidence, and (g) ... collaboration.” (p. 305). And those skills are consistent with marketing research requirements that call on professionals to “improvise and creatively weave through more complex information in a way that benefits decision making and the profession.” (p. 302) In other words, the jazz metaphor represents those understandings and skills that students need to develop in this course.

The approach is further explained with a couple of examples illustrating how this instructor used the metaphor in his course. They show how an approach like this might benefit students. However, the design and implementation of activities like this would also benefit an instructor looking for a way to make a familiar course different and exciting. This instructor introduces the metaphor on the first day of class. Students are divided into groups of five, with each student assigned an instrument. They role-play, imagining that they are in an improvising band. After a very brief rehearsal, this “band” must play (and improvise) an easy jazz tune for the rest of the class. Afterward, he has them discuss the similarity of skills needed by a jazz group and those needed in the marketing research process.

The metaphor is carried across a number of classroom activities. When it’s about time for students to present their research, they are divided into small groups and tasked with generating a list of characteristics that make for a bad performance. Then students consider how a jazz player might approach making a presentation more interesting.

The author does offer some useful guidelines for selecting a metaphor. You want one “that is easily understandable, translates well, is not contextually or culturally constrained, and therefore can successfully aid student visualization and action.” (p. 302) You also need a metaphor that connects with student interests. The author also reports that the more you use the metaphor, the better the students are able to apply it to course content.

The approach as it was used here was not equally successful with all students, but a number of student comments included in the article attest to its effectiveness for some. “At the beginning I was a bit put off when this guy started off talking about and playing jazz in a marketing research course. I mean, what planet was he from? But his method gradually won me over. Now I use jazz thinking in a lot of my courses, and other things as well.” (pp. 309-310)

Clearly this isn’t one of those quick-fix solutions, but, then, courses that we’ve been through many, many times aren’t “fixed” with a couple of new techniques.


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exams. However, with the RAT, the percentage of readings completed was statistically significantly higher. Also, exam scores for those units during which students completed RATs were higher, in the case of the first and second exams, those differences were statistically significant.

Student surveys indicated that 56 percent of the students preferred the RATs, compared with 33 percent who preferred the quizzes. “Students who preferred RATs indicated in their open-ended responses that the questions helped them look at the overall meaning of the articles and focus on the main points. In addition, having the RATs due before class helped them prepare to participate in classroom discussions. Students who preferred frequent quizzes reported that their preference was due to quiz questions showing them what to expect from exams and having only one correct answer.” (p. 182)

The authors make the following recommendations based on their findings: “If an instructor’s objective is for students to do the readings prior to class and be prepared to participate fully in class discussions, she should consider using RATs to provide some external motivation. However, if an instructor’s objective is for students to learn the material in any way possible, and/or there isn’t time enough to score student responses every class period, he might consider weekly quizzes as an alternative.” (p. 185)