Unique Perspectives on a Shared Classroom Experience

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In fall 2007 I took my first undergraduate course in about 12 years and in a subject I hadn’t studied since high school. I’m an engineer and I enrolled in one of Dr. Petry’s history courses. We decided to write about this classroom experience from our perspectives—McMartin as a faculty-student and Petry as an instructor with a colleague student in her course.

Open dialogue

McMartin: When I registered for an undergraduate course on campus, my first thought was to confirm that Dr. Petry was comfortable having me in her classroom. I wanted the dialogue between us to be open.

Petry: I will admit that when I heard that a university colleague was interested in taking a class from me, I initially reacted with some apprehension. I realized that the situation was potentially challenging. The fact that her field of expertise was so far from my own lessened this anxiety, though, and I decided to view the situation as a potentially interesting opportunity.

Saving face

McMartin: Assured that my colleague was accepting of my presence, I next worried a bit about saving face, both personally and professionally. My behavior and performance in the course became a source of constant personal scrutiny. I probably put more pressure on myself to perform well than students typically do.

Petry: It’s interesting to hear Dr. McMartin express concerns about her performance as a student. I didn’t think about that at all. What I was acutely aware of, though, was my performance as an instructor. Having a colleague in the class meant having someone there who could scrutinize my competence and performance in the classroom in a way that most students cannot. Throughout the semester I felt somewhat self-conscious in front of the class, even though I reminded myself that Dr. McMartin was there as a student, not as an observer.

Peer evaluation

McMartin: Having my coursework evaluated by an academic peer was nerve-racking. I cared what my colleague thought about my performance. I tried to write succinct and witty responses to questions. The experience also made clear to me how much work is involved in grading 25 essay-style midterm exams. Here I was aware of the student and instructor perspectives.

Petry: I was conscious that my evaluation of written work would be interpreted by Dr. McMartin on two levels, that is, as an assessment of her work, but also as an expression of my own ability to evaluate others’ work. I also wondered how the differences in marking history exams and essays would appear to someone coming from a scientific background.

Pedagogy

McMartin: I never found myself evaluating Dr. Petry’s teaching style per se, but I did pay close attention to the lecture format and activities she used in the classroom. History lectures differ greatly from those in engineering, but I did see some methods that might be transferable. In my courses, I do spend more time writing on the whiteboard, using PowerPoint slides, and demonstrating on overhead transparencies, but I saw other methods that we both use although in slightly different ways. For instance, the class discussions in history were more frequent, open-ended, and focused on the readings. Discussion in my class involves in-class calculations and the interpretation of technological applications. Those differences mean that the two of us prepare for and facilitate discussions differently.

Petry: I assumed that my pedagogical techniques would be under some additional scrutiny with a peer in the classroom. That awareness made me try harder to deliver good lectures and facilitate interesting discussions. And if, on a given day, something did not go as well as I had hoped, I was acutely aware that a colleague was watching!

Just another student

McMartin: Finally, I very much appreciate the anonymity I felt I had in the classroom. It made it easier for me to participate in discussions and ask questions without feeling self-conscious.

Petry: I agreed that it was helpful to have another person in the classroom who could provide feedback on my teaching and help me improve.
What Textbook Reading Teaches Students

Ed.'s note: Two articles in this issue deal with some of the many problems surrounding students and textbooks. Getting students to read their books often seems the most pressing need, and one of the two pieces offers good advice on this issue. Perhaps less pressing, but no less important, are issues associated with how much help students ought to be given with the reading material. This article comes down on the side of less help, with a list of all that reading the book helps students to learn.

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“D
Do we really need to buy the textbook? It’s so expensive!”
“Can’t you just summarize it for us?”
“Would you just tell us what parts will be on the exam?”
“It was so long and so boring. I couldn’t get through it!”

Quotes like these indicate that many of our students want us to help them with the hard work of extracting difficult material and new vocabulary from their textbooks. They may use the term “boring,” but what they really mean is difficult and time consuming. In turn, we sometimes fall into the trap of summarizing the textbook in our lectures and our PowerPoint presentations.

Our students do appreciate a good textbook summary and may even reward us with positive feedback when we highlight text material with flashy, multimedia presentations. In my experience teaching psychology at the university and community college level, I have been flattered by student praise for “making the concepts seem easy.” Recently, however, I am finding myself troubled by the trend of making it seem easy for students. I have been reminding myself and my students that there are important reasons why they should do the hard work of reading the textbook on their own. I decided that the list I’ve created might be useful to others who have students like mine—students who would rather have me read the text and then tell them what they need to know.

1. Many of our students are poor readers. They often don’t know how to extract key information from the textbook, even when the textbook is “user friendly” and written at a lower reading level than a standard college text. I discovered this by asking my novice students to read out loud in class. If you’ve never done this, I recommend that you try it. Many of my students stumble with the vocabulary and sentence structure. When we require them to read the textbook in advance, we give them the opportunity to improve their reading skills and build vocabulary.

2. Most of our novice students know little about the structure of their textbook, how the chapters are organized, and how each section is painstakingly validated with current research. Most don’t preview and scan the text before reading, as expert readers usually do. We help students understand and appreciate how professional and technical material is formally presented when we require that they read the course text. This will better prepare them for what they will be asked to do later in most professions.

3. Textbooks today are filled with captivating pictures, helpful pedagogy, and interesting, real-life case studies and examples. This is in contrast to many of the textbooks that we read as undergraduates. Textbooks today provide students with many different opportunities for learning, but only if they are read.

4. From careful reading of the text students can come to see the value of having a second professor in the course, the author of their textbook. This second professor repeats what he or she said exactly, as many times as the student needs to read it. And students often get

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Creating a Mindset for Collaboration

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Because we know that active engagement in collaborative projects can create a synergy among students that often surpasses what can be learned individually, we find ourselves designing assignments that create opportunities for students to collaborate and learn from one another. Also, the ability to work together in teams is a skill needed in today’s workforce. So for many reasons, assignments that foster collaboration have become essential parts of a well-designed course.

Peer review has been a standard collaborative strategy in English for decades. The activity strengthens students’ editing skills, helps develop confidence in their own writing, and creates a sense of community among writers. With proper guidance students can give each other valuable advice on works in progress and come to rely on that extra set of eyes looking over their work. But building student trust in peer response takes time. Because students see the teacher as the most important source of knowledge as well as the person in charge of grades, they find it difficult to trust peer opinions. I have developed an assignment that hastens this trust building process as it shows students the value of collaboration, with the added bonus of establishing a sense of community in the class.

Although any text could be used for a collaborative assignment of this nature, I use Carol Dweck’s Mindsets: The New Psychology of Success because the content of the book reinforces many of the learning outcomes of the course. This book, a popularized version of Dweck’s psychological research on individuals’ attitudes toward failure and challenge, defines two types of mindsets, growth and fixed. People with a growth mindset accept failure as a challenge and a means to improve. Growth-mindset people believe that intelligence is expandable. Fixed-mindset individuals consider intelligence static and unchangeable and, therefore, see failure as a threat to identity. Fixed-mindset people are less likely to take risks for fear of appearing inadequate. The book, which is full of personal examples of famous people who demonstrate the two mindsets, provides a rich discussion platform for establishing attitudes about learning. It could be used in many different kinds of courses, such as first-year seminars or senior capstone courses.

The simplicity of the writing task makes this assignment easily adapted to many other non-composition courses. After reading the book, each student prepares and brings to class two paragraphs, one describing a person he or she knows who illustrates the fixed mindset and one describing a person who illustrates the growth mindset. We look at the paragraphs as a class and talk about their accuracy in relation to Dweck’s definitions. I then put the students in teams of four. Their assignment is to take the eight paragraphs that they have as a group and use them as the basis of an essay defining the two mindsets. They must include paragraphs from each group member, but the goal is to create an essay with a single voice, not a Frankenstein piece that sounds like four different people’s work sewn together. Their ability to work through the process and to substantially revise the original pieces is weighted heavily on the assessment rubric for the assignment.

For the composition class, this assignment provides an interesting rhetorical problem. Although the essay is easy in the sense that the body paragraphs have been created and the organization and content are fairly simple, the assignment poses significant challenges in relation to point of view and voice. The entire exercise is focused on writing as revision, another key learning outcome of the course.

But as important for me is the efficacy of this assignment in fostering community and promoting positive attitudes toward learning. In regard to community, the students exchange email addresses and phone numbers, share drafts via email, and meet outside of class in order to complete the project. Through this assignment, they develop acquaintances who frequently become study partners with whom they feel comfortable sharing work throughout the semester. This group experience makes students much less self-conscious about making mistakes, and they begin to ask each other for help and advice.

Too often students believe that their intelligence has been determined and that school is just a matter of validating whether they are smart or not. By looking for the mindsets in their friends and family, they begin to consider their own attitudes as well. They know from reading Dweck that although one might have a natural propensity for one mindset, mindsets can be changed. The students begin to understand that rather than viewing mistakes as validation of one’s inadequacy, they can use them to identify areas for growth and improvement. With the help of others, they can successfully address these challenges.

Students generally perform well on this assignment. The positive feedback they receive bolsters their sense of accomplishment and their belief in the value of collaboration and peer review. Long after we have moved beyond this assignment, we continue to make reference to fixed and growth mindsets as well as other learning-related concepts from the work. Dweck’s book sets the stage for learning and provides a valuable starting point for any course that intentionally focuses on student learning.
How to Conduct a ‘Paper Slam’

By Stephanie Schlitz, Bloomsburg University, PA
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Last year, I attended a digital humanities conference at which the highlight was something called a “Poster Slam.” I’d never heard of a “Poster Slam” and had no idea what to expect. It turned out to be a conference session devoted to sharing information about the various posters that would be on display during the poster session. Each poster session participant had created one slide (in PowerPoint or a similar format) depicting the principal content of his or her poster and had one minute to entice conference participants to visit it during the designated poster session. If a presenter spoke beyond the allotted minute, the session organizer rang a bell, and in good humor the presenter was stopped and the next in line ushered forward.

I decided the idea had merit for my classes and shortly thereafter began conducting “Paper Slams” on the days when student papers were due. I reasoned that students spend a good deal of time and energy on these papers and that their work deserved a broader audience. Students could be learning from each other and the “Paper Slam” offered an innovative and unique venue for that learning.

Toward the end of each semester as paper due dates draw closer, I explain the “Slam” requirements to my students. I ask them to develop one slide that highlights the key ideas explored in their papers, and I require them to prepare a 60- to 90-second oral narrative that explains their work to their peers. They are free to use images and color and to explore various modes of composition. Students take advantage of this and use their creative energy to prepare intriguing slides. Being asked to prepare a slide and oral synopsis that effectively distills their work encourages students to think carefully about the content, organization, and delivery of their message—both in their “Slam” materials and in their papers as well.

Students email their slides to me in the days before the “Slam,” and I organize them alphabetically by last name to determine the presentation order. I then compile the slides into a single slideshow. Finally, I create a text document that lists the students’ names and their topics in order. I distribute copies to the class so that everyone can follow along and take notes during the “Paper Slam.”

On the day of the “Slam,” I seat students in alphabetical order and appoint a timer who holds up a “stop” sign when a presenter exceeds his or her allotted time. The “Slam” advances as I scroll through slides and students move to the front of the room to present when their slides are displayed. Some students prepare and read note cards while others extemporize in response to prompts built into their slides. Either way, the students convey their ideas to their peers, and the process is as fun as it is illuminating.

Students have much to learn from one another’s research, but too often the opportunity to exchange ideas is missed. A “Paper Slam” can rectify this by inviting students to present their research in a way that acknowledges the importance of their work and continues the academic tradition of sharing work with peers.

Sources of Power

Communication educators have taken a well-known typology of power and applied it to teachers. According to this theory-based schematic, individuals exert influence over other individuals based on five different sources of power.

**Reward power**—Students learn quickly that teachers can give them rewards such as bonus points, extra credit, or other forms of positive feedback. Students do what the teacher asks or tells them to do because they are motivated to get these rewards.

**Coercive power**—Students also learn that teachers can punish. There may be penalties for late papers or unexcused absense. In this case, students respond to the teacher’s power because they want to avoid these kinds of punishments.

**Legitimate power**—Students expect teachers to have some authority over them. Teachers determine what students will study, what assignments they will complete, and what standards they must reach in order to pass and do well. If students accept these agreed-upon definitions of a teacher’s role, they will acquiesce to the teacher’s direction.

**Referent power**—Students do the teacher’s bidding because students admire the teacher. Because students identify with the teacher and have positive regard for him or her, they willingly do as the teacher says.

**Expert power**—This power comes from the teacher’s knowledge of content and/or expertise as an educator. Students are willing to do as the teacher says because they recognize that the teacher knows more than they do.

Teachers make moves based on these sources of power—they tell students how to solve a problem, or that points will be taken off if papers are late, and they respond with smiles, nods, and positive reactions to a student’s answer. If students respond by following the teacher’s direction their behaviors confirm their willingness to let the teacher influence them.

The application of these sources of power to the teacher–student relationship is well explained in this article: Schrodt, P., Whitt, P.L., and Truman, P.D. (2007). Reconsidering the measurement of teacher power use in the college classroom. Communication Education, 56 (3), 308-332.
Helping Students Use Their Textbooks More Effectively

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Most college students spend little time reading their texts. There’s research to confirm that, but most of us don’t need to look beyond our own classrooms for confirmation. In our case we sampled the undergraduates we teach and they reported that on average they spend 1.88 hours a week reading the required text. The hours reported by first-year students were even less—1.54 hours. Our upperclassmen, primarily educational psychology majors, reported a mean of 2.21 hours each week.

These bleak findings caused us to start thinking about why students don’t read the text. We wondered if instructors somehow unintentionally discourage students from reading their texts. And most important, we tried to identify those actions a teacher can take that might result in students using their textbooks more effectively. Here’s our list of suggestions.

State your requirements for the text on the syllabus. Make it clear from the beginning of the course that the text is required and will be used. This should be done orally and in print. Many students apparently get the idea from the instructor that the text isn’t that important. If it is important and you intend to use it, or you think it is critical for student success in the course, be absolutely clear about that right from the start.

Introduce the text. At the beginning of the course, talk about the text, its features, how it relates to the course, and how it will be used. How is it organized? Are there outstanding features in its layout? Are key terms highlighted, for example? What do you know about its author? Does it have any support material, such as a student workbook or website?

Communicate your expectations regarding the text frequently. Make it clear when a reading assignment from the text needs to be completed, including whether or not students need to complete the reading before they come to class. If you plan to use the text during class, let students know that they should come to class with their book. If you know a chapter is going to be particularly difficult, then give your students some tips for reading the material.

Make it clear that textbook reading requires effort. Many students think that reading a chapter once, or, worse, skimming it, is sufficient. If a careful reading of the text is essential to course success, let students know that they will need to read the material more than once. Explain that even you can’t grasp material in a particular text in one quick read, and that reading textbooks in college requires much more effort than reading the books used in high school courses.

Use the text in class. In your lectures or group work, refer to charts, specific studies, or interesting points in the text. Place reminders about reading on your course Web pages. This connects you and your students with the text. If you disagree with a text, make it clear to the students why and how your position differs. When your lectures digress from the text, make that clear as well, and communicate your reasoning. Students need to know that the instructor has read the text and is familiar with its viewpoints and examples.

Offer students effective textbook study practices. Because many college students don’t read college-level material well, they need to be introduced to effective study strategies such as rereading, asking for help, and asking questions in class. Unfortunately, many students rely exclusively on underlining with highlighters. They use multiple colors, which brightens the paper but doesn’t necessarily lead to better identification of key terms or examples.

Choose a good text. Select texts that emphasize good structure, content, and layout. They should closely support your course topics. Let your book company representatives know what you are looking for and what works and doesn’t work for your students.

Be a good role model. Let your students know that you read—not only the course texts but other texts and books. Demonstrate your knowledge of texts in the field as a way of showing students that reading is an important professional requirement.

The best advice in a nutshell: let all you say and do reinforce the importance of the text.
Online Grade Books: Surprising Accomplishments

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I started using an online grade book (a central feature of any course management system) as a convenience for myself. Here, finally, was a grade book that couldn’t get lost or stolen, and it would be automatically backed up by the IT department every night. The accumulated scores could also be downloaded directly into a spreadsheet for calculation of grades, a shortcut that reduced the possibility of errors. At the same time, however, using an electronic grade book took something that had previously been my private domain and opened it up for every student to inspect. This aspect of the technology challenged me to rethink some of my teaching policies. If I wanted to give credit for attendance and participation (and I did), I needed to make sure that I was calculating that in a way that could stand up to direct student scrutiny. Instead of recording a series of cryptic checks, dashes, and check “pluses” into a black book, I had to create a more quantifiable and defensible system for determining these kinds of grades. I soon found that the transparency of an open grade book fostered a healthy level of instructor accountability in my classes.

For students, the open grade book made it easier to follow their performance over the course of the semester, and it opened a new avenue for teacher-student dialogue. At midterm, for example, when students received their grades, they could compare daily and weekly scores with a letter grade summary to see how it all added up. They could ask questions or contact me if they thought a mistake had been made. Being able to review and correct entries seemed to increase my students’ confidence in the grading process. They recognized my good-faith effort to handle grading in a consistent and reliable way.

After a couple of years of using an online grade book, I decided to survey students about their perspectives. Over two semesters, I collected anonymous responses from 71 students in three different sections of the same course. Only 28.1 percent of these students were using an online grade book for the first time in my class, so the majority had taken other courses in which teachers used this technology. I was curious how frequently they checked their grades online. I found that 58 percent of the students surveyed checked their grades a couple of times a month, and 20 percent answered that they checked them a couple of times a week. Only one student reported ignoring the grade book completely.

When asked about grade accuracy, 76 percent said they never found any mistakes in the recording of their grades, but 7 percent found mistakes without reporting them and another 15.5 percent said that they reported mistakes and I subsequently corrected them. I do record attendance and daily homework assignments, so there are many opportunities for mistakes or misunderstandings (students who come to class after I check attendance or hand in homework without their names on it, for example). Learning that 16 students out of 71 experienced some kind of error in the grade recording process was somewhat alarming, but it also confirmed the value of the transparency that an electronic grade book provides.

I was encouraged that 85.9 percent of my students agreed or strongly agreed that “[t]he online grade book gave me a clearer understanding of my status in the course this semester.” In a section left open for additional comments, students reported that they appreciated being able to track their progress in the course and having a clearer picture of their performance throughout the semester. The only recurrent suggestion was to have the grade book calculate a running cumulative grade throughout the semester. Given the number, variety, weighting and spontaneous use of assignments in the course, I haven’t yet worked out how to provide this information.

Based on these survey responses and my own experiences with the online grade book, I’ve come to believe that this electronic tool is more than a convenience. It has created a new level of accountability and student-instructor communication in my classes. The technology is easy and it offers many advantages while requiring no more effort than does a traditional paper grade book. This transparent approach to grade recording seems to be one digital innovation that can be recommended to faculty wholeheartedly.

Petry: I did consciously try to treat Dr. McMartin as a student rather than as a colleague. I didn’t want other students to think that she would receive special privileges or attention. I didn’t actually know whether she had told other students in the class that she was a professor. Since this was an upper-level history course with a number of good students in it, I hoped that she would find the experience intellectually stimulating. I know that the students certainly benefited from having her in the classroom. I particularly enjoyed watching group discussions unfold with students and a faculty member tackling the assigned readings and questions together.

McMartin and Petry: For both of us, this was a very rewarding experience.