

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## Helping First-Year Students Study

**Bette LaSere Erickson, *University of Rhode Island***  
(PART I)

**I think the professor expects too much from freshman. I'm sorry, but we're not as smart as professors seem to think. They don't seem to realize that we have other classes, too. They just keep piling on the work. If students don't understand it, too bad. They don't care.**  
**--Freshman student**

**It's the passivity of freshman that gets to me. They don't do the reading; they wait for me to explain it. If they don't understand, they blame me. It does not seem to occur to them that they might have to work at understanding, that it might involve some effort on their part.**  
**--Faculty member**

In preparing to write *Teaching College Freshmen*, we heard these sentiments echoed many times. Faculty complained about students' lack of motivation, their neglect of their studies, and their refusal to assume any responsibility for their learning. At the same time, freshmen told us the pace in most courses was far beyond them, it was not humanly possible to do all the work, they frequently felt overwhelmed, and their professors seemed neither to notice nor to care whether or not they learned.

What sense are we to make of these conflicting stories? For starters, freshman descriptions of "humanly impossible" work loads make more sense if one considers them in the context of their previous study practices. According to the 1993 national survey of incoming freshmen, only a third said they had spent six or more hours per week studying or doing homework during the previous year (Fact File, 1993). Freshmen expect, of course, to study more in college, and most apparently do. Surveys of our students are consistent with Moffatt's (1989) estimates that most freshmen study about two hours a night or about one hour outside class for each hour in class--more than double the hours they studied in high school, but less than half the time most faculty expect.

Studying more would only help, of course, if students studied in productive ways. Although it is difficult to pin down what freshmen actually do when they study, surveys of our students reveal a fairly limited repertoire of study activities. Most say they read assignments, underline or highlight important ideas work assigned problems, and read over or copy over their lecture notes. Few report using strategies likely to lead to deeper understanding--paraphrasing, summarizing, questioning the text, quizzing themselves, explaining the ideas to others.

Few freshmen can keep pace with their courses if they study only an hour between classes and if their only study activities are reading, highlighting, and copying over notes. Faculty expect more, and those who teach freshmen play an important role both in making expectations about college work explicit and in helping freshmen develop their study skills. What, then, might we do to get students to spend more time studying and to study in more productive ways?

In *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, Angelo and Cross (1993) include several practical techniques for monitoring students' learning. Four are specifically designed for monitoring students' study time and activities. *Productive Study-Time Logs* ask students to keep records on how much time they study for a particular class, when they study, and how productively they study at various times during the day. The logs allow faculty and students to assess how much study time is actually used, important and often startling information to freshmen. In *Punctuated Lectures*, the instructor pauses from time

to time and asks students to reflect on what they were doing during the lecture and whether or not their behavior helped or hindered their understanding. Students jot down their reflections and submit them anonymously at the end of class, thereby providing feedback on how students are processing information during class. *Process Analysis* requires students to keep records of the actual steps they take in completing an assignment and then to comment on the effectiveness of their approach. Angelo and Cross suggest this technique is especially useful when students complete similar types of assignments several times during the course because it allows students to pinpoint problems in their study approaches and to try alternative strategies. *Diagnostic Learning Logs* ask students to keep records of each class or assignment, noting things they did and did not understand from class and identifying successful aspects of their performance as well as problems they encountered on assignments. Periodically, students look back on their entries, looking for patterns that might help them diagnose their strengths and weaknesses in their study skills. Angelo and Cross provide detailed instructions on how to use these assessment techniques and excellent suggestions for adapting them to accomplish a variety of purposes.

Several faculty on our campus have found the *Survey of Study Activities* (included below) a quick, but informative way to monitor what students do when they study and how much time they spend. Administering the survey in each class for one week early in the semester and then reporting the results to students serves as a useful entree to discussion of how much they study, what they currently do, and what additional activities they might try. Repeating the process once or twice later in the semester reminds students what it means to study actively and lets instructors know whether or not their students require more structured assignments--more powerful prompts--in order to study effectively.

### **Survey of Study Activities**

I am participating in a project with several faculty to try to learn more about how students study and what we might do to help you study more effectively. I will be grateful if you will take a few minutes to answer the following questions.

1. Listed below are some of the things students say they do when they study between classes. Please check any activities you did for this course *since our last meeting*.

- a) Read the assignment
- b) Underlined or highlighted important ideas in the readings
- c) Took notes from the readings
- d) Wrote summaries of the readings in my own words
- e) Asked myself questions to see if I understood the reading
- f) Wrote answers to study questions
- g) Worked assigned problems
- h) Worked problems in addition to those assigned
- i) Read over my notes from the last class
- j) Wrote a summary of my notes from the last class
- k) Tried to explain the ideas we're studying to someone else
- l) Discussed the ideas in my study group
- m) Other (Please specify):

2. About how much time did you spend doing work for this course *since our last class meeting*? (Please check one)

- less than 1 hour
- 1--1.9 hours
- 2--2.0 hours
- 3--3.0 hours
- 4--4.9 hours
- more than 5 hours

3. About how much time do you *usually* spend doing work for this course between class meetings? (Please check one)

- less than 1 hour
- 1--1.9 hours
- 2--2.0 hours
- 3--3.0 hours
- 4--4.9 hours
- more than 5 hours

### **References**

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