

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Active Learning Beyond the Classroom

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Attending class is akin to regular religious observance: The ritual or sermon is less important for what it teaches directly than for its motivational impact on what believers do between services.

Lowman, 1984, p. 165.

Even carrying a full course load, students spend a relatively small proportion of each week in class, typically about 15 hours, and research has shown that most undergraduates spend only a few hours a week studying outside of class. How do they occupy their time? According to a national survey of college students (Boyer, 1987), almost 30 percent of full-time students work 21 or more hours a week; 31 percent spend over 10 hours a week in informal conversations with other students; 33 percent watch television more than seven hours a week; 38 percent spend between three and 10 hours in leisure reading; and 47 percent participate in some type of organized student activity, consuming another three to 10 hours a week.

Clearly, students find many more interesting things to do on a college campus than coursework, but perhaps the question we should ask is whether the out-of-class work we require of our students is interesting enough (and sufficiently rewarding) to compete with non-academic activities. Our goal should be to devise out-of-class assignments that promote collaboration and active

involvement in learning so that students can find their academic work at least as interesting as late-night bull sessions in the dorms. Four discrete approaches to the problem are offered below, but combining two or more of these strategies can multiply their effectiveness.

Study Groups Research has consistently shown the effectiveness of peer teaching and group work for enhancing learning, but spontaneous student collaboration is rare. Undergraduates rarely organize study groups on their own, even if teachers encourage the practice, so it is usually necessary to make study groups a course requirement if we expect students to form them. Students will need help in setting up their groups and advice about the best procedures to follow in order to maximize the benefits of group study. You can provide guidelines for the groups in the course syllabus and offer to help solve problems when they arise. Typical guidelines might include the following:

- Meet at the same time and place every week.
- Combine class notes into a set of master notes, discuss the key ideas in each lecture, and highlight these ideas in the master notes to aid individual review.
- Take turns asking each other questions about the assignments, making sure everyone has a chance to ask and answer questions.

Journals and Diaries Students often view term papers, essays, and book reports as make-work exercises rather than integral parts of the course, which helps explain why their products are often poorly-researched and hastily composed. Written assignments that involve students' imagination and reflect course goals in significant ways can increase their interest in doing a better job, and many teachers have achieved this outcome by requiring journals or diaries. Students are asked to record their reflections on the course, write about material that confuses them, and describe new insights or discoveries about the subject matter. Journal writing helps students think more cogently about the course and their own learning; they become actively involved in the process of learning and develop a better understanding of how they learn. A teacher can choose to make a the journal a basic course requirement rather than a graded assignment, but journals that show little thought or work should be

returned for rewriting until they are acceptable. Student journals have been used successfully in courses across the curriculum: history, business administration, physics, math, history, and sociology. Student journals in mathematics courses reduce math anxiety and improve performance on exams. Math students who express their difficulties in writing are able to understand and solve problems they could not solve before (Griffin, 1982).

Experiential Learning A number of authorities have begun to question the reliance on the classroom, lab, and library as the only proper environments for learning. Many teachers have decided that, since the world cannot be brought into the classroom, students need to be sent into the world. They have integrated experiential activities into their courses by offering internships and community-based activities as options for learning. For instance, a professor at the University of North Carolina who teaches a course that deals with race, poverty, and politics arranges with local social welfare agencies and community service organizations to place his students in volunteer positions. In reflection sessions, students discuss the ways their experiences relate to the course (Murphy and Jenks, 1981). To be pedagogically effective, experiences must be carefully tied to the course and made the subject of some academic analysis or reflection. Help is available from the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE), an organization that supports publications and conferences on experiential learning, at 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh, NC, 27609-7229.

Student Research Most undergraduates never have an opportunity to engage in the kind of research that their professors practice. Often they are given assignments that insulate them from contact with the complexities and confusions of the research world, and also keeps them from experiencing the joy and pride of discovery. Professors in the social sciences might structure their courses entirely around research projects in which students are required to develop hypotheses, gather and analyze data, and report their findings. Although the level of research would not be as sophisticated as that performed by the faculty, it would be sufficiently complex to give students a taste of the real thing. Similar assignments are possible in the natural sciences as well. For example, student lab groups can be given the task of designing lab experiments rather than simply

repeating pre-structured exercises. These changes not only require the development of new course plans, they imply a refocusing of the course outcomes, which may be difficult without curriculum reform. However, seeking ways to incorporate any research experience into our courses will bear fruit.

Combining Strategies Innovative combinations of these four strategies -- study groups, journals, experiential learning, and student research -- are easy to imagine. For example, a teacher could require a journal as a way for students to reflect and report on an experiential learning assignment (or a research project). Study groups can be focused on a group research project or used for reflection sessions to process activities in experiential learning. Experiential assignments in the community might also be combined with research projects, with the added benefit that the research results could have real-world impact. In each case, these strategies will help students appreciate the connections between life inside and outside of the classroom while making coursework more stimulating and fun.

References

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