

Educate Through Innovative Technology

Reading Minds: Helping Students Stay On Task

Posted em Educate Through Innovative Technology em 11/out/2017 0:04:24

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"I didn't do the reading," said Taylor (a pseudonym) with a nervous laugh. Our casual chat in a student lounge undoubtedly contributed to her openness. Most students are not as forthcoming despite their obvious lack of preparation.

I discovered this is often the end of the discussion for my peers when I solicited advice about improving reading adherence. "They're graduate students," they'd say.

"They read the material or they don't." Despite the *laissez faire* coating, most conversations with instructors are incomplete until someone complains that the students aren't keeping up with assignments.



At first I didn't give much attention to whether my class did the homework either. I put my mind to finding good resources, assuming students would do the work. But they didn't. Clearly that put a damper on learning. It also made classes more wooden. I had to rely on lecture rather than in-class engagement and exercises—both of which are predicated on completed assignments. I decided that if it was worth worrying about the lack of adherence—or even assigning texts at all—I should revisit my hands-off approach to reading.

Thought Evolution

Learning individual names early by requesting a profile and selfie was instrumental in drawing them out. When a question fell flat or someone wasn't participating I called on them by name. If students knew they were going to be asked about the homework, they were more likely to do it.

In larger classes, I asked students to keep track of the number of comments made by their classmates to ensure I knew who was participating. Because this task was rotated, it also gave students the chance

to know their peers better and be more focused on discussions.

Still, I suspected compliance was irregular. (Though, truthfully, I'd never actually asked who did the work.) I wanted another method to motivate the students to read the material. This decision was influenced by contemporary textbooks, which are very different than what I was used to as a student. An introductory writing text I just considered is about 475 pages. When I went to school, a book that size was primarily found in law or medical schools. That thick text is intimidating even for me—and I know the subject.

Prelude to a Change

In deciding what to do next, I had a few frank “the-semester’s-over-and-the-grades-are-submitted” conversations in which I asked students what was happening. There wasn’t soul-searching, just a neutral expression that *their classmates* didn’t do the work. Although not what I wanted to hear, I had to admit that my own compliance was spotty when I was their age.

So I checked in with friends, especially teachers who went back to graduate school as adults. Their advice was particularly important because they were recently in school and had current, relevant experience. The consensus was that a moderate amount of material and an activist approach to reading adherence helped them learn.

Reimagining Support

Like Goldilocks in a classroom, I went through many permutations to find the right level of support. For example, I gave easy, short, weekly quizzes. If you’ve done the homework, I reasoned, you’ll know the answers. A mature student dissuaded me from that position. She pointed out that asking specific questions tended to test memory rather than understanding.

Given that fair critique, I switched to mimicking an exceptional colleague versed in teaching critical thought. I asked for 5-minute in-class papers articulating students’ opinions of the key takeaways of the readings. This swung the pendulum back toward loose. I got answers that were true but superficial, ideas that seemed to be based on a quick skim. The next semester I returned to quizzes that asked specific questions, but allowed students to use their notes.

All of these ideas worked to some degree and, I believe, are worth trying. But none felt exactly right for my classes.

So I went to my convenience sample of Facebook friends with the question: What are your tips, ideas*, etc. for getting graduate students to do course reading? Many posted ideas about what helped them as students, which seems especially credible.

In addition to a graduate student’s reminder for instructors to stay on top of their own reading(!), here are some other thoughts:

- Have each student take notes on the readings as part of their homework and share these thoughts with a small group during an in-class discussion.
- Ask for a written reflection/journal on the material. Have students publish their reactions on the course site and comment on a set number of other posts.
- Require a short summary of the homework, spot-checked for accuracy, be sent to the instructor before the class.

- Task students with running a discussion of the readings.
- Distribute questions about the readings the week before—and then use them to generate conversation.

Helping Students Succeed

Many of the instructors I've spoken with are understandably uninterested in a hands-on approach. For myself, I think I'm especially motivated by my own foibles. My fundamental belief is that students want to do the work, just like I did. Most sign up with the intention of staying on top of the assignments and learning as much as possible. Then L-I-F-E gets in the way. Offering support is a call to their original, better angels. They, like me, need some extra help now and then to stay on the right path.

* I'm grateful for smart ideas from Monica Grant, Lauren Jessell, Heidi Jones, Maya Mesola, and Laura Spess.

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