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Helping Students Find Meaning in Core Curriculum Courses

LET'S FACE IT: some courses are simply more applicable to the job market than others. For some, it's easy to make the connection between what is taught in the classroom and the skills needed for landing that perfect job. But, what about those courses that are not geared toward generating employment?

I teach religious studies courses, which are intended to enrich the spirit, open the mind to ponder the meaning of life, and explore how cosmic questions have been approached by others. Unfortunately, many students have a hard time tapping into the importance of these courses, especially the required introductory ones. Nothing is more discouraging than standing in front of a classroom filled with freshmen who desperately want to be elsewhere.

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Coming from a background in curriculum development, I have challenged myself to make introductory religious studies courses meaningful. In particular, I strive to establish value, build on previous knowledge, address expectations, and give the students freedom of choice within the assignments. These ideas and more are articulated in the research-based article by Susan Ambrose, et al. (2010), called How Learning Works. The strategies listed below are a few I've had success implementing. They can apply to many core curriculum courses in the social sciences and humanities.

1. **Don't overwhelm students with readings.**

Engage them in active learning. It wasn't that long ago that I was a student, and I know very well that the book won't get read if there's little interest in the course or if students feel intimidated by it. Rather than assign long, theoretical readings, have them explore the material through short writing assignments. This semester, I gave my students readings every Tuesday and required that they pick an example related to the reading and write a one- to two-page essay on it. The essay was due on Thursday, our next class meeting. This assignment also can be turned into a short research or analytical assignment. The point is that it encourages the students to: a) routinely engage with the material, b) find something they would like to explore in greater depth, and c) actively participate in their own learning. To help the students benefit from each other's perspectives, they can meet in small groups on Thursdays to share their papers or they can be assigned to present to the class on a specific day. A word on grading: Although the constant stacks of paper appeared intimidating, they were easy to grade on a 1-10 scale and could be skimmed for correctness and effort.

2. **Introduce insider perspectives.**

Students are fascinated by guest speakers, particularly those who can bring the topic to life for them. During the course of the semester, I try to have two to three guest speakers. One semester a Buddhist layperson, a Catholic priest, and a Protestant pastor came to speak. Another semester, I invited a Catholic priest, two nuns, and a poet renowned for his writings on Christ. All have been very successful. Afterwards, it is helpful to follow up with a reflective paper assignment that allows them to process the guest lecture and turn it into a long(er)-term memory.

3. **Conduct site visits.**

Despite teaching at a Catholic university, I approach each class with the assumption that my students have never been inside a place of worship, and I require them to experience it. Armed with the excuse that they are fulfilling a class assignment, the students attend a worship service of their choosing (of any religion) and write a reaction/reflection paper. As for those who regularly attend worship, they are requested to visit a different service, thereby giving them an opportunity to experience an alternative way of worshipping and broaden their perspective. Since Catholic Mass is held regularly at the chapel on the campus, the students have no excuse to not complete the assignment.

Although there might be some resistance before completing the assignment, it is amazing how much the students usually enjoy and learn from the experience. Don't forget, learning is associated with emotion!

Courses in religious studies deal with important cosmic questions: What happens after death? What is the purpose of life? How do we decide what is morally correct? These are pretty heavy topics for people of any age to explore, not to mention college freshmen! I've highlighted a few strategies that have been helpful in connecting students with the material in required core courses that may initially hold very little interest for them. Obviously, it's impossible to engage every student, but these have improved the classroom experience and made the material more approachable and meaningful. I like to think that students might carry at least one of these experiences with them after the course is finished.

Reference:

Ambrose, Susan; Bridges, Michael W.; DiPietro, Michele; Lovett, Marsha C.; and Norman, Marie K. (2010). How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Julianne Hazen, PhD; Faculty Focus; June 22, 2015; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/helping-students-find-meaning-in-core-curriculum-courses/] July 6, 2015.

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Flipping Assessment: Making Assessment a Learning Experience

What's been left out of the conversation about flipped classrooms, however, is why and how we might also need to flip our assessment practices.

IF YOU'RE A REGULAR reader of this blog, you're already aware that flipped instruction has become the latest trend in higher education classrooms. And for good reason. As it was first articulated by Bergmann and Sams, flipped instruction personalizes education by "redirecting attention away from the teacher and putting attention on the learner and learning." As it has evolved, the idea of flipped instruction has moved beyond alternative information delivery to strategies for engaging students in higher-level learning outcomes. Instead of one-way communication, instructors use collaborative learning strategies and push passive students to become problem solvers by synthesizing information instead of merely receiving it. More recently on this blog, Honeycutt and Garrett referred to the FLIP as "Focusing on your Learners by Involving them in the Process" of learning during class, and Honeycutt has even developed assessments appropriate for flipped instruction. What's been left out of the conversation about flipped classrooms, however, is why and how we might also need to flip assessment practices themselves.

The bottom line in flipped instruction is actively engaging students in higher-level learning during class. Although many instructors see assessment as a separate part of the learning cycle—a part that doesn't typically involve students—there are ways to shift the focus of assessment from the instructor to the student as well as involve students in the process, thereby flipping assessment by making it a learning strategy. Here are a few suggestions for flipping assessments:

- **Create assignment/course rubrics with students.** This strategy allows students to provide input on the standards by which they will be graded as well as promotes a deeper understanding of what the standards mean. Instructors and students involved in the discussion during the co-creation of rubrics standardize their concept of quality work, giving students a clearer understanding of what they are being asked to do and the level at which they should be performing. Inclusion in the creation of rubrics also motivates students to participate more fully in the learning process.
- **Have students fill in evidence of learning on their assignment/course rubric.** Give students a modified rubric with the articulation for the highest achievement level and leave a blank space for them to write in. This flipped assessment strategy enables students to reflect on their learning and take an active role in the grading process by directing the instructor's attention to their achievements. Instead of passively "receiving" a grade, students actively guide the instructor in assessing their work in a particular context, one that the students articulate for the instructor. This method, coupled with the last, allows students to participate in authentic assessment situations that they might face in job performance assessments as current or future employees.
- **Grade *with* students in grading conferences.** This unconventional strategy, much like flipped classrooms, actively engages students in learning during assessment. Having students sit with instructors while they grade takes the mystery out of how assignments are assessed, and it enables students to actively question, clarify, and understand why they are assigned their grades. Their involvement in the grading process also allows instructors to see where students misunderstand points on the rubrics or in classroom instruction. Grading becomes a collaborative activity where learning by both instructor and student also takes place, unlike the one-way communication situation inherent in conventional grading situations.

When I have used flipped assessments in my writing courses, students have responded positively. After participating in grading conferences, students reported that this grading experience was more personal, important, and valued, and that they felt more confident in revising their work. Students also felt that the grading standards were clear and fair as a result of co-creating and discussing the course rubric.

Students engaged in these flipped assessment strategies are reflective learners who generate evidence for their own assessments. They can take charge of how and why they learn, a major tenet of flipped instruction itself, or at least have a voice in that process. In this way, the energy of assessing their work shifts away from the instructor and toward the students, enhancing their learning in the process. Flipped assessment features a collaborative process where information flows between students and instructors instead of only one way. Finally, students are involved in the full process of learning, including the integral element of assessment, by their synthesis of standards and analysis of their own work. This is a powerful moment where pedagogy and personal/professional practices come together. When we flip our classrooms to be more focused on student learning and student goals, and when we consequently flip our assessment practices to foster agency in our students and help them develop the skills they need for providing evidence of their learning, then we're mentoring them; we're walking them through the processes that we, as teachers, need to enact daily.

References

Bergmann, Jonathan, and Aaron Sams. Flip Your Classroom Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day. Eugene, Or.: International Society for Technology in Education, 2012.

Barbi, Honeycutt, and Jennifer Garrett. "Expanding the Definition of a Flipped Learning Environment." Faculty Focus. January 31, 2014. Accessed April 8, 2015. http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/expanding-definition-flipped-learning-environment/

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Susan Spangler, PhD; Faculty Focus; June 15, 2015; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/educational-assessment/flipping-assessment-making-assessment-a-learning-experience/] July 6, 2015