

Getting Students to do Reading Assignments

“I want students to do the reading!”

This is a familiar complaint heard from faculty members, and it is also a problem nationally in higher education. There are a variety of reasons why students fail to complete reading assignments. Some of them are cultural, some are institutionally fostered, and some are even a result of instructional practices by the very faculty members who are complaining.

Here are some issues to consider -

Students’ inexperience in deriving meaning from a text

This is common among entering college freshmen. The problem is not that they can’t “read,” but that their academic experience has not required them to learn from a textbook. Hence, they tend to read a textbook as they’d read a novel (or Car & Driver magazine). That is, they try to take information out of the book without regard to understanding the ideas or concepts. Beginning students see “learning” as regurgitating information for an instructor, so if the textbook is a source of information, they try to “get” it, usually just before an exam.

In fact, reading a textbook correctly involves making meaning (DiGisi & Willett, 1995). Effective reading in the disciplines – both science and humanities – is an interactive / constructive process. The student reader needs to become familiar with the vocabulary of the discipline and must be creating schema in response to the conceptual demands of the text. That is, the student is developing understanding through a dialogue with the text. If one looks at used student texts with large segments of the prose simply marked with the ubiquitous highlighters, it’s apparent that most undergraduates are generally less oriented to the interactive/constructive process of meaning making and merely try to take information from the text.

Lack of “pay off”

Often students don’t do reading assignments because they can achieve their goals without doing them. The course goal for the average undergraduate is “getting through,” and students are adept at identifying exactly what’s necessary to get through (with their target grade). This is especially true for undergraduates for whom the daily goal is simply survival, and anything that is not perceived as essential to survival is quickly jettisoned. However, undergraduates are also forming academic habits that will have a lasting influence on their behavior, so it’s especially important to form in them the right academic habits.

Thus, if class is conducted so that freshmen can “get by” without doing assigned reading, you can be sure that’s what they’ll do. Another factor to keep in mind is a published observation of college freshman that indicates that they are not inclined to study on a daily basis. They really don’t consider it important to keep up with course material but tend to think of “studying” as reserved only for impending examinations (Leamson, 1999).

There has to be a structure in place that connects the reading assignment to the student’s course experience in a very specific way. Here are some techniques for communicating to students that they must do the assigned reading and simultaneously helping them learn to read the textbook effectively.

The Enticing Question:

The assignment is for history, and the chapter is about the French Revolution. At the end of the class preceding the assignment, the instructor says,

“For the next class, you’re going to be reading about the French Revolution. What I’d like you to consider is this: ‘Given the social, political, and economic situation at the time, could the French have had an unbloody revolution? Why or why not?’ That’s what we’ll discuss in our next class, so read to form your opinion on this question and come with your evidence.”

Of course, the key is that the instructor actually does conduct the promised discussion in the next class meeting and doesn’t panic when the students appear unprepared and simply feed them the key points from their assigned reading.

“Cognitive Mapping”

This is more structured and takes some class time. However, it’s particularly helpful for helping students navigate the text and if a discussion of the reading is the major point of the class, this also provides an excellent entry into that discussion (avoiding the instructor summary of the reading).

For the reading assignment, students receive a “map” to fill out. The elements depend on the reading, but they should be accessible to the students and not unduly demanding. Here’s one sample:

What is the focus of this chapter?

From your reading, what is the most important point made in this chapter?

Why is this important?

What ideas in this chapter are new to you and especially interesting?

Whatever questions you use (based on the type of reading in your course), there should be only a total of about 5, and they should not be simply the lesson objectives. You don’t want the students doing a scavenger hunt for answers; you want them exploring the material in a focused way – i.e., looking for main ideas, etc.

The final question should always be a version of this:

What ONE question would you like me to answer in class about this reading?

Begin the next class with the students in groups of 3 or 4, and have them discuss their responses to the various questions for about 10 minutes, comparing their answers to arrive at a common idea of what the reading was about and its main point. Each group is told that they can have only ONE question for the instructor from the group, so they have to decide which one they want to pose as a group.

After the group discussions, the instructor initiates the discussion by asking for the group questions. The provides a student-centered focus for the class – i.e., the instructor doesn’t lead from what he or she wants to cover, nor rely on the common but rather ineffective “Any questions.” By giving

students the opportunity to really formulate questions in a controlled environment, the quality of the questions will improve.

The advantage of this practice is that the questions can be developed for any discipline and any type of reading, and they can be written at any cognitive level—i.e., students can be asked why and how in addition to what.

Having the questions while doing the reading provides the student with focus and assistance in deciphering the reading, and providing class time for a brief discussion among peers signals to the students that this is a valuable part of the class—i.e., doing the reading.

You can also teach them to annotate their cognitive maps during the class discussion as a form of note taking.

The Incomplete Outline

This is another technique to help students (especially freshmen) learn to read the textbook.

The students receive a handout (either electronically or in hard copy) that lists some of the key points in the reading assignment but also indicates the number of supporting points that can be found in the reading. For example, for an assigned reading in general chemistry, the students might receive this handout:

Atoms, Molecules, and the Mole

For each letter below, write a point you consider important from the reading that relates to the subject with the Roman numeral.

I. Atoms & the Mole

- a.
- b.
- c.

II. Molecules, Compounds, & the Mole

- a.
- b.

In class, the instructor can check to see how well the students could identify the important points and then see how well they understand the material. Students can annotate their outlines during class (thus promoting note-taking).

Challenging Writing

Students are instructed: In your reading, you'll see the comment that "The mole is the chemist's six pack."

Your grandfather, who has only a high school education and no scientific background, is fascinated with your courses at the University, particularly chemistry. Since the mole is such a key concept, write an explanation for your grandfather, using examples that would be relevant to him, so that he

will be able to understand this concept. You must do this in 100 words or less.

An assignment like this will focus student attention on understanding this key concept, and when the instructor reviews some of this writing in class (perhaps having students identify the best explanation), the concept can be reinforced and incorrect ideas corrected.

The technique chosen should correlate with the lesson objective (what do I want them to get out of this reading).

For example, if the students were assigned to read a short story, the instructor would not be interested in having them read for information. However, the students might be told:

In the story you're reading for our next class, there are five characters. Imagine that Steven Spielberg is planning to make a movie of this story and has consulted you for advice on casting. Bring to class your list, identifying at least one actor or actress who would be suitable for each character.

Summary

The possibilities are endless. What's important is that the activity be suited to the goals of instruction and the needs of the students and that it not be onerous. In addition, the instructor must plan to use the student work as part of the next class meeting.

As a distinguished educator has commented,

"In summary, then, outside assignments should be designed to accomplish educational objectives that are clear to the instructor and students alike, that are integrated with what is happening during class, and that do not require student time and effort for its own sake." Student motivation tends to be increased if, in giving assignments, "the instructor (1) avoids language that emphasizes a role as formal authority, (2) uses language that attributes intrinsic motives to students and suggests they will find the assignments intellectually satisfying, and (3) uses creative classroom exercises and ungraded feedback designed to help prepare them for subsequent graded work" (Lowman, 1996).

References

DiGisi, L.L. and Willett, J.B. (1995). What high school biology teachers say about their textbook use: A descriptive study. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 32, 123-142.

Leamson, R.(1999). *Thinking About Teaching and Learning: Developing Habits of Learning with First Year College and University Students*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.

Lowman, J. (1996). Assignments that promote and integrate learning," *Teaching on Solid Ground: Using Scholarship to Improve Practice*, ed. Robert J. Menges, Maryellen Weimer, and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 203-231.

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