GREAT TEACHING

Getting Students to Read BEFORE Class

Is there a magic bullet for getting students to read assigned material before they come to class? Dr. Eric Mazur of Harvard has figured it out—take a look at this 2-minute video during which he describes his process. You’ll see that he has students respond to questions about some aspect of the reading before class time by submitting their responses to his course shell.

Then there’s the old extrinsic motivation stick: give a brief quiz over the reading at the start of class. In speaking with college students during a Small Group Instructional Diagnosis process one semester, the group of mostly juniors revealed that they just didn’t take the time to do anything that didn’t have a grade attached because their lives were so busy. They also shared that it was a waste of time to read the material when all their instructor did was to go over the text material in class.

Below is a link to an article with 14 tips for getting students to read before class, but you may be interested in the solution Dr. Gary Smith of the University of New Mexico devised for getting his students to do the reading as well as other work before class and actually be enthusiastic about the process. His students also became perturbed if peers ever showed up without having done the pre-class work after Smith’s ingenious approach.

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The first day of class Smith projected a slide presenting three responses from which his students could choose in order to answer the question, “Thinking of what you want to get out of your college education and this course, which of the following is the most important to you?:

1. Acquiring information (facts, principles, concepts)
2. Learning how to use information and knowledge in new situations
3. Developing life-long learning skills (p. 2)

Then the class discussed their responses, which allowed Smith to explain how the course was structured, which (as he’d hoped) turned out to be in ways that were most important to the students. In addition, they overwhelmingly chose #2 & #3 as their responses, with even the two who selected #1 admitting that they chose it believing they were there just to learn facts before they applied any knowledge. The discussion was exactly what Smith had hoped for: a consensus-building exercise about what students would do in order to best serve their own learning. The students volunteered that they could do the “acquiring information” step on their own before coming to class in order to have class time for #2 and #3. After this discussion, he found that his students did a much better job preparing for class.
Smith’s approach, as described in this brief article, accomplishes multiple objectives, not all of which are specifically about getting students to read before class, though most connect to it. For instance, the kind of first-day-of-class activity that he describes is a great one for developing teacher immediacy (a concept to be discussed in a future newsletter article), and which has positive consequences for students’ academic achievement.

In addition, working with your class in this manner can help transform many of your students’ thinking about how to be college students, especially if they have not had much experience with studying material and trying to grasp that meaning before a teacher previews the information. With Smith’s approach, the rationale for reading and working outside of class before class is seen as a positive because it enables the cool stuff students get to do in class.

The result is much more intrinsic motivation than would have been present otherwise.

Finally, working with students in this manner on the first day of class allows you to set expectations for academic rigor, yet do it in a way that makes students think it’s their own idea. The challenge of helping students work at college-level-appropriate academic rigor has become increasingly notorious, and Smith’s technique is a way to help students understand what they’re capable of when they adjust techniques and strategies to become better scholars in training.

Check out Smith’s approach and his reflection about its success in his article.

And what about those fourteen tips? Eric Hobson wrote a paper for the IDEA Center to address the all-too-common phenomenon of students not reading assigned material before they come to class. You may find some new ideas among his suggestions.
