Ensuring that Students Complete Assigned Readings

Students are often reluctant (or unable) to complete readings before class. They might lack the confidence, motivation, or skill to read difficult texts (Starcher & Proffitt, 2011). Instructors can make things worse with expectations that don’t align with their students’. Fairly or not, instructor and student are often not on the same page.

To ensure that students complete important readings, you can use Class Prep assignments. First, you design questions that can only be answered if a student completes an assigned reading. You can use Bloom’s taxonomy to adjust question difficulty based on your class’s needs (Ewell & Rodgers, 2014). Second, create an audience for each question that forces students to answer in their own words. This can reduce plagiarism, and it keeps students from using textbook language as a crutch (Bean, 2011). Below are some examples from a 100-level Literature class (examples from other disciplines can be found in Ch. 3 of John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*):

* **Remembering/Understanding Question:**

In your own words, briefly explain what happens in Susan’s Glaspell’s one-act play *Trifles*. Imagine you are explaining it to a friend over lunch. Be comprehensive, but also be honest. If you didn’t understand certain parts, describe what happened in the play and why you think it happened. Keep your tone PG-13, as if there were children running around your table at the restaurant *(around 200 - 250 words)*

* **Applying/Analyzing Question:**

After discussing Glaspell’s play, your friend notices that a major plot point centers on domestic violence. Nervously, he reminds you that a mutual friend has been acting strange lately, prone to nervous laughter and flinching at sudden movements. Your friend thinks she might be in an abusive relationship. What can the two of you do? Keep in mind, this is a hypothetical. You don’t need to share these thoughts with your peers if you don’t want to. So, be as honest as you can. Would you be likely to approach this friend and offer help? Are you likely to confront the alleged abuser? Is it possible you might do nothing at all? Explain what you might do, and then explain whether your choices are similar to those made by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters *(around 200 – 250 words)*

Third, assign a due date of about 1 – 2 hours before class (Patterson, 2005). This lets you skim the responses before class to see where students are struggling. You can give feedback in class, celebrating excellent insights and addressing common observations and misconceptions. Finally, you can grade this class prep as a participation assignment. If a student tries to answer all the questions, you give them full marks, whether right or wrong. This minimizes your grading burden, lowers the stakes, and incentivizes students to do the reading.

Keep in mind, as a general rule, you should *not* accept class prep late. If you accept it late, you lose the ability to make sure students are doing the reading before class. If you don’t want to punish excused absences, you can always include a policy to drop the lowest grade for 1 or 2 class prep assignment(s). Done well, these assignments not only make sure students are prepared for class, they can provide a strong foundation for in-class discussion and activities.

References

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