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Creating Assignments That Work for Digital Learning Environments

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Teachers who spend time actually thinking through assignments that align with the learning outcomes of a course are the most effective in assessing the learning that has taken place. It's debatable that evaluating learning in the purest sense might ever really be possible given the scope of variables in any context of learning, but when assignments are linked closely to outcomes, the results are more significant.

Additionally, when assignments are creative and applied so that all learning styles and aspects of course content can be integrated, students are usually more positive about their performance. When assignments are vacuous and seem only to present "busy" work to students with no apparent application to reality, students become frustrated and often feel misrepresented and diminished in the process.

This may all sound familiar to anyone who is an educator, but it seems that even the most creative teachers are being stretched like never before in regards to creating assignments that work in technology-rich learning environments. How can these assignments be rigorous, accessible, and holistic--yet also specific--and all the while remain student-centered and integrate technology freely? How can teachers really create assignments that demonstrate what students know both in content and in technology skill development?

The Importance of Developing Technology Skills ... and Assigning a Grade

It's vital to realize that when technology is integrated into a learning environment and students are using technology in their learning process, the assignments must also include technology use. That is, if, for example, students are using computers to work on projects, do research, collaborate with their peers, or interact with content and then the assignment set is to write a paper on a set topic and for which no aspect of the technology use is involved, the assignment will seem unnecessary to the students and dissociated with their learning experience.

Not that writing a paper is not important; but it does not reflect the learning that has actually take place unless the writing assignments takes that into consideration. If instead students are asked to use the Internet to research a theme or topic from which they will set their own paper title and the research is blogged and cross-referenced, then not only will the students feel involved in the process but also that all of their skills are being demonstrated--including the computer use, the software use, and the research skills. In that instance, each of those skill areas should be assigned a grade

percentage so that students will feel that every skill they have used has been valued and contributed to their overall grade. Then they have a reason to improve both their technology skills and their academic skills. This means that the technology use will not sit outside the course but remain thoroughly integrated as part of the learning process.

Similarly, experience shows that, with group projects, if a grade percentage is not assigned for every stage of the group project--including individual participation and contribution--what usually happens is that one person will complete all the tasks and not only will everyone else get a "free ride," but, more importantly, no one will really have learned anything from the exercise.

So, in a technology-rich learning environment, every aspect of the technology use must be integrated into the overall assignment design and assigned a grade percentage to add value.

Additionally, in a digital learning environment--whether fully online or blended--students do not respond well to assignments that sit outside the digital environment, as they become inconvenient and marginalized.

For example, students should be able fully demonstrate their learning digitally--not via hardcopy. Digitally, students can integrate images and direct links to blogs or wikis or Internet sites within their presentation, which expands the scope of their assignment and also more fully reflects not only their academic learning but their technology skill development. It also provides an opportunity for the "multilayering" of information rather than only a linear flow, which is central to a digital environment.

When I taught blended courses at the university level, what most often frustrated students was when they had a lot of "busy" digital work using supporting software or collaborative tools when their assignments were additional in the sense that they did not either integrate their digital work or reflect all the work they had done. I learned to redesign the assignments I set to provide flexibility and creativity for students and to encourage the integration of every aspect of their learning and not only a small preset reflection I determined they should provide.

Content Rigor: What It Does Not Mean

A great anxiety with many educators when being challenged to think creatively and innovatively in using technology and creating effective assignments is that academic rigor will suffer and students will be "short changed" in their learning experience. The following are some statements that discount several well accepted myths about academic rigor:

- Content rigor does not mean that students are working all the time or that teachers are working all the time in a class or online session time;
- It also does not mean that vast amounts of homework are necessary. In fact, piling on work to students will be perceived by the students as frustrating;
- Academic rigor is not achieved through sternness or distancing oneself from students in an attempt to seem lofty or highly intelligent.

If anything, academic rigor should be perceived as fully accessible content for teachers and students (in other words, not "hiding" content to trick students), and teachers should always be a ready and willing resource to the learning process, providing whatever learning resources necessary for students to succeed. In other words, academic rigor does not equal mysteriousness but in fact

de-mystifies complex meaning for students.

I attended a traditional literary university (old school), and, while it was a prestigious school, the overall belief we as students held was that we would never be as smart as our professors, so there was little hope, even if we tried. That kind of myth can still entangle education and student experience, whether in K-12 or in higher education: only the "very intelligent" have any hope of making, it and the majority will simply have to find other things to amuse and fill their time at school.

The reality is that academic rigor is about three major things:

- **Relevancy:** This is not the notion that the content area must be popular with students as many subject areas are unpopular, but necessary. It does mean, however, that academic rigor is fully relevant for students in that they can see how and why they are learning what they are and that it is fully relevant to their overall development. Many teachers in higher education do not present courses this way and seem to want students to feel that their course is the most difficult and therefore the one that students should spend the most time studying. Relevancy, however, means that students understand the necessity of what they are learning to the overall discipline they are studying--even in general education. Relevancy essentially "forms" the academic thinking of students.
- **Currency:** students must be taught by current scholars, not teachers who represent "yesterday." Students know when their teacher has current examples and applications and can connect them with real and current life contexts for application. Additionally, technology must be included for currency, as any subject area has a use for technology both for study and, eventually, for professional work in that field. Currency keeps students engaged and interested.
- Finally, academic rigor means challenge on every level. Students should feel stretched and constantly moving outside what is comfortable for them. Something to remember here is that when a teacher does not move himself or herself outside the comfort area or refuses to appear stretched in any way (that is vulnerable as an ongoing learner), students will not only become disengaged but will not be stretched themselves. So their learning will be diminished.

Tip: when designing assignments, keep the learning outcomes of the course beside you, and use something like the following as a checklist for accountability to rigor:

- Is this assignment relevant?
- Is this assignment current?
- Is this assignment challenging?
- Does this assignment integrate technology use?

As you become more familiar with your students, some adjustments can be made according to their specific learning needs. Remember that an assignment may probably never run the same way twice. That's a good thing.

Guidance from Students

It's always a good idea to involve students in the evaluation of assignments. That is, after every assignment, ask students to complete a short survey letting you know how they think the

assignment rated in each of the areas mentioned above. Be sure to include a comment field for their "ideas for future assignments." This will help to keep you connected with students and also keep you creative as a teacher.

Framework for Progressive Assignment Creation

In terms of the value of an assignment to the overall learning of the student, the following provides a framework from which good assignments can emerge. Remember you are a content expert and a facilitator of learning. Your job as an educator is to support every student as he/she learns, all the while forming their thinking within the specific discipline(s) you teach.

1. **Posing a problem: critical thinking.** Critical thinking is a skill, not a subject area. All courses should develop critical thinking in students--even highly quantifiable subjects like math. Students should be encouraged to question the status quo of every idea, every concept, and every application in order to be able to fully articulate their own ideas in relation to those that are valued in the field. The idea that this kind of thinking can only happen later on is simply not true. Even the smallest child should be encouraged to question and realize that knowledge is to be constructed and is never preset.
2. **Focus on process: collaboration.** Vygotsky (1962) referred to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), meaning that there is a process to learning that must be recognized and supported and that there are stages in that process that require intervention and stages that do not. The idea is that as effective educators we must engage students at every stage and provide assignments that involve both supported and independent learning. New technology is key here as so many current software programs provide through blogs, wikis, and micro blogs perfect ways in which students can retain their independent thinking and development and fully represent that through digital captures and posts, while still remaining part of the class learning community and even a wider global community via the Internet. That is, students can learn simultaneously how to learn individually and as part of a group or wider context. This is vital for social knowledge construction and for relevancy and rigor. When students realize that their ideas are posted and therefore "published," they assign more value to their work and look for affirmation from the field of their ideas--this is academic pursuit at its best.
3. **Flexibility of presentation: refusal to support rote repetition.** Additionally, students should be provided flexibility in how they present their work in a digital environment as they should be encouraged to fully value all their ideas and their learning process. By diminishing presentation to only one option, teachers exclude both creativity and innovation, both of which are vital to the overall perception of individual success for students.

Many school teachers and some higher education educators might agree whole heartedly with my ideas in this paper and yet feel that they cannot implement any of them given the confines of the set programs they are assigned to teach. I understand that kind of challenge. But I never cease to be amazed at how innovative teachers can be when committed to better learning. There are numerous examples of teachers who have implemented many of these ideas with a fairly tightly set curriculum and methodology. My sense is that these teachers are those who see standardized outcomes and curriculum as a starting point rather than an ending point. They see their role as in the process as being the guide, the facilitator, the encourager, and the supporter providing students with as many options as possible to pursue their own learning rather than being controlled by someone else's standards and ideas.

Reference

Vygotsky, L. (1962) *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

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