



Reading, Oh My! Getting Your Students to Engage with the Reading

SPEAKERS

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Tierney King 00:00

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast, sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. How do you get your students to complete the readings you assign? More importantly, how do you get them to engage with and retain the readings you assign? In this episode, we'll talk about strategies to help students master deep reading, an activity you can implement to foster student engagement with the reading, and a technique to encourage students to do the reading prior to class. To start, Nathan Pritts explains in his 20-Minute Mentor that an important aspect of active reading is close reading, which requires you to notice everything you're reading and develop an understanding of how that specific reading functions. This four-step process can help students read with intention and help them better retain what they are reading.

Fiona Hunt 01:04

Just as there are different reasons why we read, there are different strategies for reading. That's not to say that we can't do both at the same time - we can read for pleasure and understanding. But active reading is the key to ensuring that you grasp all the information in a text at the same time as you experience the rich pleasures that come from reading. And an important aspect of active reading is something called close reading. Here's how Nancy Boyles, in an educational leadership article, defines it. Essentially, close reading means reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension. Close reading is an active reading strategy that requires you to notice everything - all the details, metaphors, similes, symbolism, repetition, and it allows you to develop an understanding how all of this functions in a text and what it means. This can be applied to any type of article or text. Reading closely involves taking note of terms phrases, short clauses that seems significant or standout, and students should be encouraged to highlight circle or underline passages that seem most important. In academic work, students cannot be passive readers. These types of reading situations require active reading, which involves reading with a pen in hand and marking up terms and phrases, or using that highlight tool when reading an e book. Active readers read for a purpose. They look for main ideas and let the structure of the reading material such as headings and subheadings help them decide what is most important where to pay attention. Active readers aim to interpret rather than just gain a basic understanding of the text. It enables you to understand the material but equips you with the skills you need to analyze what you've read and respond critically. Whether that is a writing assignment and

exam or on a job task in other aspects of your life. Active reading is an invaluable skill, a touchstone for any career that requires a college degree. Whether you're reading an article found online through a popular search engine or through an academic library or textbook downloaded to an e reader. Or even if you're just scanning through the day's news, it is becoming difficult to extricate the act of reading from being online. As a result, we need to be especially on guard to technological distractions. But there's something deeper at stake.

Nathan Pritts 03:19

Nicholas Carr, an author who writes about the effects of the online environment on reading, contends that even people reared on traditional print reading methods, those with fond memories of strolling through long stretches of prose, are being rewired through constant internet use, unable to read more than a few pages before getting all twitchy and jittery. So whether students are reading a novel a nuanced article, a data-heavy case study, or even just the guidelines for a weekly assignment, many students tend to approach the reading of those things in the same way as say scrolling through Twitter. It's a binary switch where they are either reading or not reading. And as a result, many students struggle to adapt to the material at hand, they get fidgety and restless, they find themselves unable to engage in the right kind of reading for the situation they're in. But rather than pretending this isn't the case, and just throwing reading material at our students, we need to talk about it. Maybe that's day one, maybe that's week one, maybe that's every time you assign something. We need to have these conversations about our expectations. We need to admit that there are challenges and we need to come up with solutions that will work to get us past them. So the four steps that will really ensure students have the information they need to succeed when approaching course reading material is step one prepare. They need to thoroughly read the course guide the syllabus, they need to pay particular attention to the learning outcomes learning objectives. Those reflect the knowledge that the students are expected to gain by the time they complete the course. Keeping that in mind is going to help anchor their reading throughout. It offers clues as to why different things have been assigned. If you tell students to always read discussion or assignment prompts before starting any assigned textbook material, that's a way to get them to prepare. That way the prompts can serve as a guide for how to read and what to look for. Step two is plan. Each week, students should be encouraged to check the syllabus, review emails or announcements, check the calendar. That's where they're going to find directions, goals, objectives, ideas about what's going to be happening in the week - it's going to help them to understand how to process the stuff that's thrown in that at them. But if they don't read that ahead of time, if they don't plan in that way, they're not going to have that information when they need it. Step three is implement. Each week students need to complete those readings breaking them up into parts, I think you need to talk about this. Explain that we don't expect them to sit down and read 20 pages in one night. Finally, step four review. When students have completed a text or any other assigned readings something in the in the syllabus, carefully ask them to think about what they've read, review it in their mind. If you share this step-by-step plan with students to communicate clearly how important reading is to you in the course, they'll understand the expectations better. Whether the student has to read materials that you've generated, or articles and chapters that you're pointing them to, these strategies will work, particularly if you've shown them how they work and communicate that you expect them to be followed.

Tierney King 06:23

So you get students prepared to read the content, but what can you do in class to engage them with what they've just read? In this clip, Fiona Hunt explains how reading discussion roles, or literature circles, can give students a purpose or role that helps engage students in the reading.

Fiona Hunt 06:40

Reading discussion roles, also called literature circles, this is a great activity. I really love this one. There are five roles. They are discussion leaders, passage master, devil's advocate, Illustrator, or creative connector, I usually do one or the other of those, and recorder, or sometimes people call them the reporter. I either get students to sign up for the roles, or I assign them, you can do it either way. And over the course of the semester, I would do this activity a few times. And I would make sure that they take a different role each time. If you're assigning it, then you can just assign them a different role. If they're signing up, I remind them please sign up for different roles than you had before. Here's how it works. You identify the reading or readings, you can do one reading, two or three, I wouldn't do more than three. The students read all the readings before the next class. And they do the readings from the perspective of their role. And they prepare according to what the role tells them they need to do, right? So here's what the role is and what they ask them to do. The discussion leader should identify two or three questions to ask the others. So the questions can be kind of broad, opening questions, even things like, "Well, what did you think of this reading?" or to bring out the main points of the reading, if you're doing more than one reading that week, you might ask them to do one or two questions instead of two or three, because you might not have time to get through all of that. The passage master is going to identify one or two passages. Now a passage could be anything from a line to a paragraph. And they identify one or two that they think either really encapsulates the main ideas of the reading or that they sound particularly interesting. There is flexibility here on which kind of passage they choose. And they're going to read their passage to the group, hopefully to stimulate discussion. Okay, that's the idea there. The great thing about this activity is you've got all these different perspectives, five different perspectives. And, you know, hopefully, they're all going to raise interesting discussion points. But even if one of them doesn't, hopefully one does. This is what's so great about it, because they're all different. So they'll read their passage, and hopefully that leads to stimulating discussion. The third role is the devil's advocate, and this person acts as a critic. When I explain it to students, I'll say, "What would someone who was critiquing this article say?" So someone who has an alternate viewpoint. It's meant to get people thinking, stir up the pot a little bit. It can be unpopular, and students often don't like that. But that's part of this role is to say something that would be against what the article is saying, and it's a challenge for them because they may agree with the article. So they really have to think outside the box here. Often, they will state their points and see what the others have to say. Obviously, once the discussion starts, the illustrators quite a fun one. I've added this recently, and I quite like it. So what they do is they will draw an image, or do a mind map or some kind of a graphic, like a flowchart even would work. Something visual that represents either the main ideas in the readings, or it could even be something like how they felt when they were doing the reading, it can be quite out there. For this one, they can kind of do whatever they whatever occurs to them. And then during the discussion, they're going to hold up their what they've drawn, and see if the others can guess sort of where they were coming from when they drew it, what the graphic means. And if no one gets it, then they can explain to the others what they meant by the graphic. If you don't do the illustrator, another one that you might choose to do instead would be the creative connector, and this person makes connections between the reading and real life. So what's in the news? Pop culture? Basically, they're trying to find the relevance

in the reading. So how does this reading connect to the real world outside the classroom. And then finally, the recorder or the reporter, as you could imagine, takes notes. They keep a record of the discussion. It does not have to be a detailed transcript. It's really just the main points, who was there, who took part in the discussions. They can ask questions to clarify if something is not clear. They should participate along with everyone else. Although sometimes they find it hard to multitask, take notes and participate at the same time, but I do encourage them to. And then their sort of main role after the discussion is for everyone else to send their preparation that they did when they were coming up with their questions, or just find their passage or doing their drawing, everyone sends that stuff to the recorder. And the recorder doesn't have to alter anything. I don't want this to be an onerous role. So they basically just send everything to reporter, the reporter sticks it into one document, and then I ask them to put that on the CMS. What are you doing while they're doing this? Well, you're walking around, noting any major trends. Because you might want to bring that up to the group later, or any interesting points that come up. I provide guidance, especially at the beginning when they're not familiar with the activity, and I answer questions if they have any. When they're done, I ask the whole group, "Does anyone want to share anything that came out of their group?" If no one says anything, I'll bring up what I noticed, you know, "Oh, well, this group was talking about this. And that was super interesting. Did anyone else have that?" You know, stuff like that. And then you can possibly get a little bit of a follow up discussion happening. Not always, but often there is something that people want to talk about afterwards as well. If they ask questions, I usually just direct them back to the class, because often one of the other students will be able to answer the question. If not, then I'll answer it.

Tierney King 12:14

In addition to preparing students to read the content, and engaging students with the reading, it's also important to explain why students should read prior to coming to class. In this clip, Maryellen Weimer explains how you can reinforce the importance of students doing their reading by implementing one small technique.

Maryellen Weimer 12:32

Let me talk about my second approach. Use the text in class. You show students that reading assignments are important when you use their contents in class, not with generic references to the textbook, but with specific bits and pieces of content where you're actually pointing out actual sections of material in the reading. Let me share a sample strategy, one that I use early in the course to reinforce the importance of students doing the reading. I tell students that they need to do the reading. I also tell them that we're going to be using the textbook in class and they need to bring it to class. Okay, so now it's the next day in class and I say to the students, "I'd like for you to take out your textbooks. There are not very many textbooks in class, but I pretend not to notice, and I say to the students, "I want you to turn to Page 23." Then I take my textbook and I show it to the class, and I'll say, "Look here at this paragraph, second paragraph on Page 23. I have the first two sentences underlined. Do you have those underlined in your book?" Now the response that you see here is a little bit disgusting. Anybody who's got a book in class is madly underlining those two sentences. People that don't have the textbook in class are peering about to other people, saying "What page was that? What sentences is that?" And you can imagine after class, that those two sentences are getting underlined in everybody's book. But the payoff comes the next day in class because there are all sorts of textbooks and markers in class. This is the class of every student's dreams – the teacher is going to tell you

exactly what to underline in this class. No, that's not what's going to happen in this class. So today, we're going to talk about what's on Page 46 and then we're going to talk about what you have underlined. Here's where I find a lot of interesting things come out of the woodwork. I might find that one student has underlined the entire page in bright fluorescent yellow-green or orange. When I first went back to teaching full time in the early 90s, I used to think that was really stupid on the part of the students, but I've rethought that. I think it's actually a cry for help. It's the students saying, "Oh, my gosh. It's in the textbook. I have no idea how to figure out what is the most important material in this textbook. I will just absolutely underline everything." So what I'm really doing when I use the textbook in this way is I'm also working, early in the course, to develop some very rudimentary reading skills, but I'm using the textbook in class in very concrete ways, which I think reinforces to the students that it's important to do the reading; it's important to bring the book in class. The book is going to be an essential part of this particular course.

Tierney King 15:23

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