Transforming Reading Assignments into Engaging Tasks and Elevating Student Success

SPEAKERS
Nathan Pritts, Tierney King, Norman Eng, Maryellen Weimer

Tierney King 00:01
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. This episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Online Conference. Join us from the comfort of your own home and transform how you teach with nationally recognized teaching and learning presenters. 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. According to research, less than half of students complete assigned readings. So how do you get your students to complete the reading so they're better prepared to complete assignments; to participate in discussions; and are just more engaged with the content. Today, we'll talk about how changing the term "reading assignment" to a "task" can give students more agency and break down the wall of resisting reading. We'll talk about different strategies to encourage active reading and to help strengthen student reading techniques. And lastly, we'll cover reading assignments that help students discover how much more they learn when they actually do the reading. To start, Norman Eng offers a four-step, task-based approach for getting your students to read in this program, How Do I Get Students to Complete Reading Assignments?

Norman Eng 01:09
When it comes to readings, generally speaking, less than half of students do the assigned readings, at least according to most research. In fact, one study found that even out of those who do read only about half of them actually understand what they're reading. So basically, that means that most students come in unprepared, something you're probably well aware of. So the question is, how do we not impose readings on students and break down the wall of resistance and give them more choice. The key is to give the power back to the students give them agency, and it starts with giving them purpose. The solution I mentioned before is to assign tasks, not texts. So instead of assigning readings, like we all do, assign tasks instead. Let's say you're teaching an intro psychology class, and the topic is theories of behaviorism. The old school way is to tell students, okay, read chapter three and write a two page paper describing the four behavioral theories of learning, or maybe read chapter three and post a response on the online discussion board. Either way, this is fairly typical, you assign the readings, and students respond in some way. At the very least, students have to take notes and come prepared to discuss. So basically, in this scenario, reading is the goal. So what if instead, you assigned a task like this: for this week, I'm going to give you three real life scenarios. Your task is to determine which theory

of behaviorism is depicted: classical conditioning, operant, conditioning, cognitive theory, or social learning theory. Make sure that you one, justify your answer using specific details and quotes to relate to real life examples you've seen or experienced. And three, argue why you didn't select the other theories to help. Please use, refer to, and quote from at least one of the following resources: textbook chapter three or the website simply psychology.org. This assignment will help you better understand human behavior, (i.e. how and why people behave and learn the way that they do), which is useful in pretty much any facet of life. Basically, you're flipping the focus of the learning from reading-based to task-based, right? Make the task the thing that's important. The reading is, in a way almost incidental. Let's look at another example: This time for an education course I teach called math methods, which is a course where students learn how to teach elementary school math, one topic is how to teach multiplication of two digit numbers, like 26 times 13. Students have to read chapter nine on estimation and computation. So instead of assigning this chapter to read and coming up with some sort of reading response, I might suggest assigning the following task: This week, you're helping Julissa, who is eight years old, and in third grade. She has trouble multiplying two digit numbers. Conceptually, she knows that multiply has something to do with groups and numbers getting bigger. Yet the traditional way to multiply is to abstract for her. How would you teach Julissa? Your task is to figure out the best way to teach multiplication using base 10 blocks. Consider the strategies from chapter nine and decide which ones resonate most with you and which you think would actually help her. Write a two to three paragraph plan justifying your instructional choice. Make sure to refer to ideas and strategies from chapter nine, feel free to support with visuals. Next class, you'll share your plan and come to a group consensus. So, let's go over this here, the goal and purpose are clear - to figure out the best way to teach multiplication. A task like this is first of all valuable because it directly relates to building skills that undergrads will use as future teachers. Next, the task is open-ended, as opposed to closed-ended, which means there isn't necessarily one right answer. Now, 26 times 13 is a closed-ended problem, but what I'm focused on is how to teach it. And there are many ways to do this. Also, open-ended problems, they encourage multiple perspectives and voices to be heard. And because of that, they'll likely broaden the collective intelligence of the class, especially when students share their solutions. I've had students say things like, "Wow, I never thought of that perspective before." That's authentic student-driven learning. Anyway, one last thing about this example, see the last part of the assignment. Next week in class, you will share your plan and come to a group consensus. There's built-in accountability that's built in, which means that students will more likely do the work.

Tierney King 06:31
As you think about how you can integrate some of these task-based reading assignments into your own course, you may also want to explore reading strategies and tools that help with reading retention and engagement. In this program, What Interventions Help Students Master Deep Reading and Engage with Assignments, Nathan Pritts explains different types of reading strategies and four steps to help students succeed with their reading.

Nathan Pritts 06:54
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

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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. Of course, students should always plan to read a text more than once. On a second reading, they may notice more connections between ideas and concepts. 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 ebook. 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. 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 assigned 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. David Mikics writes in a book called Slow Reading In a Hurried Ag that how you read matters much more than how much you read. This reminds us that the process of reading is not something you master once and are done with. It's not a destination, but a journey. A constant procedure we need to be aware of and follow. He described slow reading as an act of discipline. And so the use of the word slow is a little bit misleading there and it can be problematic people. Think about slow and it makes us think first and foremost of speed, which is the opposite of fast. We wonder if slow reading is really just asking us to take our time. But that's not the whole story. Perhaps it's better to think about active reading or deep reading. Many of us intuitively know when we're reading and staying on the surface, just skimming, the word deep implies concentration. And it implies a kind of complexity as well. And maybe that complexity comes not necessarily from the content of what we're reading, but from how we lean into what we read. It's a quality we bring to the table rather

than something that's outside of ourselves. And when we give ourselves to the task at hand, we can begin applying the various strategies that make up active reading. It's these four steps that will really ensure students have the information they need to succeed when approaching course reading material. 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 in any assigned text or 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 explained 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 expectation better.

Tierney King 13:16
Lastly, Maryellen Weimer explains how you can motivate students to read by implementing in class exercises that call on specific reading assignments in this program, How Do I Get Students to Read Their Assignments Before Class?

Maryellen Weimer 13:29
Use the text in class. You show students that reading assignments are important when you use their contents in class, not with sort of generic references to the 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's 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. And 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? Anybody that's got a book in cat in class is madly underlining those two sentences. People that don't have the textbook in class are peering about two other people are saying what page was that? What sentences are that? And you can sort of 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 underlined markers in class. This is the class of every step. In the streams, 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 we're going to talk about what you have

underlined. Here's where I find a lot of sort of interesting things come out of the woodwork, I'd find that one student has underlined the entire page in bright fluorescent, yellow, green, or orange, 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, 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. And now let me share my third strategy, which is that we have to make, we have to start making students responsible for reading material that we don't have time to cover in class. We just have too much material to teach anymore. That's why we're moving more in this direction. Now, I don't have to tell you making students responsible for some of the material in the textbook that you're not going to talk about our cover extensively in class is not a popular approach. Teachers really want students to tell them what's important in the reading. They want students to they want teachers to tell them exactly what they have to know from the book. Now, when students are pressing me in this direction, and when they're objecting to the assignment that I'm going to give them where they're responsible for some of this reading material themselves, I wonder out loud in class if they plan to ask their new boss who's paying them, if they'll do the same thing. The approach isn't popular with students because they really don't have any confidence in their ability to figure out what it is that they need to know from the reading. So my sample strategy for this approach is one that helps develop that ability to ascertain what's important in the reading. What I do here now is to put students into study groups, this is part of a larger assignment, it's a section of that assignment. And I make each group responsible for a different section in the text that we really haven't gone over very extensively in class. The group task is to prepare a study guide on those materials that they have been assigned. Now, you might want to introduce this assignment by spending a little bit of time talking with students about the characteristics of good study review materials. So each group has an assigned section of the text. They prepare study review materials off of that text on the day that they're due. They distribute those to the rest of the class and students use those students prepared study guides to prepare for the exam. After the exam is over, I let students go ahead and grade those study materials that they use. I use an honor system here, if they didn't look at the materials, they don't have any business in providing feedback. But I use a simple rubric that's got some of the characteristics of good study materials that we talked about in class, and let them go ahead and assign a point value to those to those study materials they prepare. One side benefit I've noticed from those materials, is that the questions that come off a particular section, that that the students in that group, do not miss those questions on the exam. And I of course, point that out during the debrief showing that if you really do get into the materials and understand them, and are preparing review materials on them, you're not going to miss those questions on the exam.

Tierney King 18:45
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