MAKING ASSIGNMENTS WORTH GRADING[1]

Grading and assignment making go together, that you cannot do one effectively without doing the other effectively. The key to effective course planning is making sure that your assignments and tests actually assess what you want your students to learn. What, after all, is the use in grading assignments that don't accomplish what you want to accomplish? Walvoord and Anderson offer six suggestions for assignment making:

1. Define what you want your students to learn.

Above and beyond everything else, such definition is crucial to ALL successful assignment making. For each course you teach, complete the following statement as precisely and completely as you can: "By the end of the course, I want my students to be able to ______________________________________."

Use concrete verbs such as *define, argue, solve, and create* in describing what you want your students to be able to do. If you write, "I want students to think like economists" (or psychologists, or literary historians or whatever), then elaborate on what that means.

Don't be hesitant to include goals that may not seem measurable (e.g., "motivation to write"). An item may seem impossible to test and grade, but usually, they aren't—although it may take a lot of thought to figure out how to break apart the assessable features of these ineffable goals. For example, "motivation to write" could be broken into various behaviors that tend to exhibit increased motivation. Just remember, the items you include as those you want your students to learn in your course are the items that you will want to be creating assignments to teach and that your assignments will allow you to assess.

2. **Select assignments that measure what you value most.**

Try to insure that your assignments teach what you want your students to learn. Below are three suggestions for selecting assignments to use (Walvoord and Anderson, 22-26):

- ***Choose assignments that are likely to elicit from your students the kind of learning you want to measure.*** *U*se "careful forethought," "knowledge of our own students," and "analysis of your students' work" (22). Think about what we call our assignments, because some names may have different—and negative—associations for students. Example:

    A sociologist was asking for a "term paper" from his students and getting encyclopedia-based reports that did not meet his goals for the assignment. In a workshop, when asked to define what he really wanted, he realized he wanted a review of the literature, so he began to call it that. Two positive results ensued. First, students no longer imported notions of the term paper as an encyclopedia-based pastiche of paraphrased material on a topic; they had never written a review of the literature before, so they knew they had

[1] Adapted from Chapter 3 of *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment* by Barbara E. Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

> to listen very carefully to his instructions about the assignment. Second, he was forced to clarify for them and for himself what he meant and to teach them how to write a review of the literature. (Walvoord and Anderson, 24)

- ***Choose assignments that are interesting and challenging to your students.*** Such choices tend to motivate students, and research and common sense tell us that motivation enhances learning. Do not, however, make motivation the only criteria by which you create your assignments. Just because an assignment is fun does not mean that it helps students learn the skills and/or content that they need to learn.

> Example: For many years now, writing teachers have worked under the assumption that giving students complete authority over the choice of topics to write on was better than assigning topics. It is true that students generally will be more motivated to write about topics of their own choosing that about topics specified by the teacher. It is equally important to remember, however, that choice is NOT an either/or dichotomy. There are ways of constraining topic choice yet still allow for choice. Some writing teachers, for instance, assign students to find a local or campus problem to write about. That kind of assignment tends to anchor student thinking. Students may still write about large topics such as abortion, but they will be forced to relate these topics to the campus or local community.

Some writing teachers also believe that, for smaller writing assignments that focus on the development of specific skills, even assigning a particular topic is justified. For example, in order to teach students how to synthesize source material and how to integrate that source material into discourse, I assign students to write a museum brochure on the disappearance of the dinosaurs. This assignment typically takes less than a week to complete, because I provide them with notes from a variety of sources and a template organization for the brochure. What helps motivate students to write the museum brochure on the dinosaurs is the assignment's real world contextualizing. Students are not being asked to write a "term paper" that has little relevance to writing in the world beyond the classroom. A brochure is the kind of writing that many of them might well have to produce one day, and more importantly, its production requires students to use skills that definitely will be needed for "real world" assignments they will be doing later. While most students recognize that this assignment is merely an exercise, they also realize it is an exercise that could have relevance for them one day.

Another controversy related to topic choice involves assigning the personal experience essay. Justifications for beginning a writing course with a personal experience essay assignment include the following: (1) students will not need to do any library research in order to accomplish it; (2) students will be motivated, because they are writing about their own experience; and (3) students are likely to succeed in producing a text that allows them to be easily successful. Some critics have questioned these assumptions. Still, assuming that defenders are correct in their assumptions, other questions have to be asked about the assignment, most notably, "What does it teach the student writer?" That is, what are the goals of this assignment and does it perhaps send certain wrong messages to students about writing. One such message might be that writing does not need to involve research, that a

writer can simply write from her or his own personal experience whenever she or he chooses.

All this said, motivation remains an important part of teaching, whether it's writing or literature or quantum physics. The more you can create assignments that motivate students AND seek to achieve your education goals, the more likely your assignments actually will achieve those goals.

- ***Use peer collaboration***. Collaborative assignments—that is, assignments that ask students to produce something together—can "have strong pedagogical and motivational advantages," although when not managed well, such assignments can cause anxiety, anger, and a loss of motivation (Walvoord and Anderson 25). Plan carefully. Research tells us several things about using collaboration in writing courses:

    a. ***Students need training in collaboration***. If students are simply peer responding, they need guidance and practice in it. If students are assigned a collaborative project, they need to learn about group dynamics and the techniques developed to help groups deal with those dynamics. They also need to learn about group organizational structures and which ones would be best for them.
    b. ***Successful collaborative writing assignments involve topics that actually require multiple authors, assignments that cannot be accomplished by just one person in the amount of time given and that can be easily broken up into workable sub-units for individuals***.
    c. ***Pairs and groups need a system of progress evaluation and progress assessment.*** You can't simply assign a group a major task and then expect everything to run smoothly. There must be in place a system whereby groups assess their work as a group, address problems in their group dynamics, deal with members of the group who don't pull their weight, address inevitable problems with the project that come up.

3. Construct a course outline:

(1) to see if all of your assignments will fit into a semester or quarter and if the assignments create a manageable workload both for your students AND for you; and

(2) to see how the assignments all sequence together—how the course moves from one assignment to the next and how you will need to transition among assignments. You are, thus, creating an "assignment-centered course."

"Research suggests that the assignment-centered course enhances students' higher order reasoning and critical thinking more effectively than the courses centered around text, lecture, and coverage" (Walvoord & Anderson, 26). Coverage does not have to be lost, but readings and the lectures, concepts and facts, all, feed into the accomplishment of assignments, thus enhancing the possibility of learning. On the next page, you will find a lengthy example of "coverage-centered course planning" (see Walvoord and Anderson, 26-29).

Example of a "Coverage-Centered" Course Plan[2]

An instructor is putting together a 15-week general education course in Western Civilization, from 1500 to the end of the Cold War. She says to herself, "Let's see. I'd like to use Burke and Paine, Marx, Lafore, and *Heart of Darkness* in addition to the textbook. I'll cover 1500 to 1800 in six weeks and get through the French Revolution by midterm. Then in the second half of the course, I'll cover 1800 to the present." Her outline of the course might look like this:

Week	**Topic**
1	Renaissance and Reformation
2	Seventeenth-Century Crisis
3	Absolutism
4	Age of Reason
5	French Revolution
6	Burke, *Reflections,* and Paine, *Rights of Man*
7	MIDTERM
8	Industrial Revolution
9	Mark, *Communist Manifesto*
10	Imperialism
11	Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
12	World War I
13	Lafore, *Long Fuse*
14	World War I, World War II, and the Cold War
15	FINAL

Walvoord & Anderson note "that in her conversation with herself, the subject of her sentences is *I*. The most common verb is *cover.* This teacher is already well launched on the coverage-centered model" (27). Her syllabus looks something like this

> Tues., Sept. 5: Social and religious background of the Renaissance and Reformation. Read ch. 1 and 2 in textbook.
> Thurs., Sept. 7: Economic and political background of the Renaissance and Reformation. Read ch. 3 in textbook; Machiavelli handout.

The topics all appear abstract and general, the kind that students tend to associate with lecture-based classes. Note, too, that assessment methods are added after the fact in the coverage-centered model. And given the broad sweep of the coverage approach, assessments tend toward "objective" forms (e.g., short-answer tests) and maybe a term paper. The implied function of assessment here is to test coverage only, even if the teacher really wants students to achieve more than just a body of abstract knowledge. Students will tend to simply provide "fact dumps," rather than analysis and synthesis of the ideas. For their term papers, students are likely as not to "submit cut-and-paste pastiches of library sources, following the 'term paper' models they learned in other settings" (Walvoord & Anderson, 28).

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[2] Adapted from Walvoord. Barbara E., & Anderson, Virginia Johnson. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment* (*San* Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, pp.26-29).

The “coverage-centered” course tends to foster several assumptions that tend not to lead to effective learning:

- Sitting through lectures, taking notes on what the teacher says;
- Studying lecture notes and the textbook the night before the test; and
- Regurgitating what the teacher has said on the test.

4. Check tests and assignments for fit and feasibility.

Do the tests and assignments fit the kind of learning that you want? Is the workload for both you and your students reasonable, strategically placed, and sustainable?

5. Know what your students’ goals are for the course so that you can make sure that their goals do not contradict your goals.

Sometimes, a student’s goals will not be fulfilled by your course.

Examples:

- A course in “The Bible as Literature” probably won’t fulfill a student’s goal to reinforce her or his religious belief.
- A grammar course is not intended to improve a student’s writing skills; it simply teaches grammatical concepts.

6. Make assignment and test instructions clear to students.

“Students will complete the assignment they think you made, not the assignment you actually made. With sketchy or ambiguous instructions, you run the risk of having students draw on previous learning that may not be relevant or desirable in your situation” (Walvoord & Anderson, 38). On the following pages, you will find examples of clear assignments.

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