



An Integrative Approach to Student Understanding and Learning

Our primary role as educators is to create learning environments that service a diverse student body. To be successful, this environment should focus on the ability of the student to demonstrate their level of understanding for the topics posed rather than focusing on just the grade.

If the era of pandemic teaching has taught us anything, it is that “one and done,” on-time delivery of student assignments is not conducive to understanding and learning. In addition to the plethora of health and medical issues faced by students and educators, the already existing problems of time management and declining student performance continue to be an obstacle.

The approach suggested here is applicable across disciplines, modalities, equally effective at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and embraced by underperforming and overachieving students alike.

Planning classroom structured flexibility that holds students accountable for engaging in objective-driven assignments

Learning for understanding is not the same as studying for answers or striving for a grade. Mastery of an area of study occurs overtime, and time is the one variable we are all provided to execute our teaching plan. We can use this to benefit both the students and ourselves.

Instead of using a single due date, allow multiple or unlimited attempts for lower weighted activities such as quizzes. Use these activities to verify foundational knowledge, build confidence, foster self-improvement, and

encourage accountability for understanding key concepts and theories presented (Orchard, 2016).

Multiple or unlimited attempts for written assignments incentivizes continued independent exploration of the course material and shifts the responsibility of the grade to the student, while at the same time helps overcome the stigma of repetitive education. This is especially easy to execute if you are using Blackboard or similar learning platforms offered through textbook publishers.

Luebben (2010) confirms the acceptance level by students for this approach;

“The biggest benefit of multiple testing attempts came when the course evaluation report showed high student ratings. The goodwill generated by the security of having additional testing opportunities available was viewed positively by students.”

Additionally, devote class time to activities that build on independent work by students. It is important to scaffold independent activities, such as quizzes, short papers, and discussion boards, as examples into meaningful, common practices or group assessment practices such as presentations and projects (Hausmann, 2011).

The key to these efforts is that each time a class period is devoted to this independent work, there must be a submission of the work students completed within the utilized time. This technique works well to extract a draft, outline, or annotated bibliography for a project as a first step to getting started with long-term or multifaceted activities. This early assessment allows the instructor to provide direction and additional resources.

Completing, or more importantly beginning, complex term projects in sections, especially a group project during class, creates a deeper learning experience for the student. It allows faculty to engage in discussion, ask and answer questions, clarify instructions, and collectively seek additional resources for all students in real time. It also has the added benefits of reducing the end-of-term stress many students experience as a result of procrastination and producing a project for which you, as the instructor, are much more familiar with prior to assessment. In addition, consider if the student benefits from having to submit a final version of the entire project or if the student's demonstration of understanding and learning of the topic(s) occurred at an acceptable level for each completed section.

Implementing classroom structured flexibility and student feedback

It is critical to fully discuss and set the expectations of your plan to students on the first day of class. Getting students committed to the learning process establishes trust and sets a tenor of ownership for their education.

Student Feedback from Faculty Evaluations

What do you find most beneficial about the course?

1. "I appreciated being able to go back and improve my grade, which forced me to learn and helped boost my grade when I put in the extra work."
2. "The feedback from the professor after submitting the assignments. Also, being able to take the quizzes as many times so that we can really learn the material rather than memorize to just pass the quiz."
3. "I appreciate the opportunity to revise my work; not for an easy A, but because revisiting the material multiple times helped with retention and comprehension. Professor is thorough with his grading and revisions, which makes for a good conversation between himself and the student. I felt challenged but not provoked."
4. "I was excited to work on my assignments and could confidently ask questions at any time to the professor who answered my questions entirely and personally. I really like that he added additional references after grading assignments because they were directive and could be used to add to my upcoming and revised assignments. 10/10 for the professor and the content."

Outlined example summary and thoughts

I am sure many of you have struggled with students engaging in timely and meaningful group work. Ask yourself: Is the team or group engagement necessary for the completion of the entire project? Or is sharing multiple viewpoints more important to specific aspects, like important decisions about choices you want the students to make about the work they will produce?

Scaffolding weekly or two-week activity modules can help build a student collaborative exchange of ideas (group or teamwork) and prepares the

individual student to participate and produce meaningful, usable output that can be applied to more complex tasks.

This is what a scaffolded weekly module and timeline might look like, beginning with shorter, easier, and individual tasks to complete earlier in the timeline that then prepare students to engage collaboratively later in the module.

Weekly Student Completion Module Example

Note: It can be very helpful to students to include the *overview, learning objectives and to do list* in a weekly announcement on Sunday prior to the start of the week.

Overview: Provide the students with an overview for the topics for the week.

Learning Objectives: Provide three to five specific learning objectives you expect students will be able to do by the end of the week.

To Do List

(Day 1-2): Preparation

Review the weekly overview and learning objectives.

Read the weekly article, textbook chapters, and watch the videos provided.

(Day 3) Complete Weekly Test: Tests and quizzes are an opportunity for faculty to engage!

Tests should offer short answer or essay to the foundational elements from the weekly learning objectives.

The student's response should be used in the subsequent weekly assignments.

Providing feedback and resources to these questions engages the student early and builds understanding and confidence.

If possible, provide tests online and offer unlimited attempts. Ask students to provide sources so they can be shared later.

(Day 4) Author an original short topic paper

Have students research two or three key topics relevant to what you are asking them to expand upon in the group work session and later in the term project.

Provide the research questions, suggest they define unique or discipline-based terminology, and discuss multiple viewpoints or arguments found in credible sources utilized.

Have them properly document sources so they can share with fellow learners.

(Day 5) Participate in the weekly discussion: The big day!

Present the research questions again but use the term project section as the basis for the discussion.

The goal is to complete a meaningful introduction draft to the project section collectively using the previous completed short paper and test as a shared resource.

The teams will share and submit the final draft at the end of the discussion session.

Conclude the discussion session by reviewing the project section using a team introduction as an example to connect the next use of the information gathered.

(Day 6-7) Begin project section: Individual task

Overall, the best advice I can offer is at any level of study there is no “one and done” student assignment submission. Learning, understanding, and eventually useful implementation in real world applications are realized through the depth of exploration and reflection students and faculty are willing to undertake.

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