The Value of Worksheets for Asynchronous Online Courses

When I began teaching 15 years ago, I came to the profession with the belief that worksheets were an elementary school-level example of lazy teaching. I'm not sure where that idea originated, but it was a strongly held notion—and it was shared by other faculty as well. Since then, I have found that worksheets are often key to high-quality student work, and I use them in all of my classes. I utilize them most often in my online courses, but there are times when they are invaluable in person as well. The following article focuses on the value of worksheets in asynchronous online courses, because I have found them essential for this type of format.

When to implement worksheets

When I am adding new material to a class or creating a new class, I tend to start simple and add worksheets when it becomes clear they will be beneficial. For example, for one rather long yet essential reading, I assigned a short prompt: "Please read chapter 10 and write a paragraph of at least 200 words about how the material in the chapter relates to your studies and goals, and what you can learn from it." For my online classes in particular, the paragraphs students wrote indicated that most of them had either read only part of the chapter or, in some cases, did not read at all. This was a particular problem since we did not have the ability to discuss and engage with the material in person. I later added, "Please be sure to reference multiple concepts discussed in the chapter," but that made little difference. The top five percent of students in those classes performed well on the assignment but the rest did not. This was a failure—not of the students but of the assignment—and I was determined to fix it.

In preparing for fall 2021, I began making major changes. One obvious solution was to break up the reading into two parts. I also expanded the "purpose" section of the assignment to make it clear why I ask students to do the reading, and what value they will gain by reading it. But the most important change was creating a pair of worksheets (one for each part of the reading) that required students to reflect on essential concepts in the reading and then apply them to short scenarios I created and to their own studies. Although I didn't have proof until after I read the completed responses to the two worksheets, I was certain the results would be a dramatic improvement—and they were.

Modifying worksheets

There are still changes I am learning I will have to make. For example, I need to ask questions individually and not in pairs otherwise some students will answer only one of the questions. When I asked the following questions, "In what ways are you engaged in your community? How might you increase your civic engagement?" the latter question was frequently ignored—perhaps because they didn't want to expand on the second part after putting thought into the first part. Assignment development is a continuous process, but the student work I see from these worksheets is already so much better. Students were engaged with the material, they analyzed the readings and applied it to real-life scenarios, and I believe they clearly understand the concepts better now than when they started.

I also commonly use worksheets for in-class and asynchronous workshopping of papers (vital!), reflections, and evaluations of group members for group presentations. These are clearly more useful for me, but the responses are exponentially more thoughtful, insightful, and also useful for students. Worksheets also create an opportunity for reflecting on assignments, which is a great way to enhance student learning. And because it's so difficult to fake having done the work, when a worksheet is designed well, you have an indication of whether a student is struggling or understanding the material.

Worksheet complications

An area where worksheets can be problematic is if there is a section that students are often missing or disregarding. I have this issue with a worksheet in an interdisciplinary studies class where students offer their understanding of each individual discipline they are working in, followed by a discussion of their intersections and complications. Because students work with a different number of disciplines, most often two or three, my worksheet offers three spots for them to discuss their disciplines followed by a final prompt. In practice, those students who concentrate on only two disciplines often just delete the end of the worksheet and call it done. I do give them a chance to add to the final section to improve their grade if they missed it, and they usually do, but this is time consuming.

There are a few good approaches for solving this sort of issue. The easiest, but potentially less effective approach, is to put a note in the assignment instructions indicating that the last and final prompt section needs to be completed. This solution depends on your students fully reading and following the instructions. Each professor will have to determine for themselves if their students will be likely to do that. Also, making the rubric visible to students may also have a similar effect. Though for a smaller, low-stakes assignment, students may not take the time to fully read through a rubric.

The next approach, which I have found highly effective, is to create the worksheet as a quiz in Canvas. (Note, I've never tried to do this in Blackboard so I can't comment on whether it would be effective, but I have colleagues who use Google Forms for a similar effect, and they are very enthusiastic about that solution.) Each quiz question can include text, links, images, and even video, and each question response is in the form of an essay (or other answer format). Canvas allows students to start, save, and finish their work later, as long as you don't limit the time allowed to take the quiz or set a very long time limit. Based on my experience, however, I would limit how much reading students need to do for each quiz question. You may also want to assure students that this is not a quiz, in spite of the name, but an assignment; they sometimes ask and are concerned.

Conclusion

Worksheets are basically instructions that tell students the steps needed to complete a task or describe what specific results we want to see. Too often we offer brief instructions, such as my reflective prompt example, and believe this is enough or imagine that students will dig in and persist even when it's not clear to students exactly what you're looking for. Conversations about the extent to which we should have to offer detailed instructions to students can be interesting—yet the main concern is whether the work is being completed and understood. Although creating worksheets does take time, the results can be absolutely marvelous if we do it well. The reward for me as a teacher and a facilitator of learning has been tremendous.

Worksheet examples

- Nice example of a peer-review worksheet: https://writingcenter.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/593/2014/06/Collab_Writing_PEER_REVIEW_WORKSHEET.doc
- Another strong peer-review worksheet: https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum20a/handouts/PESlotkin.doc
- An oral presentation planning worksheet: https://www.whoi.edu/fileserver.do?id=147025&pt=2&p=163049
- A presentation evaluation worksheet: https://www.uab.edu/medicine/obgynresidency/images/Word_Docs/Formal_Presentation_Evaluation_Form.doc
- A long and detailed astro navigation lab worksheet: https://my.vanderbilt.edu/astronav/files/2016/03/AstroNav-Lab-Packet.pdf
- A chapter response worksheet: http://people.uncw.edu/olsenr/courses/200/Worksheets/9%20COM%20200%20Chapter%20Nine%20Worksheet.pdf

Credits

FACULTY FOCUS

Contact Us

Call us: +92 42 111 300 200 Ext: 3469/3412
Email us: zarnab.shakeel@umt.edu.pk | ctl.info@umt.edu.pk
Visit us: ctl.umt.edu.pk