



Engaging Students in Course Material Through Informal Writing

One major key to engaging students is to assign informal writing. “Decide how much time you are willing to spend on student writing and then plan your courses to include only what you can handle—always remembering that you do not have to read everything a student writes” (Bean, 2001, p. 11).

We can more fully engage students in our courses by understanding how students have changed and how to motivate them.

What Student Characteristics Should We be Aware of?

Students may be poorly prepared for college; CoVid has intensified the problem:

“Many students come to college not only poorly prepared by prior schooling for highly demanding academic tasks, . . . but—more troubling still—they enter college with attitudes, norms, values, and behaviors that are often at odds with academic commitment.” Our current students have been called “‘drifting dreamers’ with ‘high ambitions, but no clear life plans for reaching them.’ These students may ‘have limited knowledge about their chosen occupations, about educational requirements, or about future demand for these occupations’” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 3).

Students may not see or value the “big picture” of education:

Students who lack a clear future plan may view coursework as “jumping through hoops.” They may not see how their learning is preparing them for academic or career paths, and they may “perceive general education courses as something to ‘get out of the way.’ Many students find these courses burdensome and express frustration over ‘jumping through the hoops’” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, pp. 74-75).

Many students have learned how to minimize academic work:

Students often struggle to focus on academics because they have learned “‘the art of college management,’ in which success is achieved primarily not through hard work but through ‘controlling college by shaping schedules, taming professors and limiting workload’” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 4). For example, one student offered insights about course readings: “I hate classes with a lot of reading that is tested on. . . . I rarely actually do reading assignments, . . . it saves me a lot of time” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 4).

Students “report spending only 12 hours per week studying” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 69). “Student perspectives are often exceedingly myopic and focused on short-term gains, understood as increased freedom from strenuous academic effort” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 76). Students want to earn high grades in their classes “with little investment of effort” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 125).

How Can We More Fully Engage Students Through Informal Writing?

- Understanding student characteristics can empower us to understand what matters to students, and in turn, to “make the material relevant to the things they care about” (Shackleton-Jones, 2019, p. 136). We can help students understand the relevance of our courses and “create opportunities to care about something new” (Shackleton-Jones, 2019, p. 151). One way to do this is through writing tasks.
- Beginning writers can learn to view writing as a means to join “a conversation of persons who are jointly seeking answers to shared questions—a discourse community . . . Readers need to be persuaded by appropriate disciplinary uses of reasons and evidence” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 22).
- “Good writing assignments (as well as other active learning tasks) evoke a high level of critical thinking, help students wrestle productively with a course’s big questions, and teach disciplinary ways of seeing, knowing, and doing” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 1).
- “Academic problems are typically rooted within a disciplinary conversation: to a large extent, these problems are discipline-specific, because each discipline poses its own kinds of questions and conducts inquiries, uses data, and makes arguments in its own characteristic fashion” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 3).
- Bean (2001) recommends short writing assignments that strengthen students’ abilities to think critically and to achieve the professors’ goals for student learning. For example, students may be learning about conditioning behavior. Assigning students to define “conditioning behavior” may result in “text-parroting.” “Unsure of the answer, the student uses the textbook as a crutch, attempting to imitate its authority by creating a dense, academic-sounding style complete with impressive technical data” instead of using their own words. A result that Bean calls a “snowjob” (pp. 79-81).
- In contrast, a professor might invite students to apply concepts to new situations, such as learning about conditioning behavior and then critically considering how conditioning behavior might be manifested by a person who opens a can of cat food each morning and by the cat who runs into the kitchen and rubs its back against the person’s legs. The act of writing can help reveal gaps in students’ learning, and this short assignment should minimize or eliminate the teacher’s grading time (Bean, 2001, pp. 79-81).

Refer to past Writing Lab Newsletters (these can be accessed from the FHSS home page) for examples of informal student writing tasks.

References:

- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Univ of Chicago Press.
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- Shackleton-Jones, N. (2019). *How people learn: Designing education and training that works to improve performance*. KoganPage.

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