



Informal Writing can Help Students Review & Prepare for the Final Exam

One semester while I was completing my PhD, I was unhappy because one of my courses required an intensive final exam; as a grad student, I questioned the need for a final exam. However, as I organized my notes, re-read assigned readings, and practiced retrieving the information from the course, I was shocked how the ideas all came together and I understood for the first time the value and purpose for the class. I was able to relate the ideas together and see how they applied to my own life. It was a true learning experience and even though I never learned to “love” final exams, I could see the value of them! We can enhance the value of final exams and prepare students to benefit more fully by using guided informal writing tasks.

Help Students Connect Ideas from the Course

Students tend to see ideas in “isolated, non-contextual ways that lead to shallow thinking. Facts are related to other facts, and the more of those relationships we can see, the more we will prove capable of critical analysis and creative thinking” (Lang, 2016, p. 15).

However, students may be more prepared for final exams if they have opportunities to understand the concepts of the course. Informal writing can be used to “relate concepts to each other and their previous knowledge,” and to “evaluate the evidence and logic behind arguments” (Minbashian et al., 2004, p. 161).

Understanding the Course Material Should Precede the Final Exam

Final exams often “place more emphasis on the reproduction of material than on the understanding of it” and as a result, “Students are more likely to obtain good grades for the quantity of information they are able to reproduce rather than the quality of learning achieved” (Busato et al., 1998, as cited in Minbashian et al., 2004, p. 163).

“When students practice the skills of written analysis and synthesis, it encourages them to grapple more with course ideas both inside and outside of class. . . . Informal writing emphasizes reflective thought rather than the ability to display technical writing skills” (Hudd et al., 2011, p. 179).

Informal writing can be used to help students identify their own understanding of course material in preparation for the final exam. One way to demonstrate understanding is through making connections within the material. Increased understanding may lead to student confidence in adapting and applying the course material as they deepen the breadth and depth of their understanding (Entwhistle, 1995, p. 48).

Once Students Understand the Material, Use Informal Writing to Help Them Internalize It

“Informal writing enables students to ‘internalize’ course content (Stokes et al., 2002, as cited in Hudd et al., 2011, p. 181), understand it, and use it as the basis for forming new knowledge. For students, prioritization is the ‘gateway’ cognitive skill for contextualizing information, translation demonstrates their ability to use this understanding to make sense of difficult explanations and applications, and drawing analogies shows that they can transfer this

understanding to new and unfamiliar applications. These three cognitive skills define disciplinary mastery for our students” (Hudd et al., 2011, pp. 181-182).

Sociologists have observed that “writing about any subject encourages deeper thinking about it (Stokes et al., 2002, as cited in Hudd et al., 2011, p. 181). [John Bean’s] campus writing program is founded on this principle: that informal writing-to-learn assignments enhance critical thinking” (Bean, 2001, as cited in Hudd et al., 2011, p. 181).

Use Informal Writing to Help Students Retrieve Course Material to Prepare for the Final Exam

Informal writing can help students prepare for the final exam “by first access[ing] stored information and then [mapping] new information to old and identify[ing] similarities and differences between the two. This process of creating connections allows for the development of inferences, and learning occurs as new categories of knowledge are created” (Hudd et al., 2011, p. 181).

Informal writing is one way to help students organize what they are learning – to take them from learning isolated facts to application. Students with new knowledge have “not yet developed the ability to recognize relationships among pieces of knowledge” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 49). Helping students organize what they are learning increases their ability to remember what they learn and to make connections to the ideas we teach. Using informal writing can help students organize their learning.

It is ineffective to have students learn information and skills in isolated learning; have students apply what they learn – not just “recite” it back to you.

Deliberate practice – instead of having students define a statistical procedure, give them a problem and have them practice choosing which procedure is most appropriate. Informal writing is one way of practicing deliberately. Then, instead of collecting students’ practice and spending lots of time giving feedback, have students pair up & discuss their choices.

So What? What is the End Goal?

Students’ ideas “shift as they acquire new information and respond to it with a more thoughtful approach” (Hudd et al., 2011, p. 183). In turn, final exams can be both a learning experience and an assessment of what they have learned and applied.

References

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