



Challenging and Supporting First- Year Students

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When our courses demand that first-year students move beyond memory—as they should—we need to provide structured activities to support them in uncharted territory.

The challenge (and frustration) of first-year instruction was perhaps best captured not too long ago by a student in a colleague's chemistry course. My colleague had reworked the course to emphasize problem solving and the application of basic chemical principles to real world situations, moving it away from memorized facts and routine calculations that had formed the bulk of the curriculum. At the end of the course, a student summed up the effort: "Thinking is fine, but learning is what I am here for."

First-year students come to us with their own notions of what constitutes learning. Because, for the most part, they are in the early stages of intellectual development, many students define learning as accumulating facts and memorizing right answers, and they've honed their study skills to do just that.

Although accumulating facts is something we want students to do, it is certainly not the only thing we hope they accomplish in our courses. We want students to use the ideas of our disciplines to solve problems, to analyze situations, to make judgments, and more.

And this is the rub. We want first-year students to do more than commit things to memory, but students who are well-practiced in the use of flash cards and other mnemonic devices often cannot transform their study habits in ways that will allow them to succeed even when they decide that "thinking is what they are here for."

When our exams and assignments ask first-year students to move beyond memory, they struggle. Resistance and resignation often emerge, usually marked by comments about faculty "not caring" or "not helping much" or the lament that "there is no way to study for these exams."

The Bargain

All too often our response to this frustration is to strike an unspoken bargain that leaves students in a comfort zone of what they know how to do (memorize) and absolves us of responsibility to support them in acquiring the skills that promote and sustain higher order learning. We might relax our demands that students immerse themselves in the reading by highlighting the reading's major points in class, or we might abandon the goal that ideas be applied by asking only that students be able to recapitulate the applications we have performed.

However we do it, this sort of bargain transforms our courses into something different from what we planned and something less than our students deserve. Although striking the bargain is, perhaps, understandable because of the circumstances of first-year instruction (large classes, required courses, distribution requirements), there are ways to avoid it that support students in the kind of learning we want.

Active Classrooms and Active Study Practices

The place to begin is in the classroom. For many of us, and for most of our students, teaching is lecturing, and this seems especially true for first-year courses. We feel the need to “cover the material” more acutely because of the introductory or foundational aspects of first-year courses, and what better way to ensure that something is “covered” than to lecture?

But lecturing, even good lecturing, is best suited for imparting information; it does not help students apply ideas, draw connections in new settings, or make independent judgments. We cannot entirely abandon the lecture in



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first-year courses, but we can begin to think of it as a method of last, rather than first, resort. In any case, when we lecture we should keep these things in mind:

We make more productive use of our class time if we break our lectures into chunks of no more than 10 or 15 minutes. This is enough time to introduce a concept and give an example or two. Then students need time to think about the ideas—to summarize the material in their own words, come up with their own examples, or to try to use the ideas to solve a problem.

Many courses can be enriched by incorporating a variety of activities that allow first-year students to practice those skills—paraphrasing, summarizing, explaining how ideas are connected—that are important to higher order learning. Lecturing promotes memorization; discussion, writing-to-learn activities, case studies, and other active learning methods help students gain those skills necessary for deeper learning.

Class time is only part of the regimen for first-year students. We also expect them to study outside class, often assuming they will spend more time on our courses outside our classrooms than in them. Yet our direction to students about this aspect of our coursework often is vague, almost perfunctory. With nothing to go on but the assignment to “read Chapter 6” or “work the problem set on page 87,” first-year students have little reason to think that there is more to studying than accumulating facts or memorizing the steps of an algorithm.

If we want first-year students to engage with our material more deeply, we need to provide more structure outside of class assignments. The biggest challenge in this regard is assigned reading. In thinking about assignments that promote active reading and that engage students more deeply, we should keep the following in mind:

Reading assignments for first-year students are most useful when they demand a product—a paraphrase, a summary, a concept map, a set of questions—that requires them to process the information rather than merely highlighting it. These products are often good starting points for class discussion, so we might want to collect and skim them occasionally.

Reading and other assignments should be designed to give students practice in the kinds of learning we expect them to acquire. Reminding students that we want them to be able to apply the ideas they encounter in the reading and then creating an assignment that asks them to do that is the sort of support that can help first-year students develop more productive study habits.

Engagement Outside Class

Creating active classrooms and supporting engaged study habits can go a long way toward ensuring academic success, but first-year students often expect more from us than classroom presentations and a semester's worth of assignments. In spite of the fact that they often seem reluctant to take advantage of office hours or other times we might be available for conversation, students want to meet us, talk to us, make connections with us. Our attention to students outside class is well worth our while because research clearly indicates that personal contact with instructors outside class correlates strongly with student satisfaction, higher academic achievement, and persistence in college. The uneasiness first-year students have about meeting a professor one-on-one can be overcome if we keep some things in mind:

Our office hours are perhaps the most underutilized resource on campus. Emphasizing our availability, reiterating our desire to meet students, and perhaps even asking students (individually or in groups) to sign up for a specific time to visit can work to break down the barrier between us and our first-year students.

We can take the initiative to meet and talk to students. Spending time before class chatting informally with students will make us seem more approachable. We might even consider systematically writing “please see me during office hours” on returned assignments to jump start the visitation process.

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