

# for your consideration...

suggestions and reflections on Teaching and Learning

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## Planning, Designing, and Evaluating Student Assignments

*(This is the second of two FYCs concerning the relationship of student experience and the curriculum. This issue provides some general guidelines for designing and assessing student assignments with a particular focus on those that ask students to relate their experience to the course material.)*

Evaluation is not solely an activity performed with a red pencil for the purpose of giving students a grade. Instead evaluation is an important element among several in a college-level course and bears a distinctive relationship to the other elements. It flows logically from the overall goals set at the course's inception, which are in turn defined more specifically in separate unit objectives. Evaluation permits instructors to determine whether students have mastered important course outcomes. And evaluation criteria accomplish two purposes: they communicate clearly to students expectations of performance, and they provide definite standards that instructors can use to assess their performance.

Described below are three major guidelines to ensure the integrity of course planning and evaluation, increase the likelihood of student success on assignments, and evaluate these assignments fairly and consistently. These general principles apply to virtually all student assignments. The examples that follow, however, illustrate assignments that explicitly require students to relate their experience to the course material.

### 1. Tie student assessment to specific course objectives.

Communicated explicitly to students at the beginning of the course, course goals and related course objectives should state very specifically what students should know or be able to do at the end of the course. One among several course goals might be that students will be able to reflect upon their own experience critically using the frames of reference of the particular course discipline. Exams, papers, and/or projects should assess whether, in fact, students have learned what you hoped they would. This holds

true as much for asking students to relate the course curriculum to their own experience as to more traditional academic outcomes. There are a variety of ways of getting students to reflect critically upon their experience within the frames of reference of particular course disciplines; there are also a variety of ways of assessing their ability to do so.

**2. Provide detailed assignments that clearly specify your expectations.** The necessity for clearly communicating expectations is arguably even greater for less traditional assignments than it is for traditional ones such as exams and papers. The tendency, however, is to leave such assignments highly open-ended. As an extreme example: "In a project of your choosing (e.g., videotape, dramatic representation, poem), demonstrate how one of the six major themes in this course relates to your own experience. Be creative!" Undoubtedly, students would appreciate answers to these questions: What is the purpose of the assignment? How does it relate to the overall goals for the course? What do you mean by "your own experience"? With respect to this assignment, are certain aspects of my experience more privileged than others? How should I relate my experience to one of the themes? Is there a particular framework/method that I should use to do so? How long should the project be? How will it be evaluated? What will you be looking for?

**3. Clearly specify how the project will be evaluated at the time it is assigned.** Particularly for less traditional assignments, providing clear criteria by which projects will be evaluated is essential. In addition to general categories of evaluation (e.g., organization, analysis, originality), behavioral anchors within each category should specify different standards of performance. For example, what does one observe in a paper that indicates "good organization" (A) or "poor organization" (D)? "Penetrating analysis" (A) or "superficial analysis" (D)? The likelihood that students' performance on a given project will match

an instructor's expectations is greater if s/he provides detailed assignments and specific performance criteria. Doing so also ensures that in executing assignments, students will have the type of learning experience and demonstrate the competencies instructors intended.

These guidelines are simple in and of themselves but harder to execute. Three examples, drawn from different content areas, appear below. They range from a fairly open-ended assignment to a more closely defined one.

### Example I: Journal

A psychology instructor observed that some students, overly anxious about "getting the course material right," had difficulty and were tentative about "thinking beyond the course material." As a step towards getting students to habitually think more independently about the course material (**course goal**), he decided to have students relate an aspect of their choosing of each class session to their own experience and reflect upon it (**course objective**) in a one-page journal entry (**assignment**). Students handed in their journals four times during the quarter at exam times; the instructor chose randomly one entry from each student's journal and graded it as an exam question. His criteria for evaluating the entries appear below.

### Example II: Literature & Life Project

An instructor of an introductory course in contemporary literature has identified a number of **course goals** including the following: to explore why and how you read literature; to develop your writing through analytical and creative responses to literature; to explore how analysis can enhance literary appreciation; and to see literature as participating in and dialoguing with a larger cultural system. In addition to traditional modes of assessment (e.g., midterm and final exams, explication), the instructor assigns a "literature and life project" that evaluates the final course goal above (i.e., to see literature as participating in and dialoguing with a larger cultural system).

The instructor asks simply that students explore the extent to which the readings have affected them; students must variously identify, analyze and act upon this influence.

Of particular interest are the criteria developed to evaluate student responses. Although you may question the instructor's literal interpretation of a literary work's effect on our behavior, this project and the criteria developed to evaluate it represent an interesting attempt to operationalize an elusive course goal.

Example I: Guidelines for Journal Entries		
Grade	Area	Features of Entry
<b>A</b>	1. Coverage: <i>and/or</i> <i>and</i> 2. Organization: 3. Grammar and Spelling: 4. Length:	a. Relates some aspect of class discussion or text to own experience, e.g., personal, observed, read, viewed  b. Reflects on some aspect of class discussion or text by, e.g., offering own opinion, presenting a contrary example, critiquing, imagining  Well done Virtually no errors Appropriate
<b>B</b>	1. Coverage: <i>and</i> 2, 3, 4 Same as above	Offers own ideas but does not relate clearly either to text or discussion
<b>C</b>	1. Coverage: <i>and</i> 2, 3, 4 Same as above  OR  1. Coverage: <i>and one of the following</i> 2. Organization: 3. Grammar and Spelling: 4. Length:	Only summarizes text or class discussion  "A" and "B" level entry  Not well done Several errors Too short
<b>D</b>	1. Coverage: <i>and two of the following</i> 2, 3, 4	"A" and "B" level entry  "C" level errors above
<b>F</b>	1. Coverage: <i>and three of the following</i> 2, 3, 4	"A" and "B" level entry  "C" level errors above

## Example II: Evaluation Scheme for Literature and Life Project

The **C** option asks that you **identify** the impact this literature has had on you. Respond to any or all of the works read. Try to address specifics within the texts as well as a general impact. Consider how this reading has affected your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

The project could be in the form of a letter, a journal entry, or an essay. You are expected to spend about 1-2 hours a week for four weeks (4-8 hours total) reflecting and working on this assignment.

The **B** option asks that you **analyze** the effect one or more readings has/have had on you. Address specifics within the text as well as an overall effect. Consider how this reading has affected your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Once you have identified the effect(s) the reading has had on you, you will analyze why you responded in this way. Consult the page entitled "Reading in a Cultural Context" in your coursepack for questions to address. Consider the text, the reader, and the cultural context and then articulate what your response tells you about yourself and the contemporary world.

This project could be in the form of a letter, a journal entry, or an essay. You are expected to spend about 2-3 hours a week for four weeks (8-12 hours total) reflecting and working on this assignment.

The **A** option asks that you not only **identify** your responses and **analyze** them in the light of your cultural context, but **act** upon them. In an informal paper you will identify and analyze your response (see **B** above). Then ask yourself, given this response, what does the literature motivate you to make/do? If you were to channel this response, what form or medium would it take? Who would most benefit from learning about your response? After you have responded with an action, you will write an informal analysis of the action: how it felt, what it did for you, what it accomplished for others.

You are expected to spend about 3-4 hours a week for four weeks (12-16 hours total) reflecting and working on this assignment.

*All students are asked to turn in a time sheet indicating the days and hours spent working on the project and signed with the honor code pledge.*

## Example III: Service Learning Project

In a course on labor economics, students investigate the role of labor in the economy and the models economists use to analyze it. In addition to a midterm and final exam, students may either write an analytical paper based on library research or engage in a service learning project.

The instructor is extremely explicit in outlining his goals and objectives for the service learning project and describing the assignment itself:

**Goal.** To increase students' understanding of and concern for outcomes of labor markets which are harmful to individuals and families, such as long-term unemployment, underemployment, and discrimination, and ways to alleviate these harmful outcomes.

The instructor then identifies several related knowledge, skills, attitude and values, and service objectives that he hopes students will meet through the project. These include to:

- learn about an organization which is working to help those who are having difficulty in the labor market
- learn about at least three individual cases of unemployment or underemployment
- improve ability to apply economic theories to actual situations
- improve ability to use actual experiences to evaluate the adequacy of economic theories
- form or deepen a concern for those who are unemployed or underemployed

The project asks students to spend 15-20 hours over the course of 8-10 weeks working for an organization that helps the unemployed or underemployed to find appropriate jobs. Students submit three assignments associated with this experience:

1. An organizational profile including the mission, structure, personnel, and finances of the organization as well as the manner in which the organization measures its effectiveness
2. A journal in which students reflect upon and analyze their experience. Each entry includes a description of the day's activities and how the experience contributed to the student's learning (i.e., about organization, clients, labor markets, strengths and weaknesses of economic theory) and/or personal growth
3. A final paper in which the student relates his experiences to the concepts, models, and theories of labor economics: why is an organization like this necessary or useful? What are the successes of the agency? What are its problems? What could be done to solve the problems? What does your experience teach you about the working of labor markets in the United States? How does your experience and the work of the agency help you to understand and evaluate various aspects of labor economics theory?

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In the source I consulted, the instructor does not give explicit criteria for evaluating each assignment. However, these would be relatively simple to develop, particularly for assignments one and two, because the instructor has defined explicitly the form of students' reflection on their experience in terms of relatively traditional assignments. For example, criteria for the organizational profile, a very straightforward assignment, might include coverage of all aspects of the organization noted (e.g., mission, finances) and clarity of explanation; within each criteria the instructor would also establish minimal standards of performance for an "A," "B," etc. For the journal entries, the criteria might be similar to those presented in Example 1 with some modifications. The final paper will be the most difficult assignment of the three to assess. In addition to criteria concerning the paper's general organization and quality of writing, others might include choice of appropri-

ate theory, use of specific examples from the service learning experience to illustrate theory, and depth of analysis. Again, the instructor would establish minimal standards of performance within each criteria.

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