

How Do I Get Students to Read Their Assignments Before Class?

Presented by:

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Maryellen Weimer: Hello, my name is Maryellen Weimer and I'm editor of *The Teaching Professor* newsletter. I've also authored a number of books on teaching and learning in higher education. I'm here to spend 20 minutes with you talking about what is a perennial problem for many professors – how do we get students coming to class having done the assigned reading before they arrive in class?

It's so frustrating when students arrive in class not prepared. It says in the syllabus that they should do the reading before they come to class. You make strongly-worded statements and now it's regularly that there's assigned reading and you expect students to come to class. Then class starts and you ask a question about the reading, and nobody responds. There is no eye contact. There's nobody giving any indication that they're interested in talking about the reading.

After a long period of silence, Bill finally comes to your rescue. He raises his hand. When you call on him, he kind of brazenly announces, "Well, I didn't have time to do the reading, but I'd be happy to tell you what I think about the question."

I don't know about your experience, but mine confirms something I was a little bit surprised to find in the research. When asked to list reasons that prevent them from participating in class, much to my surprise, students did not list 'not having done the reading'. That means that they are willing to come to class unprepared, and being unprepared, not having done the assigned reading does not prevent them from participating in class.

Now I don't want you to devalue student opinions. What a student thinks, they're opinions are fine; they need to be respected. But part of our mission is to get students better informed, informed but what's in the assigned reading. That's part of the reason that they're in college in the first place.

So in these 20 minutes that we have together, I'd like to propose three approaches that will get more students coming to class prepared. I'll offer a specific illustration of each one. I would also encourage you take a look at the supplementary materials, in which you'll find three assignments that faculty use to get students doing the reading beforehand. Never mind that these are all proposed by faculty teaching sociology courses. I've used some of these assignments. I've read them carefully, and they will work in any course where there's an assigned textbook or even a collection of readings. One of the benefits of these assignments is that they not only get students coming to class prepared, they develop some of those really important reading skills.

But let me share the three strategies that I have that I think will help getting more students coming to class having done the reading. The first approach I'd like to share I call, simply, "Let there be consequences." The

way I need to introduce this is by asking you a question – why do students come to class not prepared? Why do they come not prepared when the syllabus says they should be prepared and when you've admonished them to come to class having done the reading? That's not a rhetorical question. I'd really be interested in you thinking about why students come to class unprepared.

Yes, it is true that a lot of them are very busy. They're taking a full college load, working full time and maybe have family responsibilities as well. Yes, it's also true that some of the 18-year-olds are pretty lazy, not very focused or well-motivated. And yes, it's also true that a lot of students aren't very good readers; they don't do the reading because they don't like to read and they don't like to read technical, unfamiliar material as well. But you know what? I don't think any of those is the right answer.

I think the right answer is that students come to class not having done the reading because, despite what you have said or what it says in the syllabus, absolutely nothing happens to them when they come to class unprepared. They can sit quietly in class and they do just fine. Nothing happens to them. They are unprepared and nothing happens. So it's the old adage about actions speaking louder than words. It doesn't matter what you say to them about how they need to come to class prepared, if they can sit comfortably in class and have nothing negative happen to them when they're unprepared, that speaks louder than anything that you might tell them.

I also get a bit perturbed by students who are verbally confident, who will actually make comments, more or less implying that they have done the reading, not ever imagining that their comments make very clear to me that they certainly have not done the reading.

So when you're using this approach, let there be consequences. The first thing that you have to do is to decide what those consequences are going to be. Here I do want you to keep in mind another old adage about the punishment fitting the crime. All right, I don't recommend public humiliation. I don't think a student needs to be demeaned and humiliated if they give an answer that's not informed by what's in the textbook. And I'm not a big fan of quizzes. I'll talk a bit more about that when we get to the end of the program.

But I'm also very convinced that students should not be able to sit comfortably in class when they're unprepared. Some of the discomfort can come simply by things that you say in the discussion, things that you can say constructively and positively, but things that nonetheless, convey to students, the fact that you know very well that they have not done the reading and that that is not appropriate.

So let's imagine a scenario where John gives a rambling account of what he thinks about a particular topic. You listen politely. You smile and you nod, but afterwards, you say something like, "Well, John, what in the reading influenced your thinking on this particular topic?" If your John is like the one I had in class, he wouldn't be at all abashed to say, "Nothing. I didn't do the reading." To which you might follow up by saying, "Well, okay, but you know what? I'd be more interested in what you think after you've considered the material in the textbook."

Or let's say in another scenario the discussion is going along pretty well. A variety of different students are participating and they're making some interesting comments, but nobody's talking about anything that's in the reading. You might say something like, "Gee, I'm really hearing some interesting comments, but so far no one has even mentioned the Yardley case, which seems to me, very relevant to what we're talking about. Who knows what the Yardley case is?" Wait patiently. Look around the room. If it's like most days in class, you'll have to respond by saying, "Nobody? Nobody is willing to say what the Yardley case is? Am I to assume that that means that nobody did the reading or got out of the reading what's really important? Well, you know what that means? Everybody better go back to that reading and figure out why the Yardley case is relevant here."

What I would try to do then would be to start the next class session by repeating the question and following up with something like, "And who's got something about the Yardley case in their notes now?" You see the rationale behind this strategy is you don't want to provide answers about the reading yourself. You have to think about it from the student perspective. If the students don't answer questions about the reading, then in some classes, the teacher will go ahead and provide those answers and that's a win/win situation for the students. They not only find out what the answer to the question is, they find out what the teacher thinks is important, which means they may be finding out what's going to turn up as a test question on the next exam.

I also like direct students to particular sections of the reading. I might say to the class, "Find the section in the reading that justifies using the win/win conflict resolution strategy in the case that we're just talking about." Let's say Paul volunteers and he doesn't have the right section. You could say, "No Paul, that's not right. Somebody else?" Maybe there's nobody. Then I would follow up by saying, "Well, don't imagine that I'm going to tell you where that section is, but what I will do is give you 15 seconds to write yourself a note that you need to find out what that justification is because chances are good that it's going to be asked of you again."

Here, again, I'm using a little bit of extrinsic motivation, but nonetheless, I'm still forcing the students to get back into reading themselves and figure out what's there. If you explain a fairly complicated concept in

class and you sense that student understanding is not really complete, you might want to say something like that, “Gee, would an example really help you understand this concept? It would? Then I suggest you take a review of the textbook. The material assigned for tonight or the material assigned last night has a couple of good examples that are really going to help you put this all together.”

So my first approach here is that you decide that there are consequences that students are going to experience when they’re in class not having done the reading. The consequences might be minor ones like the ones we’re talking about where you’ve simply made comments in class that reinforce the importance of the reading and you’re sense that students are probably not as onboard with having done the reading as they need to be.

Let me talk about my second approach. Use the text in class. You show students that reading assignments are important when you use their contents in class, not with generic references to the textbook, but with specific bits and pieces of content where you’re actually pointing out actual sections of material in the reading.

Let me share a sample strategy, one that I use early in the course to reinforce the importance of students doing the reading. I tell students that they need to do the reading. I also tell them that we’re going to be using the textbook in class and they need to bring it to class. Okay, so now it’s the next day in class and I say to the students, “I’d like for you to take out your textbooks. There are not very many textbooks in class, but I pretend not to notice, and I say to the students, “I want you to turn to Page 23.” Then I take my textbook and I show it to the class, and I’ll say, “Look here at this paragraph, second paragraph on Page 23. I have the first two sentences underlined. Do you have those underlined in your book?”

Now the response that you see here is a little bit disgusting. Anybody who’s got a book in class is madly underlining those two sentences. People that don’t have the textbook in class are peering about to other people, saying “What page was that? What sentences is that?” And you can imagine after class, that those two sentences are getting underlined in everybody’s book. But the payoff comes the next day in class because there are all sorts of textbooks and markers in class. This is the class of every student’s dreams – the teacher is going to tell you exactly what to underline in this class. No, that’s not what’s going to happen in this class.

So today, we’re going to talk about what’s on Page 46 and then we’re going to talk about what you have underlined. Here’s where I find a lot of interesting things come out of the woodwork. I might find that one student has underlined the entire page in bright fluorescent yellow-green or orange. When I first went back to teaching full time in the early 90s, I used to think that was really stupid on the part of the students, but I’ve rethought that. I think it’s actually a cry for help. It’s the students saying

“Oh, my gosh. It’s in the textbook. I have no idea how to figure out what is the most important material in this textbook. I will just absolutely underline everything.”

So what I’m really doing when I use the textbook in this way is I’m also working, early in the course, to develop some very rudimentary reading skills, but I’m using the textbook in class in very concrete ways, which I think reinforces to the students that it’s important to do the reading; it’s important to bring the book in class. The book is going to be an essential part of this particular course.

Now let me share my third strategy, which is that we have to start making students responsible for reading material that we don’t have time to cover in class. We just have too much material to teach anymore. That’s why we’re moving more in this direction. Now I don’t have to tell you, making students responsible for some of the material in the textbook that you’re not going to talk about, or cover extensively in class, is not a popular approach. Teachers really want students to tell them what’s important in the reading. They want teachers to tell them exactly what they have to know from the book.

Now when students are pressing me in this direction, and when they’re objecting to the assignment that I’m going to give them, where they’re responsible for some of this reading material themselves, I wonder out loud in class if they plan to ask their new boss, who’s paying them 40 grand a year to do the same thing. The boss gives them a report and before they tackle it, they say to the boss, “Gee, could you kind of like preview this for me? Could you tell me which sentences I’m really going to have to look at and what’s important?” I don’t think that’s what you’re going to do to a boss who’s paying you \$40,000.00 a year.

The approach isn’t popular with students because they really don’t have any confidence in their ability to figure it out what it is that they need to know from the reading. So my sample strategy for this approach is one that helps develop that ability to ascertain what’s important in the reading.

What I do here now is put students into study groups. This is part of a larger assignment. It’s a section of that assignment and I make each group responsible for a different section in the text that we really haven’t gone over very extensively in class. The group task is to prepare a study guide on those materials they have been assigned. Now you might want to introduce this assignment by spending a little bit of time talking with students about the characteristics of good study review materials.

Just a side note – before I started using this assignment, I used to prepare the study guides for students myself. But then I had a moment of insight when I realized that I don’t need practice preparing study review materials. I know how to prepare a really great set. That’s a skill that’s

really important for a student to develop. Again, it's a skill that develops a whole lot better when students are doing it.

So each group has an assigned section of the text. They prepare study review materials off of that text. On the day that they're due, they distribute those to the rest of the class, and students use those student-prepared study guides to prepare for the exam. After the exam is over, I let students go ahead and grade those study materials that they use. I use an honor system here. If they didn't look at the materials, they don't have any business in providing feedback.

But I use a simple rubric that has some of the characteristics of good study materials that we talked about in class and let them go ahead and assign a point value to those study materials they prepared. One side benefit I noticed, from those materials, is that the questions that come off a particular section, that students in that group do not miss those questions on the exam; I, of course, point that out during the debrief, showing that if they really do get into the materials and understand them, and are preparing review materials on them, you're not going to miss those questions on the exam.

Let me conclude by talking just a little bit about reading quizzes and why I have some concerns about them. A lot of faculty do use them and there's no question that they do work. Students come to class having done the reading if they think they're going to have a quiz on the reading. It's like any other strategy. It certainly is not entirely bad. In fact, one of the assignments described in the supplementary materials uses a kind of quiz format.

But in general, because faculty don't have a lot of time to grade quizzes, they use questions that test recall. They just want to know whether or not the student has done the reading. They don't ask the kinds of questions or use a quiz format that really makes students think. So the quizzes end up encouraging surface learning, encouraging students to simply memorize the material in the text, rather than really reading it for understanding it.

Also, quizzes rely entirely on extrinsic motivation. Students are doing the reading because they want the points. They're doing the reading because they're afraid they're going to have a quiz on it. Do quizzes make students want to do more reading? Do they make students want to learn more about the material? Unfortunately, I don't think they do. Once the quiz is over, once the course is over, so ends the reading in that content area.

Now I may be totally idealistic here, but I think we want students coming to class having done the reading because they're discovering how much more they can learn, how much easier the course material is to master once they've done the reading. Those are the right reasons for students to

be doing reading in the course, and I think we want to try to use strategies and approaches that get students coming to class having done the reading, so that they're ready for even more and better learning.

Thanks, very much, for you attention. We do like your feedback on these programs. There is a web address and a survey that you can complete. We take you feedback very seriously, so we hope that you will respond. Thanks, again, and best wishes for a good day.

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