During semester breaks, I prepare my courses for the upcoming semester, a regular ritual for most academics. My process begins with reflecting on my formal and informal teaching evaluations and considering ways to improve the course. I add new topics and delete others. I review assignments and change them as needed. And I spend a lot of my preparation time choosing timely, thought-provoking articles to assist students in learning the course content.

For many years, I had great hope that students would embrace the readings. The dialogue that occurs in class as students debate a current news item, explore the findings in journal articles, or challenge the information in a textbook is exhilarating and reminds me of why I chose the profession of teaching. Synergy and energy are created in the classroom as students reflect on the discussion and leave with new perspectives and new questions. Like many instructors, despite my high hopes for these outcomes, I was often left disappointed.

As a faculty member in a graduate program, I expected that students would be eager to read the material. I would come to class having reread the information myself only to find a few raised hands and many more blank faces as we began to discuss the week’s readings. Those who had done the readings were willing to interact, but I could sense that they too were disappointed that their peers did not participate. I was at a loss for what to do.

I know I am not alone in my concerns about the lack of assigned reading done by college students. In his blog for Inside Higher Ed, John Warner (2016) asked, “Is there a more common lament among college instructors than, ‘Why won’t students just do the reading?’” According to Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, and Herschbach (2010), the resistance to reading may be due to “lack of reading comprehension skills, lack of confidence, disinterest in the course material, and an underestimation of reading importance.”

**Index card reflections**

I researched strategies to persuade students to read for class and began trying them out with my students. Initially, I had students respond to the readings on an electronic discussion board. Most complied, but something was missing for them and for me. After much contemplation, I adopted the index card reaction assignment. It is simple and very old school but has proven to be highly effective. Each week, as indicated on the syllabus, students are required to write a reaction to at least one reading. They are asked to react to the readings by writing what they thought or felt as they read it. They react in their own handwriting on a 5" × 8" lined index card. They bring the card to class, reference it during discussion, and then turn it in at the end of class. In doing so, students receive points toward their participation grade.

There are three features of this assignment that contribute to its success.

1. **The power of handwriting.** Students write their thoughts in their own handwriting. Handwriting is becoming obsolete (Grossman, 2009, p. 52), and there is something very personal about writing down one’s thoughts in one’s own hand. Students have the option of emailing their thoughts, typing and printing their responses, or posting their thoughts on a course management site. But most often students turn in the card with their written reflections. When students are unable to attend class, they typically send a screenshot of their handwritten index card.

2. **Individual responses.** I like to write something in each student’s index card. There is no need to write a lot; some short remarks are enough. If you have a longer response, there is more room on the back of the card. You may also wish to invite students to discuss their thoughts in class, after class, or during office hours. One way to adapt this exercise to a larger class is to have students...
exchange cards and comment on each other’s cards. The instructor can randomly collect a certain number of cards each week.

3. **Timely responses.** It’s important to respond in a timely fashion. My classes meet once per week, which allows for time between classes for reading and responding. Designate dates when index cards are due and when they will be returned. The portability of the index card allows for reading and responding to occur anywhere—on the train, waiting for an appointment, or during those 15 minutes in between meetings.

As I hand out index cards on the first day of class, there are initially collective groans. Students question whether they can send me an email with their thoughts (yes) or post their thoughts on our course management site (yes again). Then, as we have our first class discussion, they invariably pull out their cards and join the conversation. At the end of the semester, when I ask them to evaluate the assignment, most if not all claim they actually enjoyed the assignment, confess they might not have done the reading if the assignment had not existed, and say they enjoyed having a more personal conversation with me.

References:


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