

Enabling students to prepare for class

“When we assign students to read something, we really mean that they should study it. But the majority don’t. They come unprepared and make class discussion impossible. I don’t want to lecture, but...”

“They, quite sensibly, do exactly what we ask of them: they read the material once, maybe while listening to the stereo. Thus, they’re not really on top of the material when they get to class.”

“Some students do read before class. But I wonder if they really understand what they are reading. Their responses to the study questions are vague.”

All these sound familiar to every instructor. What can you do? Following are some practical suggestions from old hands:

David E. Schwalm from Arizona State University West:

Read text — write summary — compare and contrast with previous summaries — apply a theory to a particular instance

“Requiring students to write summaries is a way of getting them to study the text rather than simply reading it. But summarizing gets a little old after a while, and I recommend upping the ante a little as the term proceeds. For example, ask students to read something and to compare and contrast it with something they summarized previously. Have them apply a theory to a particular instance.”

David also alerted faculty to the fact that some study questions which go with a text may be too abstract and hard to understand. Rewriting the questions in a way that students can understand is preferred.

Zoe L. Hayes from St. Francis Xavier University :

Read text — prepare discussion questions — present questions in class — class discussion

“I have my senior students prepare discussion questions on our readings. They know that I will ask them to present their questions, and everyone sees the questions before class as well so we generate some very valuable interactions. However, I believe one has to use this carefully. Often first year students are not ready for this. Their conception of learning seems to be more focused on acquiring knowledge than the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. Their questions tend to be much more factual. It seems to be very true that there is a development of conception of learning over the four years and the student’s need to be ready (or have been prepared) for certain types of activity.”*

Calvin Kalman from Concordia :

Turning each lecture into a mini research paper

1. *students prepare a one page outline of material to be covered in class, including mini objectives*
2. *class discussion*
3. *(students prepare) a one page mini summary in essay form. Every week!*

Russ Hunt from St. Thomas University :

Students read and summarize for each other

"If they (students) see themselves in a different situation, they read differently. I ask my students to read different things and summarize them for each other. And I make sure that that's the real audience and the real purpose for the readings, by making sure that they read and respond to each others' summaries.

Another is to get students to 'cover' areas by dividing them up and reporting back and forth. They read very differently when there's the pressure of someone else who really needs to know what they're learning."

Joseph A. Parsons from University of Victoria Counseling Services :

Quiz at the beginning of class

"One method that worked rather well for large undergraduate courses was a short quiz at the beginning of class that provided those who had studied the textual material to demonstrate their understanding by answering a question or two. With larger classes, I rolled a 10-sided die and used the last digit of the student number to select those for 'marking.' The problem with this method was that it almost needed to focus on lower level objectives, but it did help to prepare students for class time discussion/lecture."

Post-class one minute paper

"...to enable students to do a synthesis of what has happened in class with their prior repertoire. These not only allow an opportunity for the students to write about the subject matter, they also provide valuable feedback to the instructor as to what the students are learning, at least in part."

Calvin Kalman (quoted earlier) echoed that he would like his students to write three separate sentences about three concepts that learnt during the week during the last class of the week.

Michael A. Roffe of the California State University had similar practice with his class and gave five points per weekly quotes (writing) which were handed in at the end of the class time. That accumulated as part of total class points for other activities, e.g., papers on selected topics and exams.

Read and comment on students' writing

“Read and comment on students’ writing is very essential in enabling them to read and summarize what they have learnt in writing. It is a real encouragement and reinforcement to generate personal reactions to what they are reading (i.e. Bloom’s evaluation) ”

Tom Powers from the University of South Carolina at Sumter :

Canned lectures and linking test with assigned material

“I review the assigned reading material, and try to anticipate what points might be particularly difficult for readers to assimilate. I do not necessarily ‘cover’ those, but I take care to be particularly prepared for them.

I decide what things, in my view, need to be covered, but are not adequately addressed in the text. I prepare ‘canned lectures’ for these.

If the reading assignment has included specifically interpretive material, I prepare an in-class exercise of some kind requiring students to use that material or evaluate it.

Otherwise, I let the students decide at the beginning of each class what is to be done that day. I figure they know better than I do what they most need help on. And if no one brings up one of the points which I have already concluded might be difficult ones, I send out a few probes and prompts of my own, just to see if they’re really as prepared as they imply.

I say in my syllabus, and I reiterate every day, that test material could be drawn from almost anywhere. Students are responsible for ALL assigned material, whether it comes up in class or not. They are also responsible for insuring that I know if they need help with any of it.”

More suggestions:

- put the reading materials on school computer network to ensure accessibility for all students
- prepare a Study Guide to difficult materials. The Guide will point out why the material is relevant to the course of study and the focus of the reading. It will also explain how the text is related to the aims and objectives of the course and what is expected from the student after reading. Preferably the Guide can give students something to do other than read
- provide a preview of the materials in class to stimulate interest
- students suggest some reading materials, monitored and modified by the instructor as term proceeds
- help students to employ some reading methods like SQ3R (i.e. Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review) or SARAS (i.e. Survey, Analyze, Read at Appropriate Speed) etc. to become more flexible and effective in their reading.