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New Chalk Talk

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How to encourage preclass reading: The Web-based discussion

No one would argue that in-class discussions improve when students read and think about their texts before class. But one of the most common questions that I have been asked by several faculty members is: "How do you get students to read the assigned texts before coming to class?" This is not a unique problem with AUC students, and a very similar question ("How to get students to prepare for class"), posted on a discussion list of a faculty development site on the internet, elicited a large number of responses. A few of these follow:

- "Require each student to **bring in a "good" discussion question** covering the material of the day."
- "Assign **students** to take a turn **as class discussion leaders** (may need to "train" them), giving them part of the responsibility for leading and carrying on discussions. "
- "Have students do a **minute paper** at the beginning of the class: What was the most difficult/unclear point in the reading? What was the concept you liked best/found the most exciting in the assignment?"
- Give "students...**questions [that] require them to synthesize** and try to do something with the material, not just skim the chapter to find the answers".
- "Allow **students to generate possible exam questions** from the readings. Be willing to actually edit and use some of these on the exam".
- Give a "**10-minute quiz at the beginning** of the class period based on homework readings'.
- "Have your students use **electronic mail** to exchange ideas about the readings or discussion topics **before** the class meets". One participant talked about how email "enabled me to get student debates and discussions going before class meets, so that by the time we congregate, students have already begun to define their ideas in relation to the material ..."

This last idea has evolved into the more structured **Web-based discussion**, a method that is increasingly being adopted by faculty and, when applied successfully, is found to enrich in-class discussions.

Harvard University's Professor G. Nagy is one of the early adopters of this discussion method, and has used it in his course, "The Concept of the Hero in Greek Civilization", one of the most popular courses in Harvard's Core Curriculum. To an already rich and interactive course website, Prof. Nagy and his teaching assistants added and developed the discussion forums that became an integral and required part of the discussion section.

Each week, a Web discussion question or topic was assigned, and students were required to post a response before the meeting in which the text was to be discussed. Part of the students' preparation included reading their peers' responses and, at times, commenting on them. **Each student's contribution to these Web discussions is factored into his or her grade.**

Faculty that have used this approach have found that students come better prepared to class, and that the live discussions start off from a higher intellectual level. This approach has also other advantages over the more common one-page response or reaction papers: instead of the latter being exclusively read by the teacher, tutor or teaching fellow, the students get to talk to one another and read each others responses. In addition, while reaction papers are typically returned one week after they are submitted, feedback with Web discussions is more immediate.

Leading a discussion on line offers some challenges, and future New Chalk Talk issues will discuss strategies on how to do this effectively. In the meantime, WebCt has a discussion tool that is quite easy to use. It offers the benefit that posted messages can be organized into topics or "threads" and can be easily archived. Any faculty member not using WebCt at present, and wishing to use the discussion tool only, can contact us and we will arrange for individualized training. ***We would welcome comments or suggestions from our faculty who are already using this discussion tool or any other.***

Sources:

Responses from POD (faculty development) discussion list on "*Encouraging Students to Prepare for Class*", Center for the Advancement of Teaching at Illinois State University
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