

Learning as Practice and Repetition: A Focus on Course Requirements (and How to Make Sure They're Met)

Is it possible that we aren't challenging our students enough? In "Homework? What Homework," an article in the December 6, 2002, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, author Jeffrey R. Young revealed that students are spending less time studying for tests and doing less homework than ever. "Results from the latest National Survey of Student Engagement, released last month, found that only 12 percent of last year's freshmen at four-year residential colleges reported spending 26 or more hours per week preparing for classes, while the majority, 63 percent, said they spend 15 or fewer hours on class preparation, which the survey defines as 'studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, and other activities related to your academic program.'" Some say that these problems can be attributed to a student culture that does not value education for its own sake, or perhaps to a declining work ethic. But at the same time, professors across the country worry about grade inflation, that is, awarding students "excellent" and "good" marks for work that is satisfactory at best. This suggests that college students may be achieving moderate to high levels of success while expending relatively little effort. Should we be worried that students are effectively learning less, and are there steps that instructors can take to combat this trend?

If you are concerned that your students may be not be getting the most out of your classes, you may want to take a second look at the very foundations of your teaching—that is, your course requirements. Teaching might best be described as an exercise in communication, but *learning* is largely an activity that takes place over time, with practice and repetition. So instead of thinking about what you want to teach them, try focusing on what you want your students to *do* for your class.

The key to any kind of learning is the active engagement in a succession of exercises designed to build knowledge and skills. This requires, first, that your assignments advance your teaching goals, and second, that students actually complete them (the fact is that most students will not carry out the activities required for your course unless they are somehow held respon-

President McCormick Discusses Budget Cuts

In an email message on January 29, Rutgers President Richard McCormick alerted the University community to the potential consequences of the proposed state budget cuts for higher education in New Jersey. "Budget reductions of the size announced yesterday will seriously damage higher education in general and Rutgers in particular....The outcomes will be exceedingly painful for students, faculty, staff and the New Jersey citizens we serve....A cut of this magnitude is unprecedented and cannot be easily absorbed. While it is too soon to predict specific impacts, the consequences of the planned cuts could include our inability to fill vacant positions across the university and greater difficulty for students to register for desired courses." He ended his message with a call to "raise our voices" in an effort to convince state legislators to reconsider the proposed cuts.

You are urged to take action! Visit the University's website, <http://www.rutgers.edu/statebudgetcuts/>, to learn more about the possible impacts of the proposed cuts and about what you can do to help. An extensive list of state contacts is available on the website.

Leading Discussions...

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sible for them). This doesn't mean that you should test your students on every little fact. Rather, this is to suggest that you build a set of *meaningful* assignments, for which your students will be accountable, into your syllabus.

Your syllabus, then, is much more than a reading list or set of "due dates"—think of it as a map designed to enable your students to learn information and skills in a progressive manner. To decide what sorts of assignments you will require from your students, think about what they know now and what you want them to know at the end of the class. Keep in mind that college instructors often wrongly assume that their students already possess the basic skills required to be successful in their course, such as writing, speaking, observation, or problem-solving skills. For the most part, if you want your students to learn specific skills, you should plan to teach them. Many instructors, for example, list the teaching of writing skills as one of their main goals. Is it reasonable to expect that students will learn to write (or even to improve) if

you assign them two five-page essays, and maybe a take-home final? Learning to write, like most skills, is an iterative process, and while it might take more time on the part of the instructor, multiple assignments are probably necessary if you are to reach this teaching goal. The same can be said for teaching mathematical, problem-solving, public speaking, or critical thinking skills.

Once you've implemented a sequence of assignments designed to promote real learning, and the course is under way, the next step is to ensure that students actually do the work. For example, if the majority of the homework in your course is reading, how can you make sure your students are doing the reading? Or, if it's a course involving the mastery of specific mathematical skills, such as calculus or physics, how can you be sure the students are completing the problem sets? While you will never achieve 100% success, most of your students will complete the work if you require them to turn something in. Even if you do not grade everything that students give you, a daily or weekly assignment is the best way to make sure your students prepare. In any case, it is vital that the assignments be collected and that you provide feedback designed to improve their skills and reward them for their efforts.

When at last they arrive at your class ready to participate, be sure to fulfill their expectations! Nothing will

discourage student preparation more than the sure knowledge that they can get away with sleeping through class. Learn and use your students' names, call on the shy as well as the outgoing, and make your classroom an active learning environment.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the point of your assignments is student learning, and not to make your students miserable (or to bog yourself down with grading); it is crucial that students feel they can do well if they try. Communicate your expectations as clearly as possible to your students. Give them descriptions and examples of A, B, and C level work, and then follow through in your grading. Your students should feel as if they are *earning* their grades rather than (passively) being *assigned* grades. In some instances, using ungraded assessment is a great way to gain feedback about student learning. At the end of each class, you might ask them to quickly write down on a piece of paper, "What is the most important thing you learned today?" Or, "what was the most confusing thing about today's lesson?" These and other types of "fast feedback" can give you invaluable knowledge about what your students may or may not be learning in your class.

There will always be those students that you will not reach. But at the end of the semester, when students know they have left your class with much more than they had when they arrived, it will have been well worth the effort.

TapTalk is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School—New Brunswick.
Editor: Jennifer Einspahr
Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901
(732) 932-7747
tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu

Critical Thinking Series, Part II: Why Teach Critical Thinking?

In the last issue we defined critical thinking as the ability to identify assumptions, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence and authority, deduce conclusions, and solve problems. Further, critical thinking is a set of learned skills that can be built upon in a progressive manner. But why should the college curriculum focus on teaching such skills?

Before coming to college, most students have experienced learning as the memorization and rehearsal of information; rarely does high school education delve into the application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of ideas. Similarly, most students have not yet seriously challenged the values and beliefs of their parents or peer groups. They often come to college with one of two mindsets: either they have very strong opinions, and they'll defend them until the day they die; or they are swayed by any argument, believing all "opinions" to be equally valid, even unassailable. As college instructors, one of our roles is to help undergraduates develop into autonomous adults who are capable of thinking for themselves and participating in a democratic dialogue. Teaching critical thinking is central to this enterprise.

What is the link between critical thinking and self-sufficient adulthood? Our students need critical thinking skills to get through life. First,

in the job setting, a wealth of information will do them little good if they don't know how to apply it, and those who understand the theories and methods behind the tasks will be more successful than their colleagues. (Good problem solvers will also build better bridges and devise more innovative medical technologies than non-critical thinkers.) Second, it is crucial that functioning adults be able to sort through and evaluate the massive amounts of information with which we are bombarded every day. We are uncomfortable with the idea of corporations marketing their products directly to children. Shouldn't college-educated adults be able to come to their own conclusions about matters that will affect them deeply? In this way, critical thinkers are empowered with a certain vital independence.

Perhaps more importantly, critical thinking is fundamental to the democratic process. A just and meaningful public life requires that citizens be capable of challenging their own assumptions, entertaining new points of view, and deliberating about the common good. Critical thinking certainly entails the ability to identify a logical flaw or assess the validity of data, but it also involves the related ability to make reasoned judgments, a skill that can be taught in the classroom, in any discipline. For example, when we delve into the sciences, we

begin to discover that what we ordinarily think of as facts are actually well-defended theories, and that experts disagree about even the most fundamental scientific principles. Furthermore, good scientists understand competing theories, but ultimately they must evaluate the evidence and take a stand. Even if students never achieve mastery in a given field, it is important that we model this attitude of openness while teaching methods for making judgments; these are indispensable skills in the real world of ethics and politics, where decisions affecting our collective fate take place. Many times, what our students take to be unshakable beliefs or opinions are really arguments that can be defended, challenged, and modified. Pushing students toward making this cognitive leap is to begin to enable them to engage in the kind of dialogue that is so essential to a thriving democracy.

In part III of this series, we will explore some specific methods for helping our students to expand their cognitive abilities. Look for the April issue of *TapTalk!*

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TAP Calendar

March 26	12:00 - 1:00 pm	Job Search Strategies in Tough Times	CAC*
March 27	2:00 - 3:00 pm	Salary Negotiations	Busch#
April 2	12:00 - 1:30 pm	Interview Skills for Academic Settings	Busch#
April 8	12:00 - 1:00 pm	Interviewing Skills for Corporate and Academic Settings	Busch#

*Call 732-445-6127 to register #Call 732-932-7997 to register

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<http://taproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html>

Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean
Graduate School-New Brunswick
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181
(732) 932-7747