

Best Practices in Teaching Nutrition: Using Online Journals to Enhance Lesson Instruction and Student Engagement

Introduction

The collegiate environment is often wrought with long-winded lectures, wordy handouts, and plenty of Power Point presentations that distribute a wealth of information but may not fully engage students in learning or may need introductory activities to promote increased interest in content. Currently, the basic nutrition course at Florida A&M University (FAMU) is taught using both a hybrid (face-to-face and online), and a fully online modality. For the last two years, the journals feature within Blackboard has been used to create journal assignments that will promote interest in content, and enhance instruction and engagement. This teaching tip will provide a description of the journal assignments as well as recommendations on the best use of the online journal feature for those teaching courses in areas of agriculture, nutrition, and food science.

Procedure

Five 5-point journal assignments (two story-telling; three performing arts-related) were provided within Blackboard's Online Journal feature. Each journal had a prompt that students were required to respond to. The story-telling prompts included: 1) Tell a story of how food played a role in your history or culture. 2) Type a story of how food played a part in social events you have attended. In the instructions, students were informed that this assignment was for creative writing purposes and that stories could be humorous, serious, or take whatever tone desired with limited offense to others. Responses were to be at least one to two paragraphs in length.

In addition to the two story-telling prompts, there were three journal prompts concerning the value of the performing arts in nutrition awareness. Each prompt included a link that led to a performing arts video with a nutritional theme (music, spoken word poetry, and comedy respectively). Following each link were specific questions that students were required to answer. Students were directed to watch each video prior to answering any of the questions. Questions included: "What are some of the health/nutrition words or phrases you remember from watching the video? Did watching this video make you think about the food you eat or your health? Describe. Did watching the video make you think about the food your family, friends, and peers eat? Describe."

Assessment

Based on data from 2016-2017, the assignments that had the highest completion rates, and was noted as the most engaging activity by students, were the journals. Students seemed to appreciate telling their stories in journal prompts that encouraged them to share their history, culture, and social events in relation to food. Stories were rich with family, customs, traditions,

as well as thought on how these things shaped their current dietary behaviors. Students also seemed to appreciate watching and responding to the performing arts videos. Based on responses in other assignments, and in-class discussion, responding to these videos often ignited and encouraged dialogue in online discussions and in-class sessions. In the journal comments section, many noted that they believed the journals made them think more about nutrition and increased their engagement with food and nutrition information even outside of the course. Oftentimes, the journals provided valuable highlights and previews of the topic for the week. As well, these were “easy” five-point assignments. Most students always completed these journals weekly. As long as students answered questions and provided responses that were thoughtful, they received full credit. Though proper spelling and grammar were always encouraged, they were not included in grading in efforts to not hinder creativity in writing. Two examples of the evaluation feedback given for journals are provided below:

“...This course has...show[n] me the impact social media and art platforms play in shaping nutrition and eating habits amongst people. The influences of media and art can be used to advertise food, discuss eating habits, and address health problems. Art adds creativity to most presentations and draws in an audience. The addition of art to important topics such as health and nutrition, not only makes them more interesting but it also makes the information memorable.”

“Being in this class has not only taught me about certain foods and vitamins that can help benefit me but also you can teach others about health and nutrition through the daily things we use such as our phones for social media and laptops for YouTube videos. The spoken words, poems, [and] speeches has made me want to be aware about my health and also my family and peers health and well-being...”

Recommendations

1. The online journals are not so much a teaching method, but rather a supplemental activity that may encourage interest in specific topics. The initiation of thought and interest on the topic can often begin here, and then nutrition, food, agricultural, or topical concepts, skills, and content can build from here.
2. Use the journal feature to tell your own story. Lesson instruction is enhanced when students feel like they know something about the professor, as well, providing an example of a story helps students understand how to format their story.
3. Use the journal feature to highlight popular videos that include the performing arts but have subtle or blatant themes or words that can be tied to your lesson topic. This can be best used to prompt exploration of the topic prior to class time.
4. Online journals should not be labor intensive to grade. These assignments should be five or less points each. Any associated rubrics should focus on word or paragraph count, and level of originality and/or creativity in writing.
5. Online journals are also a way to incorporate more writing in courses that may traditionally rely on scientific facts and assessments that are defined (true/false; multiple choice; etc.). Though the focus is on creativity, the writing in journals could be the basis to introduce more writing-intensive assignments into the course that highlight the differences in writing for creativity versus research.

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