



This Teaching Tip is one of a five-part series from a Faculty Learning Community at Pennsylvania State University.

The Landscape of Reflection

The Problem

Most college students have been immersed in organized learning environments for at least 17 years before entering college. Not surprisingly, when they enter college, they often are just checking off one of the 'life success' boxes; they do not necessarily have a particular interest in or passion for learning. Over the first 12 years of formal education, many may have lost the sense of ownership or personal investment in their education. College is one of the largest investments a student will make both in expense and effort. The question I ask is, "how can we increase our students' ownership of their own education while conducting quick assessments of course pacing and student engagement". My answer is a short weekly reflection question.

Why Reflection?

There are many methods of course and lesson assessment with varying degrees of complexity. In my landscape design courses, when I want a quick assessment of the effectiveness of a lesson, student understanding of an important principle or student response to a method of instruction, I assign a reflective question. Ryan and Ryan (2012) state that there are multiple ways of knowing, which "include an understanding of one's own ideologies and a broader knowledge of contextual factors, which can be teased out in critically reflective ways to inform one's art of practice in any professional field". While it is best to design a course around a pedagogy of reflective practices, the use of small reflections can both reinforce principles and help the student to critically assess and define their personal future professional practices.

How does it work?

Every Friday I post a reflective question on our online course management system, Canvas, due the following class. Answers are text entries to Canvas and the Dropbox closes at the start of class Monday. Students receive 5-10 points for simply answering the question. The points reflect the complexity of the question. This amounts to about 10% of the course point total, enough to justify participation but small enough it won't destroy their grade if one week's question is missed. Reflective questions examine the student's understanding of a concept, perhaps how they would, or would not, apply a concept in professional practice. Sometimes the question directly asks what class moment was the most meaningful, impactful, and why. My courses are 16 weeks in duration so at least twice a semester I ask the class to assess the pacing, delivery methods and course content for personal value. In short, what is working for them personally and what is not.

Questions are just one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is communicating to students how I will use their answers. I explain that responses will affect course pacing, in class activities

and delivery methods. When a change occurs in the class, I am careful to let the class know the change is a result of their input. If an activity or lecture has not successfully communicated the desired concept and the student perceives no value, I can only adjust if I know their feelings. This is one of the ways I demonstrate my respect for student judgment and commitment to their success. Answers can stimulate some lengthy class discussions, validating students' thoughtful answers. Even though the answers are not anonymous, students seem to be very honest. I never deliver judgement on responses, although I often respond with appreciation for their insights.

Significance

The answers to reflective questions are often pure gold. I have asked students to assess the amount of work that a project required as compared to the perceived benefit. In this instance, "presentations of influential 20th century plant designers", student answers related that the amount learned justified the work involved. They felt both the personal research and student presentations changed how they viewed and would practice planting design. Another question asked the students if the content of a webinar viewed in class would change how they behave professionally and why. There was complete consensus - the class discussion of the webinar was the most valuable component and had expanded their perception of sustainability and regenerative design. After a 15-minute Power Point presentation turned into 1.5-hour discussion, I asked if the Power Point presentation was too long. Overwhelmingly, they responded it did not qualify as a Power Point because each slide generated so much discussion. In terms of pacing, in an introductory design class I learned from student responses that the course spent too much time on functional diagrams and not enough time on form studies. This allowed me to reexamine form studies, increasing student comfort levels and performance.

Summary

The advantages of asking short, reflective questions are many. They can be used as a check on comprehension of important principles, act as a barometer of student perception of in class activities, and a check on teaching methods. If a change occurs in the class, for instance pacing of material presented, the students should be told the change is a result of their input. When the information is shared with the class, they feel more invested and involved in the course. When they feel ownership, they naturally increase personal contributions in discussion and projects. Most questions are connected to concepts presented during the course, but at least twice in the 16-week period I ask for assessment of the course. This allows timely course adjustments if the planned curriculum is not effective. Instead of relying only on midterms and tests as measures of teaching effectiveness, reflection questions combined with other assessment techniques are an effective alternative.

References

Ryan, M., & Ryan, M. (2012a). Theorizing a model for teaching and assessing reflective learning in higher education. Higher Education Research & Development. doi:10.1080/07294360.2012.661704.

Submitted by:

Dr. Margaret C. Hoffman
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA