A focus on grading can lead to a focus on summative assessment at the expense of assessment for other, more formative purposes. The paper below describes a simple but effective way of using assessment to engage students with course content from the very first day of semester. The early assessment also provided valuable insights into students’ prior knowledge and attitudes and strengthened relationships – all of which informed teaching.

McArthur, A. An Assignment that Helps Students Connect with Course Content: Faculty Focus, October 7, 2013.

The paper is already quite brief so is provided below in its original form. The full article is available at http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/an-assignment-that-helps-students-connect-with-course-content/#sthash.8Zav2yLo.dpufAssessment

Introduction

What do we hope to accomplish when we are teaching? Students will learn the material, become excited about the material, learn to think critically? Ultimately, I think most of us are hoping that our students will connect, or engage, with the material. There is evidence that getting students to engage with the material is an important process in the learning experience (e.g., Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). I recently tried something new in an attempt to help my students make that connection. This is my story of an assignment that successfully helped my students connect with the material.

As I was preparing for another term of teaching a course on Adult Development and Aging, I was wondering “how can I really get these, largely 18 to 21 year-old students, to really think about getting older?” I contemplated this question as I was rummaging through previous assignments, books etc., and I made the decision to do something I have never done before. On the first day of classes, a day so often filled with a lot of “fluff,” I gave the students an assignment! Not only did I give them an assignment, but I gave them one week to do it! As I ran through the course syllabus the students took notice of the assignment (and due date), I heard a few groans. I then handed out the assignment. It’s a reflective assignment that starts by asking students a few general questions to get them thinking (e.g., What are you looking forward to about getting older? What are you not looking forward to?), and then the big one comes: Tell me about the type of person you might be when you’re older (e.g., How might people describe you when you’re about 65 years old?) What I got from this assignment was fascinating.

This assignment provided two major benefits. First, it helped students to connect with the material, and take the perspective of an older adult. I realized very quickly that I created quite a buzz. A number of students commented afterward that they had never tried to think about themselves in this way. I even heard students in other courses and other disciplines talking about the assignment. It was clear that the assignment was successful in getting students to reflect on and talk about their
future selves; helping them to connect with the material on a personal level. As already noted, this connection has been shown to be important in the learning process (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Reason (2011) also suggests that it is critical for students to learn from perspectives different from their own. I feel that by getting the students to think about themselves as older adults they need to consider another perspective. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) suggest that although students and faculty agree that they believe perspective taking is an “essential goal” of college, fewer believe that it is actually encouraged and strengthened in the classroom.

The second main benefit of the assignment is that it taught ME something as well. It gave me insight into my students. In the end, maybe this was the greatest gift. I saw that each and every one of my students had an interesting story to tell. Amidst the endless stream of literature reviews, an assignment that allows you to gain some insight into your students is a welcome experience. I also believe that this helped me gain a new perspective of my students, which provided a couple of benefits. The first benefit was that, by providing me more insight into my students, I was able to make stronger connections with them. Strong connections/rapport between students and instructors has been linked with success in the course (e.g., Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). The other benefit is that it shed light on any stereotypes that students held regarding aging and the elderly; stereotypes that I could then address throughout the course.

In the end, this assignment exceeded my expectations. It enabled students to connect with the material on a more personal level and I was able to make stronger connections with my students. I feel that both of these things led to an overall better learning experience for both the students and for myself. I look forward to using the assignment again in the future and tailoring it to fit other courses.

References


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