Encouraging Students to Stay Up-To-date in Their Work

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Background

Faculty often express interest in having students learn basic knowledge, understand major concepts, develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills, acquire professional habits and attitudes, and become committed to lifetime learning. One thing that is less frequently mentioned is the need to create conditions under which these objectives can be most effectively achieved. Within this general category, lies an important practical skill: time management, which is one component of "self-regulation" (1).

While teachers put careful thought into how to fill the available time in a course, they sometimes do not consider or accurately estimate the amount of time that students will need to complete the assigned work. For many students the ability to manage coursework and balance it against other activities is the difference between success and failure. In fact, a major review of research on the effects of college (2) considered the impact of working (holding a job) on academic performance. Interestingly, the finding was that while working reduced the time available to do coursework, there was no significant difference in academic performance between those who worked and those who did not. The authors attribute this lack of difference to the possibility that, "employment provides a context in which they (students) acquire efficient organizational skills and work habits" (p. 133). Thus, the critical issue seems to be how well one manages one's time rather than how much time is available.

It seems important then, that teachers provide structures and models of effective work that encourage students to carefully balance their course work and other obligations. To use the common expression, teachers should help students to "work smart, not just work hard."

In Fink's terms, learning is "significant" when students are engaged and energetic and when the outcomes of that learning are lasting change and continued value in life. Acquiring effective time management and self-regulatory skills is particularly important with respect to academic success, and developing these skills can be built into course design.

Helpful Hints

Research on the dimensions of college teaching (3) provides powerful evidence of the importance of helping students to organize their time. With respect to student achievement, the most strongly correlated teaching dimensions are organization and clarity. When teachers make clear how topics fit and how the assigned work can be efficiently carried out, they help students to construct accurate schemas and clarify the structure of the discipline. The result is better student learning and increased student satisfaction because that learning becomes more apparent.

Provide an organizational structure that helps students plan and carry out coursework. This not only keeps students on task, but it is also motivational in that it demonstrates that the teacher wants to promote deep learning rather than busy work and surface learning (5). For example, break work down into manageable chunks and suggest progress benchmarks so that students have the greatest chance for consistent success. In Keller's (6) description of a motivational design of instruction, key elements

involve creating conditions that promote positive expectations and provide opportunities for success. Helping students to stay organized and on task are two such conditions.

A complete syllabus with clear timelines is a solid beginning. Reinforcing the syllabus with regular checkpoints via class dialogue, e-mail, or other communications will help. Personal contact with students who are lagging behind is absolutely necessary. Using collaborative or group work provides a way for students to help each other (as long as the group work is itself organized and supervised). A very useful technique is to ask students, from early in the course, how they plan to organize their time and what they will do to most efficiently carry out the work. An early exploration of these issues will enhance students' investments in the course and raise issues that might otherwise be missed.

Assessment Issues

Assessments addressing this item are somewhat different than those used to determine more typical cognitive or affective outcomes. Angelo and Cross (7) offer some methods for determining the success of assignments (pp. 343-361), but other options more specifically addressing workload, currency of work, and the extent to which students understand the "why" and "how" as well as the "what" of assignments can be very useful.

Some research (8) has demonstrated that when students understand the rationale for assignments and when they see value in doing the work, they are more motivated to do the work carefully. As this understanding increases, so do students' positive opinions about the course and the teacher.

Three techniques can be helpful. First, an adaptation of the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) process (9) can assess the degree to which students are keeping up. Second, the use of electronic communications available in course management systems can provide a way for students to report difficulties and for the teacher to monitor progress. Third, and most important, conduct regular dialogues with individuals and the class about progress. The instructor's personal involvement (in casual conversations, email, or class dialogue) in keeping students on track demonstrates both concern for student progress and the importance of the work.

It is necessary for students to "learn the material," but often it is equally important to provide guidelines for "learning how to learn," that demonstrate how to best manage course workload and meet deadlines.

References

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IDEA Paper No. 41: Student Goal Orientation, Motivation, and Learning, Svinicki
IDEA Paper No. 42: Integrated Course Design, Fink
IDEA Paper No. 27: Writing a Syllabus, Altman and Cashin

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