



“Good questions work on us, we don't work on them. They are not a project to be completed but a doorway opening onto greater depth of understanding...” - Peter Block

“All learning begins when our comfortable ideas turn out to be inadequate.”
- John Dewey

Reflection Exercise on a Course's “Big Question”¹

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In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain describes how many of the teachers that he studied prepared to teach by devising a “big question,” one that their course would help students address. I use a big question to encourage students to reflect on what they have learned in a course. In the first class meeting of a semester, I present a big question that the course will address and ask the students to write a page or less in which they reflect on the question, and write a response to the question as they would answer it now and indicating what knowledge they used to formulate the answer. This provides me with an understanding of the knowledge base and potential misconceptions that the students bring to the course. At the end of the semester, I ask the students to address the original big question again. I encourage them to revisit their response paper from the first class.

At the time students write the first paper, I indicate that there will be a second part to this assignment, one that will require them to respond to the same question at the end of the semester. I give points for completing this “reflection” assignment, only if both papers have been submitted.

Students use varied approaches when they respond to the question a second time. Some students incorporate comments from the first paper into the second paper, often refuting points made in the first paper with new insights gained through the semester. Other students write the second response and do not look at their earlier response until they have completed the second paper. Still other students start with their first response, and then expand on that first response to create a second response. Regardless of the approach taken, students are much more expansive in the second response than they were on their earlier attempt to answer the question. I have found that having students answer the same big question for the course at the beginning and again at the end of the course serves multiple purposes including encouraging students to reflect on their learning and address misconceptions, while providing a very practical way for me to assess the impact of the course on student learning.

Resource: Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 1994, Harvard University Press.
Learning through Reflection: http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/crmodel/strategies/learning_through_reflection.html

Material on this topic and other topics may be found in the CTL Library located in the Mason Room at the Smith House.

¹ Cal Poly Pomona Faculty Center for Professional Development, “The Big Question” in *The Weekly Teaching Note Blog*, January 7, 2009 and retrieved on Retrieved on April 22, 2010 from <http://weeklyteachingnote.wordpress.com/2009/01/07/the-big-question>