Student-Directed Learning: Using the Learning Model to Enable Engagement and Augment Learning

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The transfer of knowledge from one classroom to subsequent, related classrooms has been the subject of research for a long time (Bergman and Zepernick, McCarthy and Fishman Clark, Florence and Yore, Tardy). Some of the potential ways to encourage more transfer include 1) focused and directed engagement with assigned work, 2) receiving pre-grading feedback and 3) clearly articulated, stable assignments. As I have focused on accomplishing these goals in the writing classroom, both the learning model and conversations with colleagues in the English department have heavily influenced what have ultimately become successful classroom approaches that enable transferrable student learning. While this paper reports concepts used in my instruction of Foundations writing courses, I believe the concepts are easily applicable in most other instructional situations.

First, students engage more readily with classroom concepts when their study is focused and directed. Specifically, students who prepare to participate in class discussions by performing focused roles within structured reading groups have the structure necessary for effective learning engagement. In that vein, BYU-Idaho English professor Quinn Grover suggested an article entitled “Using Structured Reading Groups to Facilitate Deep Learning” (Parrot and Cherry), which argues that deeper learning occurs when students are 1) given specific critical thinking tasks to perform as they read and 2) are required to prepare to teach what they learned to their teammates. Specifically, the article suggests that instructors identify disciplinary habits of thought, divide them into five unique roles, and provide students explanations for how to accomplish those target abilities. The class is divided into teams of five and each student performs a different one of the five roles for each reading; while I use the Paul-Elder critical thinking model (Paul and Elder) as the basis for these roles, I believe any systematic approach to the discipline would work. To complete each role, students will need to employ their assigned thinking tools as they read and write a brief paragraph analyzing the assigned text. When they arrive in class, each student is prepared to discuss the thoughts emerging from their analysis within their teams; these discussions often
revolve around the intersections of the various ways of thinking. After discussing their thoughts in their teams, each team generates a question, which questions drives the discussions in the class as a whole. This approach results in students who have interacted deeply with the assigned reading; are able to articulate implications and its interrelations with work accomplished in the class; as well as team and class discussions in which individuals have a personal investment.

In practice, this concept works almost as well as the theory suggests. In classes where I have used structured reading groups, the depth of thought and the engagement in conversations about concepts the students typically see as “boring” as how to quote properly have been markedly more intellectually engaging. I often stand aside while my students bring up many of the points and questions I would have wanted to discuss; however, since they’re the ones asking and answering the questions, their depth of engagement and understanding (as manifest in their written work) is significantly greater. As the class engages the various questions proposed by the students, I often have to cut the discussion short, something I never had to do when using other delivery methods, such as lecture, Powerpoint, journaling, quizzes, and study guides. In addition to the quality of the discussions, by giving students guided practice in target ways of thinking, I find those structures of thought manifesting themselves in their other writing assignments, and have even had students accuse me of making them think critically outside the classroom, as they interact with media as diverse as advertisements, Facebook posts, and movies. Generally speaking, through structured reading groups, I find that students readily engage classroom concepts because guided practice in target critical thinking skills enable them to think more deeply and fruitfully.

In addition to using focus and structure to enable engagement, as students receive pre-grading feedback, they are more likely to learn and transfer knowledge. While there are numerous peer evaluation models, in my own instruction, I have found BYU-Idaho English Professor Steve Stewart’s evaluation workshops to be the most beneficial in terms of learning, growth, and useful feedback because teammates play an essential role as both teachers and evaluators. In conversations with him, he helped me understand that students teach one another as they evaluate their teammate’s work, investing in one another’s success; in addition, as students continually interact with one another’s work, their teammate’s homework serve as alternate models, deepening each student’s understanding of concepts. Early in the semester, students are provided with specific criteria for creditability; work is evaluated and either credited or returned for revision based on these general criteria. However, before the instructor sees any of the work, it must first pass the team’s evaluation: each team member examines work submitted on designated workshop days, deciding whether they feel it’s creditable or not. If the team feels work is not creditable, they provide
criteria-linked feedback and the work is revised for the subsequent workshop. If it is, the team recommends the work to the teacher, who also evaluates the work based on the criteria. If the teacher agrees, the student receives full credit for the work. If not, the teacher returns to the team and explains why the work is not yet creditable; the student is invited to revise his/her work for the next workshop day. The students' final grades are calculated based on how much creditable work they completed.

In practice, this concept also works quite well, with one needed adjustment. As I've experimented with a variety of pre-grading feedback, no other approach yielded as much learning and growth as this type of evaluation workshop. As students evaluate one another's work, the expectations of the assignment become clear, as well as the range of possibilities for completing the assignment. In addition, I have found it only takes a team one or two explanations before they will no longer recommend work that fails to satisfy a given criteria. As my students come to understand my explanation and how it applies to their team's work, students gain an explicit understanding of both the expectations and why those expectations are essential in the discipline. As teams use this explicit knowledge to teach one another, they become heavily invested in one another's success; many even started holding their own informal evaluation workshops to ensure that everyone on the team had creditable work to submit. The only drawback I found to this pre-grading/grading methodology is

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the tendency for students to procrastinate, resulting in enormous amounts of work being submitted in the last few evaluation workshops of the semester. To avoid this, I suggest that due dates for initial drafts of work be set, and the students be required to submit a revised copy at each subsequent review day. Students who fail to do so forfeit the available points for that particular assignment. With this adjustment, I feel the pre-grading/evaluation model above not only results in greater learning and a significantly increased ability to work as a team, but also significantly reduces the grading load.

Finally, as we allow students to propose their own clear, stable writing prompts, the “ponder and prove” element of the learning model can also encourage knowledge transfer. Generating assignment prompts that are clear and stable to all students is always difficult, given the many nuances of the language and varied levels of student preparation. Like most teachers, I have continually struggled to enable knowledge transfer through assignment prompts. After numerous iterations of various assignments, I realized that, if a student generated their own assignment prompt, it would be clear and stable to them. For example, fdeng301 focuses heavily on written argument. After teaching students the basics of effective writing and argument, I invited them to generate four assignment prompts, each based on a different mode of argument. Students used the textbook to explore the various modes of argument and locate a mode of argument that fit the type of point they wanted to make. In order to ensure that they had understood argument and the writing the argument genre required, students completed an extensive writing proposal template before they started writing. This proposal template required them to pre-think about audience and purpose, as well as the claims, evidence, and rhetorical choices that would enable them to accomplish their purpose for their audience.

The results were surprisingly powerful in terms of the levels of student engagement, the quality of writing, and the depth of understanding. The proposals were in-depth and displayed a definite understanding of the principles under consideration. Many students had gone above and beyond the simple requirements of the prompts I had given them, providing an in-depth overview of their purpose and audience. After project approval, students were excited about their writing as they researched and wrote them. The final products were some of the best writing I had seen from them. Clearly, the engagement levels, coupled with a clear and stable self-generated assignment prompt had enabled learning at a different level from what they had been accustomed to.
As a whole, I can recommend the structured reading teams, the mastery learning approach to assignment grading, as well as allowing students to propose their own assignments, based on criteria given by the professor. With very few exceptions, my experience with these strategies has enabled me to both overcome drawbacks I had seen in other approaches to instruction and directly encourage student engagement with the projects at hand. I would be happy to answer any questions regarding any of these approaches.

Works Cited


