Increasing Reading Compliance and Engagement

During the Collaborative’s first workshop of the year, participants had a chance to consider some research on how to get students to do assigned readings: Hatteberg and Steffy’s “Increasing Reading Compliance of Undergraduates: An Evaluation of Compliance Methods” (2013). The two scholars collected survey data from 438 students in eight large introductory sociology courses (with a 81.5% response rate) to evaluate several common reading compliance techniques. On average, students rated the following as the most effective:

- announced reading quizzes
- mandatory reading guides or questions
- required short writing assignments

These three were rated as significantly more effective than any of the unannounced or nonrequired techniques (such as unannounced quizzes). Optional reading guides were rated the least effective.

One identified limitation of the Hatteberg and Steffy study was that it focused solely on reading compliance. Some instructors have been concerned that such “a cost/benefit coercion of reading does not necessarily enhance construction of meaning or deep-learning; indeed, it may reward minimalist or surface reading” (Roberts and Roberts, 2008, 125). Workshop participants brainstormed ways to help students move toward deeper engagement. Here are two ideas that emerged in our discussion:

- Jacob Tingle (Business Administration and Director of Experiential Learning) requires students to submit one-page position papers on four of the eight ancillary course readings of their choosing. For the other four, students are required to bring three questions that they think should be discussed about the material. At the beginning of those class periods, students write their names and their three questions on an index card. Jacob collects the index cards, quickly checks to ensure students have written the required number of questions, and then redistributes the cards to other students, which then guide small-group discussions.
- Kathleen Denny (SOAN) assigns different students to closely read one of the theories detailed in a textbook and then asks them to bring one or two key sentences that best capture their theory. In class, students who read about the same theory discuss which sentence(s) they chose and why. Using these sentences, the groups distill their theories into concise ‘tweets’ (140 characters only), which they write on pieces of butcher paper and post around the classroom. Finally, the class comes together to try to identify the theory based on the ‘tweet’ alone.

For more ideas on moving students beyond compliance, as well as regulating their own learning, see Chapter 3 of Nilson’s Creating Self-Regulated Learners: “Self-Regulated Reading, Watching, and Listening.”

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