



Enhancing Students' Readiness to Learn

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Over the years, I have probably said, "Have you done your reading? Is everyone ready?" more times than I care to count. But as the years passed, it became apparent that more and more students weren't doing their assigned reading and were not ready for class.

Several semesters ago, out of sheer frustration, I stopped talking during one of my lectures. I turned up the lights, walked to the chalkboard, and wrote in quite large letters, "Are you ready for class today?" I underlined the word "ready," faced the class, and let about five seconds of silence simmer uncomfortably. Finally I asked the students to respond honestly and anonymously to my question on a sheet of paper.

I collected the responses and quickly tallied the results. Seventy-five percent of the class responded "no." Only a few responded "yes." Most interesting were the students who responded, "I think so." I asked with disbelief, "How can you not know whether or not you are ready for class?" To this day, I have not forgotten how they answered:

"Well I read the chapter a few days ago, but I don't really remember anything."

"Right before class I studied all of the bold text in the chapters."

"I looked over the graphs because they're usually in your PowerPoint."

"I'm ready because I'm here."

I had two pedagogical revelations that day. First, I never communicated to my

students what it meant to be *ready for class*. And second, I never made them accountable for *being ready*. I decided to remedy both omissions.

I began by declaring explicitly in my syllabus what I expected of my students. Here's what my syllabus now says:

"Learning is not a spectator sport. Fundamentally, the responsibility to learn is yours and yours alone. For learning to happen in any course, you must take an active role in the process. For our class, you are expected to come to class **'prepared'** and **'ready to learn,'** which requires you **'to read'** and **'to study'** the assigned reading **'before'** you come to class. Being prepared for class enables you to construct a knowledge base on which subsequent learning rests.

"During our class, we don't 'cover' content, which means I talk less to get you to talk about what you are learning. You will be engaging in Learning Tasks (out of class and in class) that require you to (a) use a variety of reasoning strategies to address issues and problems, and (b) write reflectively about what you are learning, how it relates to what you already know about the content, and how it relates to your life. Your performance on these tasks will be evaluated using a Learning Task Rubric, with a minus indicating unsatisfactory performance (55 percent), a check indicating work that satisfactorily meets expectations (75 percent), and a plus indicating strongly engaged, high-quality performance (100 percent). Learning Tasks cannot be made up and late Learning Tasks are not accepted."

What I teach, course content, hasn't changed much over the years. But when I

introduced the *readiness* concept into my course, what changed was "why" and "how" I teach. Now my course is more interactive, with student learning at its center.

When preparing for class, I focus on *why* and *how* the content (i.e., the process) will be delivered to the students. Learning tasks are designed with two main goals in mind: students attaining learning outcomes and getting students motivated about learning.

Being ready for a learning-centered class takes more work, for students and for the instructor. Those students who come prepared and actively engage in class need to be rewarded for their learning, and those who don't need to be held accountable. Assessment practices, therefore, must align to an instructor's explicit expectations.

I have developed the scoring rubric chart on page two to evaluate student performance on learning tasks. To qualify for a +, a student's work must meet four of the six criteria.

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- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
- If you'd like some initial feedback on a topic you're considering, you're welcome to share it electronically with the editor.

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READINESS FROM PAGE 1

Since implementing a *readiness* component into my course, I have discovered that the weighting of this component affects the quality of student preparedness and motivation. The first semester I weighted it at 15 percent of the course grade.

Based on student feedback collected over numerous semesters, I have gradually increased the weighting so that it now counts for 25 percent of the course grade, and I'm seriously considering increasing it

to 30 percent.

This *readiness* concept is not discipline specific. Therefore I welcome you to either use the concept as it currently exists or to revise it and refine it according to your needs or scholarly inquiry.

Ed.'s note: The author should be credited with developing the readiness concept, and she invites you to share with her any changes you make that enhance its effectiveness.

Learning Task Rubric

Score	Criteria and Standards
+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is completely accurate. • Identifies and describes precise and explicit supporting evidence (facts). • Strongly connects new content to previous learning (elaboration). • Strongly integrates new material to a personal life experience. • Draws an accurate conclusion based upon interpretations, connection, and integration. • Provides a strong reason(s) for the conclusion.
✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is somewhat accurate. • Identifies supporting evidence; description is somewhat accurate or clear. • Satisfactorily connects new content to previous learning. • Superficially integrates new material to a personal life experience. • Draws a somewhat accurate conclusion based upon interpretations, connection, and integration. • Provides an adequate reason(s) for the conclusion.
-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is inaccurate; facts are misleading. • Supporting evidence is missing, incorrect, or irrelevant. • Fails to elaborate or elaboration is extremely weak. • Fails to integrate or integration to a life experience is vague. • Conclusion drawn or reasons supporting it are inadequate or missing.

Peer Review: Successful from the Start

By E. Shelley Reid, George Mason University, Virginia
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A year ago I was sitting at a conference lunch table with nine other college and high school writing teachers when the discussion turned to peer review: students evaluating each other's essay drafts. I was surprised when one professor's comment, "I no longer assign peer review of student essays, because the poor results aren't worth the class time it takes," was immediately assented to by six other people at the table. I asked the group what they meant by "poor results." Most of them agreed it was the quality of students' comments on each other's essays—at best vague and unhelpful and often misleading or incorrect.

I understand that frustration, yet I have seen enough evidence, in composition scholarship and in my own classes, to be convinced that the *whole process* of peer review—from the first mention of it in a syllabus to the final use that students make of peers' comments—is a crucial part of learning to write better. Furthermore, I do believe that it's possible and important to help undergraduates learn to better read and respond to their peers' writing.

Faculty who evaluate peer-review sessions based on *multiple* criteria, not just the quality of student comments, can find themselves more satisfied with the process, more able to explain its value to students, and more interested in developing ways to incorporate it across the curriculum. In the sections below, I describe six benefits that peer review can bring to writing education, regardless of—or, one hopes, in addition to—the production of useful student commentary.

Three by getting ready: Merely by requiring a peer-review session, I can address three key learning goals before the class meeting starts. First, by assigning a peer-review draft, I broaden the audience to whom student writers are responsible: students must at least consider that some-

one besides The Teacher will see their writing. Second, students are required to produce a draft earlier than they might otherwise have done. Third, I have indicated to students that I will (and they should) value students' input as readers of each other's writing. Not all students will take these learning opportunities to heart: some may ignore the invitation to perform well for their peers; some may not revise their initial drafts; some may continue to doubt the value of "average reader" responses. But many students will reap these benefits.

Two for showing up: Having begun to read other writers' drafts, students can benefit in two ways before they write a single comment. As they see what their peers have created in response to the assignment, they can boost their own confidence in having written fairly well and/or see options for writing differently, if not better. Moreover, in asking them to consider questions about a peer's essay, I reinforce the idea that writing is the result of the writer's choices—which can be controlled and modified—rather than the result of an inspired, immutable vision. Confidence, control, and the ability to envision changes are crucial qualities of all good writers. I reinforce these learning opportunities by asking students to write reflectively afterward to describe something they saw in a peer's draft that could help them in their own writing, as well as something they saw that they don't think would work in their essays.

One in checking the bottom line: Finally, I can use my peer-review guide to help students check each other's essays—and, indirectly but more reliably, their own—against my assignment criteria. Questions that ask students to label places where peer-authors include vivid sensory details, integrate quotations smoothly, address counterarguments, or write an engaging title to the essay, for instance, invariably prompt students to ask me, "Were we supposed to include quotations?" or "What do you mean, 'counterarguments'?" Students who engage in such

an active review of the assignment expectations, especially *after* they have completed a draft, increase their awareness of writing as a negotiation between the intent of the writer and the needs of the audience.

At the end of even a very-first peer-review session, then, I know—without looking at students' comments—that I have helped many students make progress toward meeting important learning goals. I share this vision of peer review with my students as well, discussing what they may have gained from the experience, whether or not the most visible outcome—peer commentary—meets their expectations. Thus even when students aren't ready to produce insightful and constructive feedback, I believe teachers and students can find satisfaction in the time they invest in the review activity, as long as they keep in mind all the ways that peer review can be successful right from the start.

Recommended Resources on Designing Effective Peer Review Assignments

"How Can I Get the Most Out of Peer Review?" *An Introduction to Writing Across the Curriculum*. 1997-2003. Kate Kiefer and Colorado State University. June 9, 2006. <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop2j.cfm>

Kischner, Michael. "Should Teachers Comment on Drafts of Student Essays? or Making Time for Peer Review." *Assessment in and of Collaborative Learning*. Washington Center Evaluation Committee, Evergreen State University. June 9, 2006. www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/acl/b4.html

Woods, Peggy M. "Moving Beyond 'This Is Good' in Peer Response." *Practice in Context: Situating the Work of Writing Teachers*. Ed. Cindy Moore and Peggy O'Neill. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002. 187-195. 🍓

The Placement of Those Steppingstones

By Joe Ben Hoyle, University of Richmond,
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Your students are truly working but they are all struggling. What do you do now?

In Richmond, Virginia, where I live, there is a public park that holds a lovely Japanese garden. It includes a pond stocked with huge koi. By using a series of steppingstones, visitors can walk across the water to the other bank. Over the course of many years, I have observed scores of people successfully ford that pond one stone at a time.

Proper placement of the steppingstones requires a bit of special care. Set them too far apart and some of the shorter children might not be able to jump safely from one to the next. Conversely, if the steps are too close together, then individuals with long legs could find the walk awkward and unnecessarily slow. Of course, if the stones are just randomly thrown into the water, they might not actually lead anywhere. Watching visitors walk across that pond always makes me think about the educational process that teachers orchestrate for their students. In my classes, most learning appears to be

sequential. People speak and write one word and one sentence at a time. Consequently, students seem to absorb information step-by-step. Situations do arise where learning is probably nonlinear, such as developing an appreciation for a Picasso painting, but such cases appear to be exceptions. In a textbook, a lecture, or a study session, the normal learning sequence is as follows: comprehend point 1, then point 2, and so on until the student (it is hoped) arrives at a full understanding.

One of my theories is that education stumbles when either the learning points are not sequenced in a clearly logical order or they are not placed at a proper distance from each other. When troubles arise, look at the placement of those steppingstones.

If the sequencing is wrong, the teacher may be discussing point five before point two. That almost inevitably leads to confusion. Try an experiment when preparing for a class. Start by randomly listing all the points to be covered. Then, decide which logically comes first, second, and so on to create the order that is easiest to comprehend.

Setting the proper distance between those learning points is a more complex

issue. Over the years, some of my best students have been able to leap with ease from virtually any point to the next. Other (equally bright) students needed the steppingstones to be pushed close together, practically touching. Both groups are able to learn the material, and that is the goal. The first uses long strides from one point to the next; the other arrives at the same understanding with a great many short steps covering points placed side by side.

If a class is working hard but having problems, check the sequencing of the coverage. Do the steps form a pattern that is logical for students? Look to see whether the learning points might be too close or too far apart. If students have trouble learning, it can mean that they are not able to make the leap from one point to the next. If students are bored, these points could be too close together so that they are not being adequately challenged.

Ed.'s note: This essay is part of a collection of essays, Tips and Thoughts on Improving the Teaching Process in College—A Personal Diary, by the author. The entire collection is available for free online at <http://oncampus.richmond.edu/~jhoyle>.

Finding Organizations for Real-World Projects

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Interest in combining course work with “real-world” projects that involve organizations off campus continues to grow. These projects are often part of or grow out of campus programs such as cooperative education (the combination of classes and work experience), job shadowing (observation of an employee), internships, live cases (students work with

organizations on actual problems or needs), and service learning. Success of these experiences depends on professors being able to find organizations willing to collaborate with students in these various ways. The purpose of this article is to describe some ways professors can make those connections.

Organization location ideas

To help professors locate companies and organizations for these student projects, university career development centers, internship websites, Small Business

Development Centers, local newspapers, past clients, current and former students, not-for-profits, professional associations, and grants can lead to successful contacts. Let's explore each briefly. University career development centers often have websites for job placements (e.g., Boise State, <http://career.boisestate.edu>; University of Minnesota, www.parent.umn.edu/career.html; and Boston College, www.bc.edu/schools/lsoe/academics/

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Students Bring Real-Life Examples to Class

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As a marketing professor, I often found myself scouring publications, stores, and my cabinets prior to a lecture, to find examples of the concepts in the hopes of bringing these topics to life. Although students seemed to appreciate and learn from these examples, it did create more work for me. Also, since I belong to a different age cohort, I often brought examples that my students would not select. Finally, this approach did nothing to encourage students to read and try to understand the material before coming to class. Several years ago, I modified my technique and now require students to read the chapter *and* bring in an example themselves, before I lecture on the material. Sometimes I give them a specific topic from the chapter to illustrate; other times I allow them to pick any topic from the

chapter. I had two logistical issues to resolve in order to make the new technique viable: 1) How could I allow all students to share their work without using too much class time? and 2) How could I encourage students to complete this assignment?

To allow all students to share their work, I divide them into groups of four or five at the beginning of class. Once in their groups, students follow these rules: 1) Use six to seven minutes to have each group member share an example within the group; 2) Use another three to four minutes to pick the example that best illustrates the concept; and 3) Select someone other than the person whose example was picked to share that example with the class. Then one person from each group quickly shares the group's "best example" with the whole class. Sometimes they'll even pull up websites illustrating their examples or show the products themselves. In total, this exercise takes

about 20 minutes.

The approach has several advantages. First, it allows students time to warm up and get focused on the day's material. Second, somewhat surprising to me, students come to class proud of their examples and excited about sharing them. They are engaged in the learning. Third, I get some excellent examples of products and services of interest to students, and I don't have to spend any time finding them. Finally, students have an opportunity to share and build relationships with classmates, creating a better learning environment.

To ensure that students do the assigned work prior to class, sometimes I require the students to bring properly formatted letters to class explaining why they think their examples are good ones. Early in the semester, I collect and grade these letters for content, writing skills, and format;

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studentservices/career). The Boston College website includes job listings and a career information network that includes alumni and parents willing to be contacted by Boston College professors for possible real-world assistance.

Such university centers often have links to internship sites:

1) *www.internships.com* and *www.intern-jobs.com* for internships in the U.S.; 2) Rising Star Internships (*www.rsinternships.com*) and Consortium for International Education (*www.cie.uci.edu/iop/internsh.html*) for international internships. The *InternJobs.com* site also features a global database that can be retrieved through a keyword search.

A Small Business Development Center (SBDC; *www.sba.gov/sbdc*) can provide connections in your area. This

organization focuses on client needs and recommends partnerships for student projects in business, health management, and other fields. Partnerships between SBDC clients and students may include live cases in which students write employee handbooks and instructional manuals or develop business and marketing plans.

Professors can solicit organizations using several methods. They can call local newspapers and notify them of internships and live case opportunities. For example, Gundars Kaupins advertises a free employee handbook-writing service for employers. The small paragraph in the local newspaper typically nets about 20 clients per semester in a city of about 150,000 people.

Companies and organizations worked with previously can be asked if they know other organizations that could benefit from these programs involving students. And students themselves can be resources in identifying possible professional part-

ners.

Faculty and student involvement in nonprofits and professional associations (*http://dir.yahoo.com/business_and_economy/organizations/trade_associations*) may lead to partnering opportunities. Some of these associations host monthly dinner meetings or receptions where students can be invited to network with local professionals, learn about industries, and practice interpersonal skills.

Grants often support student-industry partnerships, faculty-industry partnerships, and internship opportunities. Grant websites include *www.grants.gov*, for federal government grants, and *www.srainternational.org/newweb/grantsweb/index.cfm*, for a listing of private/public sector grants. Though the grants might not directly connect professors and companies, grants do provide financing that can be used to advertise for more organizations and companies. 🍎

Using Collaborative Groups to Teach Literature and Theory

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I have used collaborative groups in a graduate counseling theories class to increase dialogue on theoretical concepts, integrate current literature, and model life-long learning. In my teaching, this learning strategy is much more than a technique. It's a systematic, coherent approach to the entire course. Groups meet for one-third of the course time, do group presentations, and participate in a variety of other class activities.

When using groups this extensively, how they are formed is essential. I let students create their own three- to four-member groups using three different criteria: random selection, common interests, or program areas. For example, in a master's-level counseling program, students pursue options in school counseling, marriage and family counseling, or mental health counseling. Students are educated about the group selection process and are encouraged to select group members only after class activities have occurred in which students learn about each other's professional interests and personal belief systems. Self-selection of group members increases peer pressure to be prepared for group dialogues and creates mutual dependence—students come to class so they don't let their group down.

Once groups have formed, students are given the assignment: review the current literature and select an article of interest to discuss in the groups. Each student does his or her own literature search and article review each week. For example, during the week that existential theory is the topic, students need to find current literature on existential theory. School-counseling students might conduct literature searches using the terms "existential theory" and "children."

Early on, groups are instructed to develop ground rules. Here are some examples of ground rules: come prepared

for the group meeting; take ownership of your ideas by using "I" statements and "It is my perception..."; wait until others are finished before speaking; present reasons for disagreeing; paraphrase what you hear; ask for clarification; and provide constructive feedback. Groups set up written contracts that list their rules and that are signed by all members. This enhances group commitment to preparation and learning.

I believe it is essential that the instructor model effective group collaboration. I do current literature searches and join a group each week. I make sure my article has been published within the last year and join in a different group each week. Students never know which group I will be joining, so this also encourages preparation on their part. In joining the group, I talk with them. I do not take over the discussion; I listen, probe, question, hypothesize, model, and rephrase their comments just as any member committed to group analysis and understanding should do. The groups meet during the last 45 minutes of class, and I do not reconvene the entire class at the end of the period. I have noticed that many times the groups are still talking 15 to 30 minutes past class ending time.

Toward the end of the course, each group does a presentation focused on "deepening the understanding of some theoretical concept." Students are encouraged to be creative and to enjoy the presentation. One group conducted a *Jeopardy* game on Freud's concepts. Also each group member is required to provide a draft copy of his or her final theory paper to each other group member. Members read and edit each other's papers between group sessions and then meet to discuss content and writing processes. After this feedback session, students have a week to incorporate group feedback before turning in the final paper.

Group members grade each other's participation based on the group rules and how collaboratively the member worked

on the group presentation. The final course grade also includes a variety of other assignments, such as large group participation, written case analyses, journals, and a final paper.

This collaborative group strategy could be adapted to any course in which theory and philosophy are major content components. Keeping current on research, joining groups, and modeling dialogue make the course exciting for students and for the instructor. It's also a great model for life-long learning. It represents how we would hope people would join together at work and in their communities to learn and to solve problems. 🍀

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however, after the initial expectation is set, I choose to collect and grade the letters randomly. Other times, students post their explanations to the course discussion board at least one hour before class. Students are not allowed to post an example already posted by another student. This way, if students don't quite understand the concept, they can read and learn from other students before picking their selection. Again, I grade these postings the first couple of times during the semester and then only randomly thereafter. A third approach, which involves even less grading, allows students to do the work for a maximum number of bonus points. I am continually amazed at how much time and effort students will put into bonus assignments for a minimal number of points. If students opt not to complete the assignment for bonus points, they can still participate in a group, learn from their classmates' examples, help to pick the best one, and maybe even present it to class.

I most like this approach because it takes the responsibility for learning and places it where it belongs—with the student—in a fun, nonthreatening, and interesting way. 🍀