

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 21, Number 2, 2009-10

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Transparent Alignment and Integrated Course Design

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This essay addresses ways of making learning goals, and ways of reaching those goals, more transparent to our students, through a process called ‘alignment.’ After defining key terms, I illustrate integrated course design with an example from my Introduction to Philosophy class.

“Alignment” is achieved when student learning activities and graded assignments are instrumental to students achieving an instructor’s learning objectives (Light et al, 2009). Alignment is achieved when graded assignments require students to ‘practice’ using skills and/or knowledge in a way that moves them toward our learning objectives. If the learning objective is to improve critical thinking then students should engage in, and be given course credit for, critical thinking. Of course, reading excellent examples of discipline-specific critical thinking is not unrelated to improving one’s critical thinking skills.

Similarly, watching/listening to an expert model critical thinking is also useful. But neither *reading about* critical thinking nor *watching* critical thinking happen is *thinking critically*. Insofar as improvement occurs through practice, a course is out of alignment when students are not engaged in repeated, guided practice of the relevant skills that constitute course objectives. If you want to become a better piano player you should practice playing the piano and attempt new techniques with formative guidance. You won’t get much better at playing the piano by reading about piano playing; nor will you get much better by watching experts play.

Colleagues who want advice on how to get students “more engaged” are often disappointed that I don’t provide them with “tips.” Rather, I ask them about their course alignment. I believe that learning is intrinsically fun and that most students want to succeed. When students are not engaged it is usually because they are not learning or they find little connection between the work they are assigned and their success. Systemic pedagogical change, not tips, is the way to increase the number of engaged students. This brings us to the “transparent” part of transparent alignment. Alignment is transparent when it is easy for students to see the connection between what they do weekly, their success in the course (largely, how well they do on graded assignments), and their learning.

Further, students engage when they are allowed to publicly display their successes. And ‘controlled failure’ motivates appropriate questioning. A controlled failure occurs when students realize that they are not doing well. Teachers need to provide students opportunities to become self-conscious of what they do not know so that students will seek further information and advice. Integrated activities that (1) connect controlled failure, homework, in-class activities where students publicly share their work, and (2) allow students to see the connection between their work and the learning objectives result in sustained engagement.

Consider an example from my Introduction to Philosophy class. My mid-semester learning objective requires students to summarize and evaluate complex primary sources as much like an expert philosopher as is possible for them. First session – I begin moving students toward this objective by asking them to read, summarize, and evaluate a short, self-contained text in class as best they can. This generates a controlled failure. Students ask: “What kind of summary do you want?” I tell them that they will read about philosophical summarizing and evaluating when doing their homework, and that for the in-class exercise they should just do what they think is best. In my experience every student does the reading and comes to the next class ready to participate. The final step of the in-class assignment is for students to write a short description of what they did while reading, summarizing, and evaluating.

The first part of their homework in the course is to read a pamphlet that describes how to read philosophy well (Concepción, 2004). The second part requires students to re-read the text they had summarized in class. The third part is to write a description of how they read, summarized, and evaluated during their second reading of the text since it was informed by their study of the “How To Read Philosophy” handout. Finally, they write a description of the difference between how they read in and out-of-class. This comparative write-up is turned in for credit (about 1% of semester grade) at the next class.

Second Session – First in small groups and then as an entire class, we discuss what is needed to read, summarize, and evaluate philosophy well. Among the important aspects of reading well is “flagging” or writing in the margins. The goal of flagging is to be able, with the aid of one’s marginalia, to mentally reconstruct the gist of the content on that page in approximately 15 seconds upon revisiting the text perhaps weeks later. After this discussion of how to read philosophy I introduce but do not explain in detail the key ideas in a lengthy primary source. The homework for the next class is to flag this lengthy text. In the next class students turn in a copy of the text containing their marginalia for 1% credit.

Third Session – Students compare their flagging with one another and test each other’s ability to recreate the meaning on the page. The remainder of the class is a discussion of how to write a summary of a text. The homework (1% credit) for the next class is to bring in a draft summary of the article.

Fourth Session – Students workshop each others’ drafts, paying particular attention to the first paragraph in light of my instruction. The homework is to rewrite the summary. The final summary is turned in the next class and counts for 7.5% of the semester grade.

Fifth Session – I first lecture in detail regarding the content of the text. Students ask questions and we build a robust understanding. I model philosophical evaluation of the text in a guided discussion. The accompanying homework requires students to (1) study the material in the course packet regarding how to write an evaluative paper and (2) bring in for 1% credit a draft of the introductory

paragraph of their evaluative paper.

Sixth Session – I lead a discussion of how to write an evaluative paper. Students then workshop each others' introductory paragraphs with my guidance. The homework following this class is for students to write an evaluative paper regarding the primary source. This paper is counts for 10% of the course grade and is turned in the next class.

Because I teach on a Tuesday/Thursday schedule this first integrated cycle of work takes about three weeks and constitutes about 20% of the students' grade. While is it true that a lecture-read-lecture-read cycle of in and out of class work can be integrated through related content, what differentiates integrated course design from non-integrated course design is that integrated course design drives, step by step, toward a student performance of a discipline-specific academic task, in my case the writing of an evaluative philosophical paper concerning the argumentation in a primary text (Fink, 2003). It is both focused on developing skills and uses scaffolding to organize that development, so that student performance moves from relatively inauthentic, simple, and highly structured tasks to a complex, authentic, open-ended task. It is worth noticing that content mastery is required, inasmuch as you can't summarize or evaluate what you don't understand. It is also discipline-specific in that everything we do is bounded by what philosophers do with philosophical texts. It is not discipline-neutral skills instruction.

Colleagues have objected that if they align their courses in this integrated way, they will not have time to cover the course content. My response has two parts. First, learning is the aim of teaching. Little or shallow learning occurs when content coverage is too rapid. When content-centered teaching produces less or more shallow learning than teaching that has guided practice, then content should be sacrificed. Of course, once baseline skills are developed students should be able to move through content more swiftly, which is why I do not use the cycle described above in upper level courses. I believe that by the end of the semester more learning takes place in integrated courses. Second, most content-centered teachers actually want deep learning to occur, and so should want aligned, integrated courses. Most content-centered teachers want students to master concepts so that students can *transfer* an understanding to a novel

situation and *evaluate* the relationship between assumptions, implications, and applications. Most faculty ostensibly focused on content mastery actually want deep learning where students “distinguish between evidence and conclusions” in the hypotheses they encounter (Bain et al, 2009). Transferring, applying, and evaluating evidence are skills that develop through practice.

In sum, integrated course design is one powerful way to successfully manifest transparent alignment. Controlled failure and connections between learning activities, grades, public work, and learning objectives increase student engagement and learning.

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