What Makes a Great Online Assignment

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The following top three characteristics of a great assignment synthesize and prioritize data that take into account student and instructor perspectives:

1. **Clarity:**
   - Why it’s essential: It has a clear purpose. Expectations, rubrics and goals are stated.

2. **Meaningful:**
   - It engages originality, experience and connection.

3. **Thought Provoking:**
   - It fosters evaluation, creation, analysis and application.

**Higher Order Thinking:**
- It develops critical thinking in students.

**Relevance:**
- Motivation increases when students can see relevance beyond the theoretical or conceptual.
What makes a great assignment?

New concepts and skills are understood when students receive clear direction and have to apply, analyze, evaluate and create their new learning. This allows instructor to see how well students have learned and keeps students engaged.

1. CLARITY

Clarity is essential for students to understand what is expected of them. Communication methods and instructions in eLearning assignments must be simplified and clear. Information must be given through a variety of methods: netiquette guidelines, rubrics, check lists, learning goals, success criteria and critical feedback. This clarity will help students meet expectations and facilitate transparent and fair evaluation by the instructor since the achievement levels are precise. Clear due dates are necessary, and instructors need to be flexible to be available to meet students’ unique circumstances.

Example:

*The details of each assignment or assessment would be included in the course syllabus and on Moodle, including information about each task. An introductory video and a short synchronous explanation from the instructor would be given to reinforce concepts.*

2. RELEVANCE

When students can connect with the material, they are more engaged and successful. When they feel the assignment is essential for learning the knowledge in the course, they see how it contributes to their success in other courses and to their overall academic career.

When the assignment allows the student to take ownership of the material by choosing their own topic or angle that fits within the guidelines, it allows the student to do research and complete the assignment not just to fulfill the class requirement but to also gain an improved understanding of
something in which they are interested and invested. As a result, students feel excited and motivated to push further into the material since it’s by their own initiative.

Example:

Students create a unit to teach to their peers that draws on their experiences, such as a presentation to a synchronous seminar or uploaded in text, audio or visual form to Moodle.

“Tendanda via. The way must be tried.”

YorkU’s motto

3. CRITICAL THINKING

The end goal of a great assignment is that it stimulates critical thinking in students. New concepts and skills are best understood when students have to apply, analyze, evaluate and create.

Example:

A problem-based learning activity can be assigned. Students could research the tribes in each province and the ‘problem’ or issue was how tribes function in each province - similarities and differences. Or students could research all the services provided for the homeless population in Toronto. Students could be assigned to research the various organizations that assist in these aspects of society, then conduct a case study.

For instance, they could be asked to examine the problem of how the homeless population is taken care of in Toronto and what these institutions do, what their services are and what specific population they cater to. Internet research would be assigned for which the students are given parameters for the search. Subsequently they would prepare a creative presentation of the material to share with their peers. A final step would include peer review (of at least two other student projects) to build upon the evaluation, analytical and communication skills. A peer review tool such as kritik.io may be useful for online assignments.

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