GROUP C: Top 3 Characteristics of a Great Assignment
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1. Scaffolds skills or knowledge relevant to course or program

Why is this important: Careful scaffolding of assignments within a course will ensure that students are building knowledge and/or skills that will ultimately align with a learning outcome. Scaffolding (and clear indication to students of how assignments are scaffolded) helps students to understand why they are completing assignments, rather than just going through the motions.

Example/Strategy: In a 2nd year psychology research methods course students will complete 3 assignments. The first assignment will involve finding articles chosen from a list, identifying various components (i.e., hypothesis, methodology, general results/conclusions) and finding another related article. The second assignment will have students find an article rooted in a specified topic, identify more complex detail of the research design (i.e., ethical considerations, operational definitions of variables, specific research design, etc) and pitch an alternative operation definition(s) and design to answer the same research question. The third and final assignment will require students to extend the skills mastered through the first two by choosing a research topic and proposing a research design complete with brief lit review, hypotheses, operational definitions of key variables, and proposed methodology.

2. Allows for creativity from students

Why is this important: This provides students an opportunity to focus on something that is especially relevant to them, which should facilitate their own motivation and engagement in learning through completing the assignment. Although it is very tempting to give strict instructions (especially for large classes where resources for grading may be limited) it is likely best to keep some room for students to creatively approach the assignment in order to really gain something or learn from the process of completing it. A creative approach to an assignment includes flexibility, variety and choice, that inspires students to complete the assigned task driven by the learning experience, competing for excellence over grades.
Example/Strategy: In a 1000-level general education course, students have to condense the contents of a final research paper into a 3-5 minute presentation that is due two weeks before the paper. They are encouraged to be creative and instructed to use any format they like: podcast, youtube clip, poster, PPT, online game, etc. This gives the student a lot of autonomy over how the assignment is structured and executed; it hits the highest order in Bloom’s taxonomy; it allows students to design for an alternative audience; it allows students to use the workshop function to give and receive student feedback; and it allows time management practice since the work is due before the written component.

RE: Feedback: Students are divided into small groups. In each small group (over zoom), each student will take turns presenting their term paper topic, research question, hypothesis and research method. The instructor will provide a list of questions to guide the process of providing feedback. Students will provide feedback by any method they desire, e.g. a short video, e-mail, etc.

3. Has clear instructions and expectations for grading

Why this is important: Often there is less time available to clarify assignment requirements in the synchronous class-time; therefore if the instructions are clearly spelt out, the student will understand the requirements with ease, dispelling confusion and ambiguity. It may be a good idea to add a FAQ at the end of the assignment which students can refer to. Often students are reluctant to reach out with questions, since they wouldn’t want to be perceived as ‘dumb’. Discussing with students the purpose of each assignment will provide added clarity about the level of mastery they will achieve in relation to course learning outcomes.

Example/Strategy: The instructor could make a short video walking students through the assignment, grading rubric, and even how to submit online.

Another strategy would be to host a short, live Q & A session (announced well in advance) to answer any questions related to the assignment or its rubric. Post a video of the live recording for those students who were unable to attend the live session and also those who want to refer to it again. Make sure the transcript of the video is included in the recording for those who are more comfortable reading instructions.