

What Students Won't Expect: Transitioning into First-Year Coursework

It's fairly common for instructors planning first-year courses to inadvertently imagine their students as possessing characteristics of older students—envisioning the incoming students as showing the thinking skills of twenty-year olds. While it's true that eighteen year-olds are capable of great things, significant growth happens between the ages of eighteen and twenty. By anticipating some of the biggest transition challenges, instructors can create effective bridges for first-year students.

Traditional-age students entering college typically have difficulty pushing their thinking beyond black and white realms, struggle to manage time and focus on homework tasks, and think that clichés are still... well, fresh. While many students enter college with a genuine desire to learn, the gap between their readiness and course expectations can lead to discouragement for both students and teachers. The following sections overview several of the most troublesome transition bumps for students and highlight strategies for helping them make the leap.

Thinking and Voicing Opinion

Students frequently enter college with little experience in analyzing disparate material and developing an argument (Perry). Their mode up to this point has often consisted of "read, research, report." And, many students are fairly uninformed when they enter college about political, historical, and cultural events that bear on their ability to succeed in the course.

Help students understand that engaging in academic discourse, being open to other perspectives, and developing an informed opinion are difficult, uncomfortable, and potentially fun endeavors. Making the leap from straightforward to messy, though, initially causes anger and resistance.

Take time for exploratory discussion and short writing in class. Modeling through lecture is important, but examples won't go far without guided practice.

Lead students into complex or difficult material by giving them a sense of the "drama" surrounding the issue. First-year students' ability to engage critically with an issue is often contingent on their ability to relate or care about the issue—and this can be nurtured through connection-building with current events, local problems, students' experiences, and the instructor's own stories and struggles.

Present successful examples of high-stakes assignments that show the kind of thinking you are looking for. Make these intellectual "moves" transparent to students in presentation and in assignment rubrics, and give them opportunities to assess their classmates' drafts for these elements.

Reading

Surveys show that faculty believe that students come to class without having done the reading three times more than students report actually missing the reading. This disparity probably reflects a phenomenon that many first-year students encounter: they read the material quickly while texting, watching TV, and surfing the internet. They then almost immediately forget what they read. Like critical thinking, students need guidance and practice in actively reading lengthy or complex texts.

Help students enter the reading before the reading assignment is due. Establish context, create questions or purpose for the reading, and begin predicting issues in the reading and starting discussion the class period before the reading is due (this can be done in the last 10 minutes of class).

Ask students to keep a record of their notes and responses to reading (this might be in response to reading questions or key issues). Having received some guidance ahead of time, students might annotate in the margins and photocopy selected pages to turn in, keep a reading journal, or be prepared to answer questions in class through short writes, speaking, or quizzes (Bean).

Homework

According to UW students' responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the average number of hours most students spend on homework per week during their last year in high school is a whopping four hours. It's not surprising then, that in response to a LeaRN survey during Orientation 08, about

60% of students predicted they would do fewer than fifteen hours of homework per week their first semester in college—and the majority of these predicted fewer than ten (n=1,161).

Also not surprisingly, students were shocked to hear that successful sophomores report spending an average of twenty hours per week on homework and studying during their first semester at UW. While some students make the switch to more homework successfully, a large number flounder and sputter out their first semester because they have poor strategies for setting time aside and concentrating on schoolwork.

In the first week of class, talk with students about the semester ebb and flow, how your class will look in terms of time commitment over the course of the semester. Students will set their expectations for your course in the first week or two, and they have great difficulty changing habits after this time. Students will benefit from understanding how the workload will look in the big picture.

Help students brainstorm strategies for setting successful homework habits early. The top suggestions offered by second-year students in LeaRN focus groups include

- Staying on campus between classes for schoolwork (and nixing cell phone and internet),
- Scheduling set weekly times for homework at the beginning of the semester, and
- Religiously using a planner and to-do lists

Your students will probably have other tips, and these can be modified for your specific course needs.

Share with students a realistic (avoid canned) estimate of the hours per week your course will need outside of class; be sure to acknowledge that the estimate will vary among students. It might be worth surveying students at the end of the semester to find out how many hours successful students tended to devote to the class, for the purposes of sharing with the next group.

Resources

Bean, J. (2001). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Perry, W.G., Jr. (1970). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*. Troy, Mo.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.