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Structuring Assignments for Success

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Introduction. Instructors want their students to succeed; and most students want to succeed and are willing to do the work necessary to perform well. But when several student papers or projects do go awry, the problem can often be traced to the assignment itself, the approach used to clarify the expectations for performance, or the assumptions that have been made about student readiness for the assignment and its embedded skills. The purpose of this article is to identify key issues in structuring assignments for success and to suggest approaches that have been productive for EMU faculty and students.

The Rationale: Why Assign It? Focus on your goals in giving the assignment. What are you trying to accomplish? Does the task warrant the time it takes for students to do it and for you to assess it? What is the value-added?

When you introduce the assignment to the class, be sure to include your rationale. The rationale may be crystal clear to you, but it may not be so clear to your students who lack your experience with more complex tasks in the field. Although it is important to discuss the rationale orally, it is also useful to include a brief statement of rationale on the assignment sheet for those who may be absent or who are so anxious when they hear the task that they miss the justification when it is first presented. The statement of rationale can go a long way in motivating students; and the absence of such a statement can undermine their efforts and yours. When students gripe about an assignment they think is busywork or pointless, they are often signaling that the rationale was not stated, not heard or not persuasive. Remind them. It may be all that is needed to get them back on track.

Ask students what they see as its value. Louise Jones, EMU professor of HECR, often asks former students to visit her class to discuss key course projects. She has found that it is reassuring to students to hear from former students that the assignment is worthwhile and manageable, and can be completed in the allotted time.

Clarity of Directions. Clarify your expectations and you will be much more likely to get what you want. If you do not, the assignment becomes a guessing game in which the more experienced students will come closer to your goal, leaving the inexperienced students at a distinct disadvantage. Be proactive. It is far more time efficient to spend extra time clarifying the expectations up front than to spend hours answering questions individually or grading work that has missed the mark.

Assignment packets. One approach that has worked for several instructors, including myself, has been to provide an assignment packet that is part of a course pack or

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distributed as you begin the assignment. Parts of the packet (e. g., successful student models) can be posted on-line or left at the reserve desk of the library. Assignment packets often include:

- The assignment in written form, including what you want students to do or produce, any specific guidelines or parameters, and special instructions.
- A brief statement of the rationale for why you are asking them to do this assignment and what you see as its value, both now and in the future. Note if the student product can be used in a program portfolio, employment opportunities, or other uses beyond your course.
- Due dates, including preliminary or interim due dates and a final submission date. If you use peer evaluation or wish to keep a copy for your files, indicate how many copies are required for each due date.
- Criteria for evaluation and/or a rubric for evaluating the assignment that can be used by you and/or fellow students for peer evaluation.
- A professional example (if one is available and/or appropriate).
- Student examples from previous classes with instructor comments and evaluation (be sure to remove the students' names and obtain student consent to use the papers for this purpose). Provide more than one student paper or project to avoid mimicry of any one model. Although A papers offer strong models, B and even C papers often provide opportunities to discuss common student errors and things to avoid. The negative example can keep students out of similar pitfalls. If the assignment is visual, use slides, photos, displays or demonstrations. For oral presentations, use videotaped models.
- Student models without grades or comments for use in applying the criteria to a sample.

Using the assignment packet. Discuss the assignment, why you want them to do it, and share a sample or two. That will reduce the anxiety. If you provide only one sample, you may get mimicry. If you introduce two samples that satisfied the criteria but used different means to get there, you will liberate students from mimicry and provide reinforcement for the key criteria. After students have seen one or more samples, discuss the specific criteria for evaluation with reference to the samples they have just seen. If possible, reassure students that you will work with them over the coming weeks to learn more about the criteria. Then ask students to apply the criteria to an ungraded paper. This will bring their questions and concerns to the fore. After their assessment, reveal the grade you gave to the paper to clarify how the criteria translate into grades. If students know in advance that your standards are high, they are more likely to reach for them. Research affirms that high expectations coupled with high levels of support maximize student learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

After students have reviewed the packet, they should have a clear picture of what is expected of them, greatly reducing complaints and concerns that they don't know what the instructor is looking for. The process requires that instructors come to terms with what they want and how they will assess it before the unit begins so that they can more carefully prepare students to succeed. Many EMU instructors use this approach and are committed to its effectiveness, concluding that student work and student learning greatly improve as a result.

If you don't have models. The instructor or a GA can develop a model. The instructor can use models of other types of assignments that demonstrate elements of the new assignment as long as the instructor clarifies why each model is being shared. Or the instructor can indicate that this is the first time he or she is using this assignment and no model is available so there will be extra time set aside in class to discuss the assignment periodically and review their work in progress. This enables the instructor to identify student work that is going well and share examples with other students; it also helps the instructor to redirect student work that is not yet on track. This is a useful practice with or without models.

When time is too short to review models in class. Provide the materials and ask students to review them outside of class. Models can be

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provided in a coursepack, put on reserve in the library or posted on-line so that students can review them independently. It is important for the instructor to clarify why these models have been selected, noting their strengths and weaknesses. In my composition and literature classes, I discussed the criteria for evaluation and applied them to two student models; I then asked students to apply the criteria to four additional models from a coursepack before the next class, at which time we discussed their assessments. The process of applying the criteria engaged them with the assignment and helped them to identify significant questions from the outset.

Skills Required for Students to Succeed. Focusing on the skills embedded in the task is a critical step in structuring assignments for success. Determine: 1) the skills required to succeed in the assignment, 2) student readiness to apply these skills, and 3) how students will acquire, practice and use these skills if they do not already have them in their repertoire.

1) Identify the required skills. List all the skills required to complete the assignment, including the embedded skills. For example, if you want students to write a paper that integrates research from journals and other print and electronic resources, you might list: searching and using library and on-line resources, evaluating the resources, analyzing and summarizing research articles, citing resources, using a specified style guide, integrating the resources without plagiarizing them, developing a thesis and supporting it, formulating a well-written and well-organized essay that is consistent with disciplinary paradigms, and applying concepts relevant to your discipline.

For each of the required skills, note the ones:

- most students have already mastered (based on your experience or from recent formal or informal assessments of student work);
- you will introduce through direct instruction in the classroom;
- students will teach themselves through assignments, reading, interviews;
- you will ask others to teach (e.g., EMU librarians);
- you will refer to student support services (e.g., referrals to the Writing Center, Learning Center, department tutors, lab assistants).

If there are skills on your list that are not addressed by one of these options, you may want to rethink or eliminate that requirement, or alert students to the importance of that skill so that they are forewarned to seek assistance.

2) Determine student readiness to apply skills. Whenever possible, test your assumptions about student readiness to apply the skills required by the assignment. Provide opportunities to review student work in progress and give them feedback, either from you or their peers. Break the assignment down into key milestones and ask students to submit evidence of their work and progress. Consider asking students for a self-assessment to accompany their drafts that will alert you and the students to their need for assistance.

3) Provide opportunities to develop essential skills. Provide time in class to practice the most challenging skills embedded in the assignment. If you want students to *compare and contrast ideas*, then design your class inquiries around that skill. If you want students to *apply a key concept to different settings*, then give students relevant case studies in which they are asked to apply these concepts in new contexts and critique their analyses just as you will critique their assignments. In short, give students practice in using the skills you are requiring them to use in the assignment. Demonstrating the skill through lecture can be productive but may not be sufficient. Students should have opportunities to practice the skills themselves and get constructive feedback that is timely and low-risk as they build their experience and confidence.

An example of assessing readiness and providing practice. If you assign a research paper, determine the ability of students to analyze and summarize one relevant research study. Distribute one article (without an abstract) to the class and ask students to

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summarize it. A discussion of their summaries will clarify their skills in this task, reinforce the research paradigm of your discipline, and provide opportunities to discuss distortion of research findings, plagiarism, and citation form. When we overlook this developmental step, students often use isolated sentences from articles out of context that may appear to support their claims but are antithetical to the findings of that study. These distortions are hard to detect unless instructors go back to the cited material, but teaching the skill when students are beginning their research serves to dissuade them from the practice.

Provide Interpersonal Support. What opportunities will you have to give interpersonal support, encouragement and praise while identifying problems? Overcoming student anonymity is a major factor in retention and academic success. If students are in trouble, interpersonal support from a faculty member can play a key role in helping students persist and succeed. But many students won't reach out to instructors. They need instructors to reach out to them. This can be accomplished by requiring all students to come to office hours for a 10 minute individual or small-group appointment to discuss their assignment. This can also be scheduled during class time when students are meeting in small groups. Peer evaluation in which students provide feedback to their classmates also provides a powerful form of interpersonal support.

Establishing Criteria for Evaluation. This topic deserves a whole article, but a few key points will have to suffice. First, what is the purpose of the evaluation? Is it primarily *formative* to promote learning or primarily *summative* to assess student learning? What are the implications of that decision for your policies relating to revisions, drafts, partial credit, extra credit, late papers, the role of peer evaluation and self-evaluation in grading. How and when will you convey the policies to all students?

Second, think of the criteria for evaluation as part of the assignment itself. Criteria for evaluation should not be an afterthought or developed only in response to the work students submit. The criteria for evaluation are not separate from the assignment. In one sense, *they are the assignment* or at least there should be consistency among the goals of the assignment, the assignment or task, the instructional methods and materials used to teach students the necessary skills and knowledge, and the criteria for evaluation.

Third, the criteria for evaluation tell both the student and the instructor what factors will be used to assess the student's work (Elbow, 1997). Some evaluation rubrics simply list the assignment requirements; others indicate the weight of items based on their importance. More elaborate rubrics indicate the level of proficiency that is required for full and partial credit on each of the components. See the scoring sheet for two items from a rubric for a biology research paper and one sample evaluation for an oral presentation, page 5. The scoring sheet identifies the requirements and the level of proficiency, known as Primary Trait Scoring (Anderson & Walvoord, 1991). Note that the levels of proficiency on both samples include the presence of positive attributes as well as the absence of negative ones (Smithson & Padberg, 1996).

Fourth, establishing criteria for evaluation is not a simple, linear task. It is a recursive one, requiring sustained effort and analyses over time. The first time instructors use an assignment, they may only have a rudimentary sense of the criteria for evaluation, focused primarily on the tasks of the assignment, that is, whether the students have done the required tasks specified in the instructions. Over time, instructors will be better able to describe proficiency on each of the component tasks. Instructors should keep track of frequently asked student questions, problems, and omissions in the final products to guide their revisions in the assignment instructions and criteria for evaluation.

Most instructors have criteria in mind as they review student work even when they don't make them explicit. The point here is to share those criteria with students from the earliest stages of the assignment. Doing so reduces student frustration with wasted efforts that miss the mark, it assures students that grading is not an entirely subjective process that varies from student to student, and the result is far more likely to be successful.

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Primary Trait Scoring Sheet for
Anderson's Biology Paper Research
[Selected Items]

Please evaluate the original research paper and assign an appropriate number of points for each section. In each category, higher numbers represent greater mastery. Please do not award partial scores.

Title

5 - Is appropriate in tone and structure to science journal; contains necessary descriptors, brand names, and allows reader to anticipate design.

4 - Is appropriate in tone and structure to science journal; most descriptors present; identifies function of experimentation, suggests design, but lacks brand names.

3 - Identifies function, brand name, but does not allow reader to anticipate design.

2 - Identifies function, brand name, but not both; lacks design information or is misleading.

1 - Is patterned after another discipline or missing.

Introduction

5 - Clearly identifies the purpose of the research, identifies interested audience(s); adopts an appropriate tone.

4 - Clearly identifies the purpose of the research. Identifies interested audience(s).

3 - Clearly identifies the purpose of the research.

2 - Purpose present in Introduction, but must be identified by reader.

1 - Fails to identify the purpose of the research.

(Anderson & Walvoord, 1991)

Sample Evaluation Form for an
Oral Presentation

Subject _____ Student _____ Time____

5=Superior, 4=Strong, 3=Good, 2=Adequate, 1=Weak

I. Content

A. Central idea or proposition clear	5 4 3 2 1
B. Sources credited properly	5 4 3 2 1
C. Main points stand out	5 4 3 2 1
D. Support for points is clear/well developed	5 4 3 2 1

II. Structure

A. Introduction gains attention	5 4 3 2 1
B. Introduction previews talk effectively	5 4 3 2 1
C. No more than three or four main points	5 4 3 2 1
D. Transitions used to enhance flow	5 4 3 2 1
E. Conclusion summarizes and is non-abrupt	5 4 3 2 1

III. Visual Support

A. Enough visual aid support	5 4 3 2 1
B. Visual aid design enhanced speaker's credibility	5 4 3 2 1
C. Visual aids used effectively talk	5 4 3 2 1

IV. Delivery

A. Eye contact involves the group	5 4 3 2 1
B. Facial expression and gestures natural	5 4 3 2 1
C. Good vocal volume, rate, pitch	5 4 3 2 1
D. Posture and movement create a positive image	5 4 3 2 1
E. Extemporaneous delivery	5 4 3 2 1

V. General

A. Conversational	5 4 3 2 1
B. Confident	5 4 3 2 1
C. Overall reaction to this talk	5 4 3 2 1

TOTAL (100 possible) _____

COMMENTS:

(Smithson & Padberg, 1996)

Structuring Assignments continued...

Plagiarism. Plagiarism represents a challenge to all instructors. It is a growing phenomenon throughout higher education, exacerbated by the ease with which students can download papers on "virtually" any subject. But even before the Internet, there were paper mills and underground markets that circulated student papers for purchase. The traditional words of wisdom still apply: customize your assignments and update or modify them from year to year to minimize whole-paper plagiarism. Require that students use specified resources. Review preliminary phases of their work, e.g., annotated bibliographies, outlines or drafts. Ask students to submit preliminary drafts with their final submissions even if they have not been reviewed by the instructor. If you focus on process and not just product, students are far less likely to attempt full-paper plagiarism. And if instructors teach the skills necessary to succeed in the assignment, fewer students will find it necessary to turn to the work of others.

Students who would not submit another person's paper as their own might cite text inappropriately because they don't know what constitutes plagiarized materials. Spend at least a few minutes in class on plagiarism in your discipline, clarifying how you define and use the term and its consequences in your course. If you encourage peer collaboration or use lab partners and student teams, discuss the line you draw between *collaboration* and *plagiarism.* Consider stating the EMU policy on academic dishonesty and the EMU definition of plagiarism on your syllabus and assignment sheets.

If you suspect that a paper or project is plagiarized, contact Karen Simpkins, Director of Student Judicial Services (karen.simpkins@emich.edu) for options in how you might respond. If you would like to assess whether a paper has been downloaded from the Internet, contact Keith Stanger, one of our EMU Library faculty members (lib_stanger@online.emich.edu), who can assist you in tracking the source of the paper if it was indeed downloaded from the Internet. These developments are a sad commentary on academic integrity, but there is a role for us as academics in redressing these issues. We can provide direct instruction on the nature of plagiarism and ways to avoid it, and we can structure assignments in ways that both enable and encourage students to take the high road.

Late Assignments and Revisions. Some students will want to hand in assignments late or resubmit assignments for a revised or additional grade. Instructors should plan for these contingencies in advance, inform all students what the policies will be, and apply these policies for all students to ensure equity. A common approach to grading revisions is to average the original grade with the revised one. This approach rewards and motivates students to engage in the revision process without undermining their incentive to do a good job on the initial submission.

Assignment Cover Sheets. Some faculty ask students to submit a signed cover sheet on which students indicate that their work meets each of the assignment requirements, has been proofread and spellchecked, and has been reviewed by at least one other student in the class. Some instructors require a statement that no part of the paper has been plagiarized. These sheets help students identify the problems before they submit their work. They also reinforce proofreading and reduce the time that instructors spend giving feedback on careless errors.

Timing the Return of Assignments. The sooner the better. Students learn more from the feedback on assignments when it is received close to the date of submission. If the assignment is long, try to stagger assignments from other classes, enabling you to return assignments as soon as possible. It is also advisable to collect papers before the last quarter of the semester, particularly if you would like to encourage students to do revisions. When papers are returned on the last day of the term or at the final exam, students often ignore the comments and feedback, looking only at the grade. The opportunity to discuss the feedback is often lost.

Confer with EMU Librarians on Research Paper Designs. If the assignment has a library research component, share the assignment with the library faculty, particularly your subject area specialist. The librarians welcome the opportunity to discuss assignments with you. They will advise you about the status of the EMU library collection on the topic, suggest new

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resources, and advise you on whether to put key materials on reserve. The librarians have extensive experience working with students on research papers and can anticipate the kinds of questions and frustrations students have when there are significant ambiguities in the assignment design. They can also suggest alternatives to the standard research paper.

On-Line Style Guides. If you require a particular style guide, you can refer students to on-line web sites that offer all the information they will need. Students appreciate this because it saves them money and offers the latest material in how to do citations for on-line resources as well as more traditional print materials. Contact library faculty for on-line style guides or to request class presentations on on-line searches and citing on-line materials.

Constructivist Approaches. Increasingly faculty are using constructivist approaches to instruction in which faculty "construct" learning activities collaboratively with their students with fewer pre-determined assignments. Many of the issues raised in this essay will be relevant but will have to be reframed to include the active role played by students in decision-making and defining the assignments.

The Paradigm Shift from Teaching to Learning: The Role of Assignment-Centered Curricula. In the past few years, a lot has been written about promoting the paradigm shift from teaching to learning in higher education. The focus on assignment design and its relation to student learning exemplifies this shift. Barbara Walvoord (1997), a specialist in Writing Across the Curriculum and instructional development, advocates *assignment-centered curricula* in which instructors design their entire courses around one or more assignments that capture the essential skills they wish to teach. Instructors then orient the course around the development of the skills students need to succeed in those assignments, thereby fully integrating assignments with course goals, content, instructional methods, student skill development, and assessments. But instructors need not make assignments the center of their curricula in order to improve the convergence of assignments with instructional methods that support the skills necessary for students to succeed. Even modest changes in assignment design, such as providing a rationale, student models, practice in embedded skills and explicitly-stated criteria for evaluation, can go a long way in helping students to succeed. The result is more effective teaching *and* learning.

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WORKSHEET

Structuring Assignments for Success

Clarity of goals: Why are you assigning it?

- What are your goals? Is the task consistent with the goals?
- Will you share your rationale and goals in oral and written form?

Clarity of directions: What do students have to do?

- Do students understand exactly what is expected of them? How do you know they understand?
- Will you provide students with models and guidelines? Will the models represent high, modest or minimal expectations? How many models will you provide?
- Will students have an opportunity to discuss the tasks and ask questions when you present the assignment *and* later while they work on it?
- Have you provided negative examples and pitfalls to avoid?

Clarity of criteria for evaluation

- Will you give students specific criteria for evaluation at the time you give them the assignment?
- Will you review with students what the criteria mean, how they are weighted in importance, and how the criteria can be used to provide guidelines for the task?
- When will you clarify grading policies and expectations?
- Is the form of evaluation consistent with the goals and tasks?
- Is evaluation meant to be primarily formative (to promote learning) or summative (to evaluate and grade)?
- What are the implications of formative vs. summative goals for assignment design and grading policies, e.g., revisions, drafts, late papers?
- What will be the role of students in evaluation, e.g., in peer review, in self-evaluation, or in opportunities for revisions?

Use of assignment "packets" or coursepacks to introduce the assignment

Which of these will you provide? In what form? (packets, coursepack, on reserve)

- The assignment in written form
- Statement of rationale in oral and written form
    - How the assignment relates to course or program goals
    - Future uses of the product (program portfolios, employment)
    - Due dates, including interim and final submission dates
    - Number of copies to submit, e.g., five for peer evaluation sessions
- Criteria for evaluation (and/or peer evaluation forms, if applicable)
- Professional example (if applicable)
- Student examples with instructor comments and grade
    - Provide more than one model to avoid mimicry.
    - For visual projects, use slides, photos, displays or demonstrations.
    - For oral presentations, use video models.
- Student examples without comments or grade
    - Ask students to apply the criteria for evaluation to the ungraded sample.

Clarity about the skills required by the assignment

- Have you identified all the skills necessary to succeed in the assignment?
- Have you determined which tasks you will teach, which you can assume students know or can teach themselves, and which you will refer to support services or to others to assist students?
- What assumptions are you making about student readiness for the assignment? Are they warranted? How do you know?
- What will you do for students who are not prepared?
- Do you intend to provide direct instruction on plagiarism? Have you built in safeguards against whole-paper plagiarism in the assignment design by tailoring paper topics to your course, requiring use of specific resources, requiring preliminary steps or drafts, or modifying the assignment each year?
- When will students practice their skills? Will it be under your guidance?
- Have you considered the impact of prior learning or knowledge that might help or hinder students who have been taught variants of prescribed procedures?
- Based on your experience, have you projected which areas are likely to be difficult, requiring more time or attention, and which areas will be learned quickly? Have you considered this in your planning and timeline?
- Can you provide negative examples and illustrations to help students avoid common pitfalls?

Frequent feedback and assessment for each major task or skill

- Would feedback on preliminary tasks be useful/possible?
- What different kinds of interim feedback can students get, including feedback from peers, professionals in the field, the instructor, study groups, tutors?
- Would classroom assessment techniques help? For example, ask all students to write anonymously about any difficulties they are having with the assignment.

Interpersonal support and guidance

- Will you require/request individual or small-group meetings with students?
- Will you have any chance to communicate with students about their progress in oral or written form?
- What opportunities exist to give students praise and encouragement while identifying problems if they exist?

Timing/Pacing

- Is there sufficient time to teach all these skills? If not, what steps or tasks can be eliminated or simplified?

Availability of resources

- Are the resources readily available to all students?
- Do you need to facilitate student access to resources, e.g., put them on reserve?
- If library research is part of the assignment, have you conferred with the librarians about the assignment design and available resources?

Sharing Results

- Will you provide an opportunity for students to share their completed work?
- Can you facilitate celebration and closure for significant assignments?