

Let Students Show What They Know

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Current research on the brain suggests that the more ways concepts and skills are presented, the more likely it is that instructors will reach students with their diversity of learning styles in their classrooms. In addition, when a concept or skill is processed in a variety of ways, the opportunity for learning is greatly enhanced for all the students. Several researchers believe that the novelty involved in a variety of strategies seems to engage the students with the material and thereby motivate them. Indeed, in an article in the August/September 2002 issue of *The Teaching Professor*, Roger Tesi and Peter Griswold laud the virtues of varied presentations to improve learning.

My own corollary involves giving students options for three major assignments in the course. Instead of the traditional five- or 10-page research paper assignment, I propose that students show me what they know, and that they do it in ways that use their natural inclinations and talents. All students must do a book, magazine, or movie critique so that at least one assignment in the course focuses explicitly on their writing and critical thinking skills. In addition, they choose two other projects.

To help students envision the possibilities, I developed the following list, which I used initially in a women's studies class and subsequently in an English literature class.

- book, magazine, or movie critique
- themed bulletin board display
- interview and write-up
- oral presentation
- posters (Many conferences have poster sessions, so this is good preparation for further academic work.)
- brochure design for a course (Students design a brochure advertising a course that they would like to see offered; for example, women in art, wilderness autobiography, history of childhood in Canada. The goal is two-fold: research a narrowly focused "course offering" and decide what might be explored in such a

course, and express these ideas artistically in a brochure format.)

- annotated bibliography
- composition and performance of an original song
- composition and presentation of an original dramatic monologue (Some students have used props to great advantage; some have simply sat cross-legged on a desk and addressed the audience.)
- creation of a website (There are several excellent, easy-to-use, free web page creation sites on the Internet, for example, www.tripod.lycos.com and www.angelfire.lycos.com. Many educational institutions also host student web pages on their servers.)
- collaborative project (Students work with one partner. They can propose an entirely different project, one I haven't thought of yet, or they may use one of the above projects as a steppingstone, but they must add something, some unique angle or twist, to make it their own.)

Some semesters, I shorten the list slightly, removing some choices, depending on what I'm teaching and how well the ideas can be adapted to the subject matter, or how popular the choice was the previous semester. For instance, designing a brochure and the collaborative project are new choices, and if students "vote" for them by choosing to do them, then I'll keep them on the list.

For each assignment alternative, I develop a grading rubric so students will know what is required of them. And some aspects of the assignment are "givens." For instance, each piece of work must relate directly to one of the themes of the course.

For some of the assignments, I produce samples throughout the semester. For example, a brochure advertising my course is available when students register for it, and at the first class of the semester, I greet students with a themed bulletin board display in the classroom where I teach. Every few weeks, I change the display so students get a good idea of what I expect. We usually mount some of the student bulletin boards in the hallways. These displays are eye-

catching and provide a high profile for our course. Often we see other students, not involved in our course, discussing these thought-provoking displays.

I have seen students put tremendous effort into these assignments, each of which is worth 15 percent of their final grade. One student, who had no experience with web page design, put in more than 20 hours creating a very successful web page. Several students who chose to do the original dramatic monologue moved some of the class to tears with their powerful performances.

Knowledge can be demonstrated in many more ways than the ones we traditionally use. I have been pleased with the results when I let students shine by using their artistic, dramatic, and academic talents. ♥

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examination questions are often used for faculty convenience rather than actual "need for speed" in student performance. Time constraints are most applicable to courses where they are a reflection of real-world demands (food preparation, emergency medicine, simultaneous translation, etc.)

- Eliminate external prompts. The use of bells or buzzers can compound anxiety and unnecessarily stress students.
- Reduce the number of testing stations. Transit time between stations is non-assessment time. Pinning several structures on one specimen reduces the amount of time that a student spends shuffling papers, looking ahead to the next station, or trying to become oriented to a specimen.

Much of this may seem self-evident to the seasoned examiner or may fly in the face of long-standing traditions within a discipline. However, to fully assess student knowledge and performance, we need to be mindful of the expected learning outcomes and match them with the best evaluation methods, even if they are less convenient or non-traditional. ♥