

In the Classroom 86

Time to Toss Out Disposable Assignments

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things. Perhaps you are doing other things, but you're still hanging out with me. I really do appreciate it. Last week, I said, we are going to talk about open pedagogy. Well, actually, I'm going to narrow the scope just a little bit. We're going to talk about replacing disposable assignments with renewable open pedagogy assignment.

Are you tired of grading piles of essays that are going to be thrown away as soon as you return them? They probably won't even look at your comments. They'll look at the grade and then throw them in the trash. Well, students are also tired of writing these type of assignments, so it's time to get rid of disposable assignment. What are disposable assignments? Well, disposable assignments are those type of assignments that are not being retained and they really don't serve any other purpose after the assignment.

As David Wiley talks about it, students are going to do the work. They're going to spend a lot of time on an assignment. They spend hours on an assignment. Then you as faculty are going to grade the work and you spend a lot of time grading the work. Then both of you, as soon as the grade is recorded, throw them away. Now you may have a requirement to keep them for three years, but then you're still going to throw them away. People don't like their time wasted. If work is only done to be discarded, people see this as a waste of time. I call it fake work. We have this in the work that I do. I consider it fake work. I do these reports that never see the light of day. It's an exercise in futility that just happened.

I want to do things that are going to impact others and make the world better, at least in my part of the world. I think everybody wants to do that. They want to have meaningful contribution to their work. What are renewable assignments? Well renewable assignments, there's value after the assignment product is created and it goes for a long time after that. Students still do the work, faculty still grade it but then there's value. There's value to other people. If created correctly, we're leveraging the five R's, where you have reuse, revision, and everything that goes together with this OER concept. That other people can use it, build upon it, but they're getting value of this.

Great assignments are those types of assignments that have meaning to the students. If a student finds meaning in it, then they're going to contribute more and they're actually going to learn more. Ideally, you want to create assignments that not only help the student but also contribute to the rest of the world. If you can make these assignments authentic, in other words, they're dealing with real-world

problems or have a real-world audience, you're going to get more engagement from your students. They're going to work harder. They're actually going to learn more.

The cool thing is with these type of assignments is they can be ongoing. They don't have to live with one class. You can build entire programs around these renewable assignments, which can actually contribute to maybe recognition for your program or for an institution if they're able to align it with learning outcomes that are at an institutional level. A lot of benefits for doing this. The other thing is, as Derek Bruff noted, students become the producers of knowledge rather than just consumers. They are creating something that others can benefit from. That's what the differences are, a little bit why you want to do this.

What are some types of assignments that you can consider for renewable assignment? Well, here are a couple ideas for you. First of all, creating books or textbooks. That you can have your students participate in the creation or adaption of an open textbook or an open education resource that may take the form of a book. If you had an opportunity to check out episode number three, I talked about OER open education materials or resources. I talked about the different ways that OER content is brought into the classroom. First, there's adoption. That you go out and you find an OER textbook and you adopt it for your class, and everybody uses it. Then you have adaption.

You can take that content and modify it to maybe localize it to fit your needs. That you can get rid of parts of it, add additional parts and you can just basically make it work for your particular class. Then you have creation where you are creating content. It could be in the way of creating assignments and you just put an open license on them, a creative commons license. It could be that you're creating new content. Maybe you've determined a way that you put things together that students can learn the content better. That you've developed a checklist or you've developed a process that just makes make sense to students. Well, you're creating new content and if you put an open license on it, you can share it.

Then the last way is having students create content. This is where this renewable assignment piece live. I have to admit, I had students working on an open textbook, challenging assignments. I found out I'm the bottleneck and all this. I'm still working to get that project online but I have some ideas and hopefully, I'll get it done. Ways that you can do this in your classroom is you can take an open textbook and have students add to it. Maybe have them go find images that they could use to improve the textbook, or take images that they can use to improve the textbook, or find open license audio files that they can put in, or improve it with video. Lots of different ways to do it.

Or you can create your own textbook by having students build, say an anthology. An example that I saw, students had to do research. They found an article that typifies a particular topic and then they had to summarize and identify key points from that particular article. The article was listed as well as their background information, their key points, and also discussion questions. That was pulled all together in a book that is now available on the web. This one happened to talk about open education.

I've seen other anthologies that were in literature that spoke of climate change, all different topics that you can have students research an article, expound upon it, synthesize it and make it available. You can also have them work on Wikibooks. Last week, I talked about using Wikipedia as a teaching tool, but Wiki has all kinds of different open resources that you can really tap into. One of them is called Wikibooks. This is a great place to go build a book with your students. There's another place called Wikiversity, where you can basically have a classroom. You can build lesson plans. You can build a book also within Wikiversity that's really suited for higher education. Creating a book or modifying a book, that's one place where you can have students do real work.

Another place that you can do it is create assignments where students work with clients. If you can get them to work with real clients or stakeholders, they will basically buy into their project more. I did this with some instructional design students as part of a class. They were broken up into teams. Each was given a client and they had to produce an artifact with their client following instructional processes and procedures. They worked with the client, they had to communicate with the client, used that feedback that they got from their client to make their product better, and they produced absolutely wonderful products.

I think it was a large part because they had a real audience. It wasn't just the instructor. It was someone else. Ways that you can do this, for example, business students could develop marketing plans, business plans, human resource guidance with local companies. Maybe you've got start-up companies that need to flesh out their processes, have business students work with them. In some cases, they could be paid interns, so everybody benefits. By helping these businesses, that helps the community.

I can see history students working with local museums or developing historical content. Maybe putting together a wiki regarding your particular community or some aspect of your community and building that out. Biology doing field studies or surveys for farmers, businesses, local government and using the skills that they learn in biology. You may want to have students write op-ed pieces or send letters to Congress in which they have researched a topic that they're passionate about and make that available. Partnering with nonprofits to develop content. It could be instructional content. It could be providing some type of research that's beneficial for a particular nonprofit.

Or you could have students work on school issues. What is your institution wrestling with at this moment? Put students on it and have them do the research behind that. Have them contribute to whether building institutional policies or maybe even just your class, building course policies and rubrics and all this instructional material around that. I see for an instructor one of the challenges- -is to line up clients for your class.

There's other ways that you can have students develop meaningful content. For example, develop or supplement books with homework sets. If you're working with an open text, very often texts come with nothing additional. You could have students develop PowerPoint presentations or slide presentations. You can have students

develop end of chapter questions, homework sets, all kinds of things that would make that open resource that much stronger by adding things that you would normally see in a textbook.

They can also help with your course development. I'm fascinated that more faculty don't take students up in assigning projects, developing presentations that would help explain different concepts in a class and use that to improve the class and actually build out online courses with this multimedia. In line with Universal Design for Learning, ideally, you have a text-only track going through your course, but also a multimedia track. You can have students work on each part of the track building out content, or using open resources, or building open resources that they can contribute to the class.

The same thing goes with test banks. There's great research out there talking about the power of a test bank, where students who take tests on a regular basis will do better overall in the course. You could actually have students help to build very large test pools that other students following them can use to improve their knowledge. They can develop problems sets if you're talking a math course. Regardless what course, they could build questions that you can use in these test banks based on the content that you have for your course. That way, you're not necessarily reliant on a commercial producer for those test banks so you have some control over them.

Another project that would have value to a community is basically digital storytelling of a community. These digital storytelling projects can focus on a specific perspective or a underrepresented community. They can include video, audio, photos, text, the whole package and really tell the story of a community. Examples of this are where you have a Latino community or Vietnam vets. Now we're talking Gulf War vets that you can interview, parents who grew up in the depression or grew up during World War II, what lifestyle was that? Just so many different topics. Just going out and interviewing family, and friends, and community members of those different group.

As I said last week in Episode 85, I talked about using Wikipedia. You can have students focus on a very specific part of Wikipedia. If you don't want them to actually write on Wikipedia itself, you can create a media wiki platform, find a site to host it on where you can build out content. If you develop the content well enough, maybe you can take that content and then upload it to a Wikipedia. As I mentioned, there's also Wikiversity, which is devoted to learning resources, learning projects, and research for all types of levels and styles of education from preschool to university. It also includes professional training and informal learning.

There's Wikiquotes, which is a free source of quotations from notable people and creative works, all kinds of languages. You can have students go add quotes to that. Wikibooks, talked about creating a book as part of its open content textbook collection. Wikimedia, I think this is a wonderful resource that if you say have art students or students who are into photography, regardless of the discipline, you can have them contribute photos to that particular site where other individuals can benefit it. Like I said, you can start with a closed wiki site first but as the content develops, you can move it over to Wikipedia.

Simply creating learning objects for future students. You can have students create tutorials for future students on all different disciplines and content or topics that you want to use. If you're smart, you can line this up with your course needs. You can do an inventory of your course. Like I said, ideally, you have a text track and a multimedia track of the same content. Where you have gaps in that, you can use those as assignments that your students build out that content.

You can also do this with pinch points in your class so where students are struggling. I'm going to talk about this next week, a lot more about pinch points. If you have an area where students are struggling, you can go ahead and have other students do explainer videos or explainer documents on how to deal with them. There are a lot of things in your course, just basic stuff on how to upload a document. Well, it depends on your course. You may have them write a tutorial on how to do those things. You have total control of the process.

You can do this in layers where you have students first outline what they plan to put into these different pieces, say an instructional video and then you can have them develop a presentation. Maybe they're developing a PowerPoint or Google Slides deck. Have them write the script because you don't want them to freestyle this. Ideally, they have a script that they write and then finally have them create the video. Also, one of the things that you're going to want them to do is make sure that that video is closed caption. That'll save you from doing it.

Other things that you can do is have students develop a student guide to help future students. This can be, say, created on a Google doc or a wiki platform that you use each class to build upon and to improve that document. Those are some ideas of renewable assignments, something that students are not just going to throw away and they benefit other people. I think those are powerful assignment.

Things that you want to consider. One, you and your students need to get training on whatever platform that you're going to do it on. If you're going to build on Google applications, make sure that you really understand Google applications and your students fully understand it. If you're going to build on Google Sites, that you get training on that. If you're going to use the Blackboard wiki or MediaWiki or what have you, make sure that you do the training.

I know that if you're going to build on Wikipedia, they have training resources for both faculty and students to make sure that they know how to do it and how to do it correctly otherwise, the material will be taken down. You want to do it right the first time. If you are, say creating a book, you should have a template of the material that you are asking for, as well as examples of high-quality work that you can show your students. Absolutely essential that you provide clear directions on what you want, as well as close supervision to ensure you get there.

Then finally, make sure that you give students the choice of whether their work is going to be public or not. From the time they create it, their stuff is copyrighted. They are the copyright holders of that content. They have an option whether or not it's going to be public, whether you're going to do it with a creative commons license or not. Those are things to think about.

I think really powerful way to do it. When I think of assignments, I try to do assignments where the students are going to benefit. I'm teaching a program planning and evaluation course. The main project is students will develop a plan that they can actually use in their work. It may be that they've had this great idea. This is an opportunity to put it into motion and by documenting and getting out to other people.

That's how I'm particularly using it, but lots of different ideas on how you can create renewable assignments, assignments that are going to make a difference. If you can latch on to something where you can build out something that is associated with you, and your program, and the institution, it's just win-win-win for everyone. That's what I have for you. Before I let you go here's a quick plug for my book.