In the Classroom 144

Creating Effective Study Guides for Your Classroom

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Stan Skrabut: Welcome back. Thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it. Last week in episode ITC 143, we talked about using guided notes to help improve your lectures. We are going to expand on that idea by implementing full-blown study guides. My inspiration for this comes from a wonderful Spanish professor named Theresa Baginski and she developed a series of study guides for her college-level Spanish classes.

She did this because she was also transitioning to OER content. The guide that I'm sharing in the show notes is her guide and it has a Creative Commons License on it. I encourage you to check it out. She offers a lot of wonderful strategies in this guide that you could use for your class.

This week we're going to take a closer look at study guides and tips for putting them into action. I guess we'll start with the big question. Why should you even consider using a study guide in your classroom? There's lots of reasons but the primary reason is that it improves student performance, student learning. There's other reasons and in the article *Study Guides, Teacher Tips, A Review of Literature With Practical Implications*, the authors highlighted five reasons to use study guides.

Number 1, study guides assist students learning. Hey, that's basically it. It helps them learn new content. One of the reasons why is it because it highlights important concepts. Concepts that you as the instructor decide that you want students to focus on. It can also improve comprehension, reading comprehension because you're specifically telling them what they should be focusing on and so they can learn to pull out those important pieces. Different ways that you can improve this comprehension is by activating background knowledge, highlighting patterns and relationships, and just going out and identify those key elements.

The study guides also help students organize information. Sometimes listening to a lecture, reading a bunch of information, watching videos, and trying to figure out what the important pieces are and to get it organized in a way that's meaningful that you can use it when it comes time for an exam, study guides help to do that. They also assist students' metacognition by enabling them to check for understanding. They can figure out basically what's important while they're reading.

As I was going through this information and pulling it all together, one of the things that I noticed about the study guides when I was going in and identifying what key

elements that you should have, that they are powerful tools because they bring in different universal design for learning principles, for example, clarifying vocabulary and symbols, which is part of providing multiple means of representation. You can increase effort and persistence by focusing on goals and objectives.

Study guides can so aid with executive functions such as goal setting, managing information, monitoring progress. In my mind, it's a lot of powerful things that are coming together. I'm a huge fan of universal design for learning and it really excited me when I took this deeper look on study guides to see everything that plays to this idea of UDL.

What are study guides? Study guides, basically, they help students through assigned readings, lectures, presentations, videos, handouts, everything that you're providing. It helps guide them through that material and make sense of that material that they're identifying what the key elements are. You as an instructor are guiding them through and saying, "Here, take a look at this. Here's the key things I want you to focus on." Basically, these study guides are kind of a framework that ties everything together.

As an instructor, you get to choose what's essential to a class. Therefore, study guides shouldn't be everything. It shouldn't be every single word that you're going to have in your text but really just focusing on the essential because very often textbooks and even lectures can provide more information that's then is essential. There's a lot of fluff. There's a lot of things. Is this essential? When thinking back to the Easel podcast episode that I share, what do you want is absolutely essential? That it's going to be lifelong or it's going to be very critical that students need to know. Not everything that we teach is absolutely essential. Some of it is just nice to know.

Let's talk about developing a guide. The first place that you should start when developing a guide is naturally with your goals and objectives for your course. Essentially, what do you want students to learn? What are the big ideas you want them to focus on? Once you have identified those, then you need to organize the goals and objectives that helps guide students to deeper learning. Your study guide will probably be broken up into major areas. For each major section, highlight those objectives. Make it clear to the students what they're expected to learn in that particular section of the study guide.

Another thing that you can and should include are essential questions that pique their interest. You want students to start thinking about the content before they're introduced to it and what you're doing is triggering that information recall, which is an active learning strategy. I talk more about it in ITC 81. When you're creating these questions, you can also use the SQ3R method, which I talked about in ITC 90, to design questions so that students know what to focus on when reading. These questions would then, in fact, satisfy the Q in SQ3R and these major sections you want those particular questions available in each of those particular questions.

You have the questions available before they get to those tutorials that are going to pull everything together. Another thing that you can also include and should include is establishing goals for the students. These goals drill into the learning objectives

more specifically. You may have a learning objective talking about being able to identify key psychologists that shape the field but now you're going to start digging in just a little bit and have them explain what Skinner did and what Freud did, all these different individuals.

Before you jump into the tutorials, take time to introduce new vocabulary concepts and unique languages. The research is out there. If you do this ahead of time, it will help with learning. I talk about it extensively in ITC 42 so go check out that episode about introducing students to vocabulary. This is also an essential element of universal design for learning. Now, finally, you get to the tutorial. So there's a lot of information that's coming up, that's setting the stage for that major section in your study guide. That's what you want to do. You want to introduce this? You want to get them ready for this information. Now we get into the many tutorials that focus on the different objectives, ensure that your tutorial has a title that fire instructions on what students need to read or watch to grasp the essence of the objective. It should include specific information about the reading assignments, such as the page number and the title. Ideally, you should have links to the text or videos if the material's available online. Video, certainly linked to the video. Then, finally, for that tutorial, having a learning activity for students to practice the objective.

Lots of different activities that you can include in a study guide, for example, concept maps. Being able to break things apart and identify different parts of a concept map. Doing a comparison chart where they have the information that they're filling out in a chart that you actually include that chart right into the study guide. Labeling then diagrams, having just diagrams that they're labeling. What's the nomenclature, identifying parts of a cell, putting in timelines where they can break apart, what's happening in a sequence? Certainly short essays or short answers, SQ3R study sheets. Those are also useful. Vocabulary where you can have matching terms or fill in the blank or putting the terms into different categories, lots of different strategies that you can use.

Just as a reminder, in the show notes, I'm putting links to some of the resources that I use in order to inform myself about this topic and there's lots of examples on how to do these things in those things that I'm including in the show notes. Once you have designed a study guide, the next thing you have to do is implement it. Put it to work, put it into your class. Creating a study guide is not enough. Here are some things you should consider as you're putting it into practice.

First of all, teach students how to use it. Spend part of your lesson showing students how you want them to complete that study guide. Ideally have a model guide, one that's already filled out where you're highlighting things or changing the color, so you can show what the answers are, the information that you're looking for, different parts in your guide. It's absolutely critical to provide clear instruction, look at tilt, the transparent instructions for assignments. Those are quite useful for laying out how you want the assignment. There is a purpose in what the objectives are step by step and resources that you're supporting for those particular instruction.

If you want students to use the guide, they got to be held accountable for completing the guide, so you have to check on this guide on a regular basis and you need to

grade it. You need to provide feedback for the students in the guide. You may want to set up deadlines for different phases of the study guide. It could be a weekly assignment that you collect them and review them and just focus on those specific answers or you can have a come in every couple of weeks or once a month, it's really up to you but if you do not grade it, they're not going to do it.

Here are some tips for success that others have shared. Tips for developing and implementing your study guide. One, you don't have to build the study guide all at once, you don't have to say, "Okay, this term I'm going to build the study guide and then just go crazy trying to build this study guide." Do it in bite-sized bits, you can just keep building upon it each term and over time, you will have a very comprehensive guide. That is one of the things that Theresa Baginski, the example that I gave earlier, that's what she did. She didn't do it all at once, she started with some different ideas, and then over the course of two or three terms, she finally had a fully-blown study guide that she now uses as a primary teaching tool. When you're building your study guide, one of the places to look is this idea pinch points. Initially, focus on areas where students are struggling, where are they asking you questions? Where are they confused? Look at the exams, where are they having trouble?

Those are the places to start, shore up those areas first and weave those in. You can take those exercises that you're already using in class and incorporate those into a study guide and then just beef it up with supporting content and just package it just a little different. You have a lot of the components probably already built. Another tip for success is to collaborate. If you're working in a department, collaborate with other instructors who are teaching the same class. You can each work on a different piece, share it, go ahead and make improvements and then make it available for your students.

I strongly suggest that you also work in a cloud, have students share their study guide with you from the cloud such as OneDrive or Google Drive. What Professor Baginski does is she has created this study guide, made it available on Google, students will then make a copy of it and share their copy back to her and only her. They share it back and naturally, you're probably going to have to provide detailed instructions to students on how to do this. You should also have editing rights to the copy that's shared with you so you can add feedback as the assignments are due. It could be in the form of comments but I think if you have the opportunity to have just editing rights, then you can go ahead and make annotations that are very specific for those students.

Use these study guides as homework assignments. This should be a major instructional element in your class. This is the place where students could take notes, it's a place that the complete their assigned work and you're creating these tutorials that are just packaged right into that study guide and they go to that particular tutorial and import their edits. You go right back to that document, look at it, make feedback and it becomes a one place that you're doing all that work. The great thing is students can use it to study from.

Another tip is to provide different types of exercises, so just not the same thing over and over and over again. You could have written exercise but you can also request

that they turn in video or they turn in audio or they create an image and embed it in that document. Feedback, it's absolutely critical that you provide formative feedback, that way you can help your students develop. You should be providing this feedback directly into that study guide and it'll be extremely useful for that student then.

Naturally, you should make your study guide as aesthetically pleasing as possible, make it look professional but also ensure that you're adhering to accessibility standard. You want to make this as useful as possible to as many students as possible. Ask students for feedback, where you could improve the study guide, and then take that feedback and use it to continuously improve your course and that particular learning tool.

Couple of other things, leave spaces for answers. Depending on how much space, that'll give students an idea how much they should write in that particular space. Talked about this in episode 143 when we were talking about guided notes, how to go ahead, and craft space so students could leave answers. Talked about providing explicit instructions on how to do things.

One of the things that's also important is sequence the study guide with your lectures and your reading and keep it in the same sequence. If they have to jump around a lot, it becomes very frustrating. This should be guiding them through the content in a way that you are presenting this. Lots of wonderful tips on how to get started. In the article *Study Guides to the Rescue*, they list 11 different types of study guides so I encourage you to go check out that article, really good article, and it talks about all these different types of study guides that you can pull together.

That is a little bit about study guides. I'm excited about this tool, I plan to go back and start working with my faculty and encourage them to develop their own study guides for their classes because I see a lot of principles that are very powerful for learning being incorporated into these guides. I'm excited, hopefully, you'll be able to go put some of this into practice. Before I leave you, here's a quick plug for my book.