

THE ASSESSMENT CHRONICLES

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ASSIGNMENTS THAT ENGAGE STUDENTS

by David Mitchell

As some of you know, the Learning Assessment Committee sponsors a monthly book discussion group. The group is composed of 15 Laney faculty members who are all currently reading *Student Engagement Techniques* by Elizabeth Barkley. We come together to talk about the assigned reading we've done each month and to share experiences we've had in our classrooms as we try out some of the SETs described in the book. It's proving to be a fun way to support each other in our teaching.

One of the themes we sometimes address in our meetings is the challenge of creating assignments for our students that both match the learning objectives we have in our courses and engage our students enough so that they fully participate. It's a tough balance to achieve. Here's a list of steps* to consider when developing an assignment that will help your students not only learn the material, but maybe even inspire their best work.

- **Identify specific, important learning goals for the assignment.** Begin creating the assignment by thinking about what you want the students to learn from it. If you're not clear and focused about what you want the students to get out of the assignment, then your students' work will probably be unfocused as well. The best way to identify the objectives you want students to achieve is to develop a rubric, one that states what you consider outstanding work, and give it to the students before they even start the assignment so they know what your goals and expectations are.
- **Create a meaningful task or problem that corresponds to your goals.** Assignments that tend to engage students the most are tasks that someone might do "in real life". These kinds of tasks could be done almost like a role play. "You are an expert chemist, psychologist, machinist, researcher, or whatever, and you've been asked to help with the following situation/problem...". "You are one of President Obama's closest advisors..." If I read an assignment that began like this, I'd definitely want to get involved!
- **Aim students at your desired outcome.** Give your students clear, written directions and scaffolding so that they can create their best work. Divide the assignment into manageable steps, and provide students with a timeline and a checklist to keep them on track. If it's a large assignment, you can even have students hand in parts of the assignment at various points so that you can check on how they're doing.

- **Share your assignment with your colleagues**, especially those who teach the same or a similar course. This may be the most difficult step of all! Many of us teach part-time at Laney and don't even know who our colleagues are in our department. I know how hard it is to communicate with others we may rarely see, but your colleagues might be able to give you suggestions that strengthen your assignment, and they might also begin sharing their assignments with you. Plus, sharing our assignments promotes what we're all collectively trying to accomplish—the success of our students.

**Steps adapted from "Assessing Student Learning" by Linda Suskie*

LET THE SHARING BEGIN!

In the spirit of sharing, I've persuaded two instructors in the book discussion group to allow me to publish assignments they've given their students which assess the learning objectives of their courses and which have engaged their students as well. A big thank you to Adrienne Oliver, English instructor, and Chelsea Cohen, ESL instructor, for providing examples of the creative and engaging tasks that Laney instructors are assigning their students.

Adrienne Oliver: I teach English 201, which requires much reading. To engage and assess my students' reading, I used a technique called "Focused Reading". This activity is one of the many SETs listed in *Student Engagement Techniques* by Elizabeth F. Barkley. For this in-class activity, Barkley suggests that the instructor identify three or four themes beforehand that she would like students to identify in a preselected reading. Then, have students actively read the material and locate places in the text where they discover the pre-identified themes. I created a worksheet to guide my students through the activity. In my course, I used the lyrics of a hip hop song that lends itself to textual analysis. I identified four themes and left space in the worksheet for students to write down lines in the lyrics where they identified these themes. Students were engaged with the act of reading by having to identify the themes I had found. When I collected these worksheets, I was able to assess how well students had actively read and identified thematic elements in a text. I found this SET to be a useful assessment method and would recommend it to instructors in any discipline. Feel free to contact me for copies of the worksheet I created (aoliver@peralta.edu).

Chelsea Cohen: In my ESL intermediate listening and speaking class, I recently did a unit on the "future" that revolved around Google Glass. Many of my students had never heard of this new gadget, so we spent time exploring the Glass website and summarizing its functions and capabilities. Afterward, they got together in groups to discuss the potential pros and cons of Google Glass, and together came up with a series of provocative questions using the future tense. Some of these questions included: "Will there be health consequences for people who wear Google Glass?" "Will they be appropriate for all ages?" "Will Google Glass infringe on people's privacy?" After listing the class's questions, we then speculated on the answers, collectively. For homework, the students had to write a paragraph about whether or not they would buy Google Glass. This unit also paired well with my midterm assessment. I decided to show a news clip about Google Glass being banned at bars in San Francisco for the listening portion of the test, along with comprehension questions. I felt this series of activities was engaging to my students because the topic is current and relevant to their lives. Many of my students have since told me they have continued to research and read about the topic outside of class. As a result, they also feel more capable of joining the conversation on the controversial issues surrounding Google Glass.

