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Writing to Learn (2015-2018)

CHALLENGES

I had challenges in two very different courses - one is a large (90 students), lecture-based, core class required for our major, and one is a small, combined upper division/graduate level class with an average of 10 students, that had traditionally been a lecture class with a paper discussion. I noticed that students had a difficult time understanding some key concepts, so I wanted to develop a pedagogy that more fully engaged students, and allowed me to give daily feedback relevant to course material. I also wanted students to solve applied problems and increase the breadth and depth of their critical thinking skills. My overall goal for this project was to use writing assignments to foster critical thinking and better comprehension of the concepts.

The Writing-to-Learn Program “showed me a different way to interact with students and to know what was troubling or interesting [to] them. I will defiantly do this again. The students also really liked the writing assignments.”

MY PROJECT

For the large class, I designed and implemented a series of critical thinking writing assignments. I also implemented a "Class Basket" : At the end of each lecture students wrote something about the class (e.g. what confused them, what interested them, what questions they still had) and put it into the Basket. In the small class, I designed a series of writing assignments that built on each other throughout the semester. I also gave daily written assignments on readings and discussions.

RESULTS

In the large class, students learned key concepts better and achieved higher test scores with the critical thinking exercises. Student evaluations also indicated that the students liked the class basket. In the small, upper-level class, daily writing assignments were usually given as quizzes over the discussion or reading material. They proved very useful in providing insight about which students were reading the assignments, and the level of understanding about the material.