

# A short take on: value in textbooks

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EACH YEAR college students in America spend approximately \$5.5 billion on textbooks. With each student spending roughly \$900 on books assigned by professors, are these dollars being well spent and are students receiving a fair return on their investment (NACS 2008)? More importantly, do these texts serve the integral function in the courses as described in professors' syllabi?

Does our responsibility to students with regard to textbooks end with a bookstore order form and correlating chapters with topics on our syllabi? Or are textbooks potentially valuable tools which can add depth and breadth to our courses, whose worth should require effort on our part to encourage students to read?

Textbooks, if properly integrated into a course, can aid in student learning by providing a "layered approach" to a subject (learning by revisiting topics with increasing insights). And in the context of a community college, textbooks can be a valuable tool to teach our students lessons about the nature of education.

Before my first semester teaching, a senior faculty member told me about his use of weekly quizzes as a means of ensuring that students "do the reading"; otherwise, he warned, "they won't read." Taking his advice to heart, I incorporated weekly quizzes into my first courses, and they have become a significant component of my teaching philosophy. Fourteen years later, I know that my students do

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read the assigned materials and that their reading represents an integral part of their education. As a result, not only are my students more actively engaged in the learning process, they also learn lessons about the educational process and their own capabilities.

Pedagogically, student reading can represent a major component of a “layered” approach to teaching. Students who read a chapter before class gain some familiarity with the topic which hopefully becomes clearer as a result of lectures and class discussions. With some background on the topic, students are far better equipped for class discussions; and subjects can be considered in greater depth. In a survey course, with the text providing a broad overview of a topic, the instructor is freed from the responsibility of discussing every detail. In addition, by the time students are studying for a midterm or a final exam, they have been exposed to the material several times and are consequently better prepared for such exercises. Reading the text also has the advantage of exposing students to a second interpretation of the material: that of the authors of the text in addition to that of the instructor.

The use of quizzes to increase student reading serves two larger goals: promoting critical thinking and student growth. For example, the primary objective of a his-

tory professor should not be the downloading of a specific amount of potential trivia. Once the students have acquired some familiarity with a particular civilization or time period, class time can be devoted to critically discussing the motivations of those who came before us; and, as a result, students will learn something about themselves and their world. A second benefit of this strategy, which is relevant to the community college mission, focuses on personal development—that Thomas Edison’s formula for “genius being 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration” is applicable to students’ lives. If they do the reading or the work, they can succeed.

Weekly quizzes provide relatively simple “mountains” to conquer and students gain a degree of confidence necessary to confront more demanding elements of the course. Having achieved some level of success in quizzes, students feel more “invested” in the course and are more willing to confront other challenges. For example, a quiz on the Hebrews in Western Civilization Semester One might ask a student to identify: Yahweh, Abraham, the Covenant, moral autonomy, etc. The midterm exam might consist of one essay asking students to compare worldviews—of the ancient Near East, the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Romans—and

the impact of those worldviews on the social organizations of these people. In the last quarter of the semester, students might be assigned a reaction paper requiring them to “weigh the relative merits of faith and reason as the source of human knowledge.” Subjecting a large percentage of today’s college population to such critical thinking challenges as their first graded assignment—a traditional educational practice—would produce too many failures. If we are interested in more than just “the survival of the fittest,” if we want to teach critical thinking to a large number of students, then early in the semester, teaching them a degree of self confidence and getting them “invested” in courses represent solid objectives.

A review of course assessments by 2,070 undergraduates over the last twelve years—their reading practices and the effect of quizzes on their efforts and performance—demonstrates that students will read textbooks given the proper incentive and they will benefit in a number of ways.

For the last ten years, with the quiz component worth 20% of the final grade in the courses I teach, the level of student reading has been impressive, as illustrated in Table 1.

With more than 78% of students completing, at minimum, over three-quarters of the assigned readings on time, throughout the semester, the strategy seems quite successful. To put the numbers

**Table 1: Level of student reading since fall 1999 with quizzes worth 20% of course grade**

Number of students responses	Percentage of student responses to “Honestly, on an average week during the semester, how much of the assigned readings did you complete?”				
	All or nearly all of the reading	75% of the readings	50% of the readings	25% of the readings	None of the readings
1709	44.4%	34.4%	14.7%	5.7%	0.8%

**Table 2: Student response to no quizzes (Fall 05 to Fall 2008)**

Number of students responses	Percentage of student responses to “If weekly quizzes were not given, would you have read the text prior to coming to class?”		
	Yes	No	Uncertain
716	18.3%	68.1%	13.6%

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into greater perspective, in one class during the Spring 2004 semester, students were anonymously polled and asked whether they would have done the readings as assigned, on time, if there had not been weekly quizzes. Of the 25 students polled only three said that they would have done the readings. In this section, which was a particularly engaged class, 20 students received an “A” on their quiz component and 4 received a “B” out of a final enrollment of 28. As a result, in each subsequent semester, students have also been asked whether they would have read the texts if they were not quizzed on the readings. As illustrated in Table 2, over 68% responded “no” and less than 19% answered “yes.”

The results seem consistent with national surveys. For example, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement in 2003 found that “among all students, 71% report that they come to class unprepared at least some of the time, while 28% indicate that they never do so” (CCSSE, 2004). The bottom line is that without an incentive to read, the majority of college students do not read their assignments.

## **Specifics of the strategy**

The approach to quizzes is relatively straightforward. On the first

meeting of each week, students are quizzed on the reading material assigned for that week. As part of the normal routine of the week, the quizzes are expected and enable students to organize their responsibilities. Unlike “pop” quizzes which bring out “the gambler instinct” in students and which can make the professor the scapegoat for student failure (“Why did he give us one this week? Last week when I did all the reading, we didn’t get one. Well, I guess we’re safe next week.”), scheduled quizzes are expected and place the responsibility for success on the student’s shoulders—but earlier and with far less trauma than if the first grade were the midterm exam. The quiz component of a course quickly becomes part of a professor’s “reputation,” and a surprising number of students are well aware of that requirement before enrolling in a class. Quizzes are not given on the week of the midterm exam, final exam, or when a paper is due—as students should focus on these more valuable exercises. With a fifteen week semester (and obviously not giving one on the first class meeting), classes generally take 10 or 11 quizzes depending on the specifics of the calendar.

Students quiz grades are calculated from their top 8 scores which not only gives them a bit of a “learning curve” (to figure out

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how to read and prepare for a quiz), but takes into account the myriad problems of life (“I forgot to read.” “I had a family crisis.” “There was a really great concert in Phoenix.”). For those students who are not committed to the discipline necessary for success in college, the weight of not doing the work slowly becomes an increasing burden. Ignoring the first couple of zeros may be easy (“He’s only going to count the top eight anyway”), but there is a sort of inescapable reality as the semester proceeds. (Note: The classes also have a mandatory attendance policy with only 3 unexcused absences allowed.)

An identification quiz is the most frequently used format, but on occasion students are given short essays. For example, the quiz for a chapter on the Renaissance, might ask, “What was the Renaissance?”. Generally, students are given a list of 13 people, concepts, developments, events, etc. from the reading and asked to identify five of them. The instructions specify that the answer should involve a substantial sentence or two. Such a quiz is not a vigorous exercise. Its objective is not to test depth of knowledge or breadth of understanding, but rather is simply a tool to begin engaging students in the subject matter. Generally, quizzes include “an extra credit” question which targets things like the author’s conclu-

sion, one of the illustrations, or some other supplemental material in a chapter. As the semester progresses, the number of potential options is reduced as student confidence and commitment increase. “Moving the bar” represents a necessary step. An analogous philosophy guides quiz grading. The first quiz is graded rather liberally and the last is graded more rigorously—again with the goal of getting students to “buy into” a reading regimen.

Certainly there are some negatives to weekly quizzes. They represent an additional “drain” on the instructor’s time both to construct and grade, although the latter is not very taxing and can be easily worked into one’s daily routine (while watching the news, or waiting for one’s spouse in the car outside a store). Probably the greatest negative is the dedication of 10 to 15 minutes of class time to them each week. The loss of class time must be balanced with the positive trade off that students are spending significant amounts of time actually reading the textbook.

Those students who “buy into the program”—the majority of students in these assessments—have a positive take on the value of quizzes. “I like taking the weekly quizzes because it motivates me to read the assigned reading.” “Great ... it certainly motivated me to read prior to class.” “[The quizzes] were

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great to keep us involved in the course.” “Quizzes helped me to discipline myself and read on a daily basis. They also helped me focus on the most important points.” “The weekly quizzes helped me tremendously to prepare for the midterm and final exam.” “I believe these quizzes were effective in persuading me to read the chapter! Were it not for these quizzes, I probably would not have cracked the book.” “Honestly I wouldn’t read if we didn’t have quizzes.” “The weekly quizzes challenge the student to actually READ!” “The frequency of the quizzes kept me focused, and forced me to read the text. Don’t ever discontinue these, please.”

As educators, one of our objectives is engaging students in a dialogue about our particular area of expertise, which also represents one of our greatest frustrations. So-

phie Ruscello recorded her search for a teaching position at “a college with a truly receptive and inquisitive student body,” and noted that many others shared “the same problem with unmotivated students” (Ruscello 2004). Students who are invested in a course are far more likely to be engaged, receptive, and inquisitive. Students who spend a significant amount of time outside of class reading a textbook are more invested, both emotionally and intellectually, in a course. While the thought of \$5.5 billion a year worth of textbooks being minimally used or neglected entirely is upsetting, the recognition that we have failed to instill in our students the value of reading is tragic. Our responsibility as teachers should extend beyond simply ordering books and should include strategies which cause our students actually to read.

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