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Presentation January 18,2018

ENGAGING AND RETAINING STUDENTS BY OFFERING CHOICES
AND INCENTIVES

Engagement

The Fall Line

Many of us think we have hit a brick wall when we cannot move forward easily doing what we have been doing. The image of hitting a brick wall evokes those car crash tests with the dummies in the driver's seat being thrown violently forward and then back, which we all know gives the classic whiplash. Anyone who has ever been in a car accident knows the incredible, debilitating emotional response, no matter how small the incident, that overtakes us. How much will this cost me? Is anyone hurt? Will I get a traffic ticket? Was this my fault? What do I do? Is the other driver really angry? These are questions that are not trying to solve the problem; they are verbalizing the fears we have.

What if we had access to a different image? An image that can make us challenge ourselves to use what we know; an image

that rouses our curiosity; an image that can help us move forward. The “fall line” seems to be a much better image to help us through a difficult learning situation.

The fall line is the place in a river where there is a waterfall. Beyond that point, a river is no longer tidal. It does not go through cycles of rising and falling with the tides. It does not change directions and mix new water with old water. In Maryland this is called the “Tidewater” and covers the Eastern Shore.

Beyond the fall line all the water runs forward, down to the ocean. The water is fresh; therefore, the aquatic life changes significantly. The first problem for anyone going upstream is how to get above the fall. If you canoe, you know the term *portage*. It is a French word that means to carry. You carry the canoe around the obstacle. You simply cannot continue to do what you have been doing.

If we think of our lives as a journey upstream from the tidewater where fresh water mixes constantly with the salt water, where we encounter new experiences with the support of what is

known and familiar and our lives are supported by our family, friends and teachers who help us to solve problems, we can understand that all of that prepares us to face the fall line. The fall line is a place where we have to draw on our own resources and solve a problem alone using what we have learned and seek new mentors.

All of us will eventually encounter a fall line in our lives. We will not be able to drift up and down with the tides and enjoy the ride. For some, coming back to school is overcoming a fall line. For others, it is encountering course demands that require more time and thought than we have ever had to give to learning. Life is difficult for us as we ascend the fall up into the freshwater stream. This is when we have to draw on the resources that are available to us and use skills we may not have given any thought to.

Does the first paper, quiz or exam become a brick wall for some of your students? How can you make what appears to be a failure a part of the learning experience, not a brick wall?

Students quit when they see the course as a brick wall.

Struggling students are often:

- not studying effectively
- not reading and interpreting assignments correctly
- not using poor work to learn

You can:

Present learning skills and techniques that are specific to your course.

Literally a handout on how to study the content of this course.

Keep a notebook: What should I record? *You cannot just assign a journal!* You have to tell them what to put in it and how to use it.

Record:

vocabulary is essential: record words as you encounter them, use table of contents to find words, glossary to define them. **memorization task: how to memorize**

Concepts and processes easy reference for how to_____ **understanding** which does not have to be memorized

Analysis of performance on a quiz, paper, exam

Questions to ask instructor

- how to ask a question—be specific and focused
- conference using email

Review: Essential part of integrating, understanding and remembering ideas

Revise: edit, comment, add

Part II Using a points added approach to grading

A flexible grading approach

Problems:

Essays count 60% and Activities count 40%

Applying a numerical evaluation to work that is graded subjectively (What is being valued in a particular essay or assignment: GMU, original thought, presentation, demonstration of research skills)

Averaging grades reduces the value of a high grade.

$$100+50=150/2=75$$

I got an A, **but** becomes I got 100 **and** 50= 150

Outcomes:

Applying different values to similar activities (all discussion posts do not require the same amount of effort.)

Coping with missing work that is not essential for all students (some need to revise, others do not)

Allowing for learning to occur after more work is completed; therefore, an average is not valid

Having a way to handle illness or a student, a family member or other personal issues

Having students drop because they could not see any way to get an acceptable grade

This system works for a class that has a large number of varied assignments in which the evaluation is complex and subjective. Most of the evaluation in English composition is about applied skills in writing and analysis of thinking related to research. Consequently, the student should be performing better at the end of the course than the beginning. However, the early evaluations often indicate so many different levels of work that need attention that students panic and give up.

English 102 Online has approximately 30 graded assignments.

There are discussions, grammar quizzes, short written activities, a ten page research paper, three major essays. Very little of the

work is subject to objective testing where there is a right or wrong answer.

Setting up a flexible grading system

Print course schedule from fall

Compose a course schedule of all the assignments you will give.

Place values on those assignments. 10, 20, 40, 100 points

Add up the total points. What is the most points a student can earn?

Adjust the points so that you have at least 100 or 1000. I like 1000 because it hardly feels worth doing something for only 1 point as opposed to 10 .

Think about where you might give extra credit. A discussion that requires research is worth more than something that only ask for a personal opinion. How much time do you expect to be spent on this assignment? How polished should it be?

My goal is to have available about 1250 points. When I grade, I will give additional points to any work that is exceptionally well done. It represents thought and is well presented.

One student thought my grading odd because I gave 5 extra points on a 20 point assignment. He turned that into a percentage and said I gave a 25% bonus. I told him the 20 points was about C level work.

Here is the evaluations (copy from syllabus.)

A equals

B equals

The caveat is that many items are required. Failure to do a required assignment means a minus from the total earned equal to the value of the required assignment. About half the assignments are required.

The four essays are mandatory, but a student can still earn an A in the course without having A's on all the required essays.

Why does this seem to be working?

There is no such thing as a failing grade. All work earns points.

There are choices about work that might be skipped.

Additional work can be given to students.

I can give an honest grade for poor work and request a revision which will earn points

I know the numbers are arbitrary and only based on my opinions.

Students remain in the class longer and seem to be dropping because they have personal issues or time problems with work/school, not because they see themselves failing the course.