



## Collaboration on Course Content Encourages Critical Thinking and Commitment to Learning

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In many of the writing courses I teach at Metropolitan State University, which are about 90 percent adult learners, we work together to decide the reading assignments and related writing topics for about two-thirds of the course. As we work through the decisions about texts and topics, we debate the value of the texts to the writing assignment, to the course, and to the students' education. This approach often leads to unsolicited debate about the society of the classroom and about major social and educational issues. Such classroom discourse and collaborative decision making raise the students' level of control and encourage critical thinking about the purposes of reading and writing. As the students exert control, they feel empowered, which inspires good discussion, reading, and writing.

To begin with, I require three books—a brief textbook on writing, a handbook, and a multicultural anthology containing a diverse range of essays, short fiction and poetry. I assign reading in the textbook and refer students to the handbook as needed, keeping the anthology as the locus for our decision making. To establish direction and get off to a brisk start, I select the reading for the first third of the course

from the anthology and assign two papers based on the reading. Also, during the first third, we select the reading for the remaining two-thirds of the course through one of two methods—either *group discussion* or *writing and discussion*.

To decide on the reading through *discussion*, and to prepare students for writing expository essays, I organize students into small groups and assign them the task of recommending specific readings from the anthology and discovering other materials from outside sources. To help focus each group's efforts, I usually ask them to focus on two or three issues or sections of the anthology, but I also encourage them to roam freely throughout the book and to search elsewhere for pertinent contemporary or historical texts. Each group then uses discussion and negotiation to develop recommendations and a brief rationale, which it presents to the class (including the instructor) for further discourse, including possible changes or amendments. Eventually, we agree to three reading assignments, each of which will serve as the basis for an essay assignment.

To make the same decisions through *writing and discussion*, and to prepare students for writing persuasive essays, I ask

each student to write a three-to-four-page essay in which the student recommends reading assignments, preferably from the anthology, and a related topic for writing. In their essays, students are to persuade their classmates and me that their recommendations are appropriate to the course and to other members of the class. The students write the papers in three drafts over a period of three weeks, and each week students receive feedback on their drafts from me and from peer response groups composed of students recommending the same or similar topics for reading and writing. Each peer group presents each week to the class so we can hear all the recommendations and the reasons for them. The writing, revising, peer group discussions and classroom discourse all help students to think critically about their recommendations and to identify and meet the demands of their audience, including both students and instructor.

Because the students and I collaborate on the content of the course, I have to listen to their opinions and work with their contributions. The outcomes from such collaborative decision making contribute to learning in several ways.

Asking students to decide what we will read and write about for two-thirds of the course involves them in a real educational problem. Such problem solving inspires critical thinking about the nature of education, demythologizes the teacher as fount of knowledge, and increases students' control over the course. Together, these elements encourage student compliance and commitment.

While surfing the anthology's selections so they can recommend readings, the students are practicing exploratory investigation. In other words, asking them to explore the anthology is like sending them to a museum to view the collections.

Such exploration helps develop their understanding and appreciation.

As students discuss or write about the works to be read, they accomplish several things at once: as we might expect, they clarify their positions on the issues raised by the texts and, more unexpectedly, they reveal their reasons for pursuing an education. For example, many students want to read and write about abortion and euthanasia because, they argue, one of the purposes of education is to prepare them for moral and ethical crises. Such unsolicited debate about the goals of writing courses and the purposes of education increases students' control over their education, thus helping to balance the normally asymmetrical power relationship between teacher and students.

Collaborating on course content enables students to understand the context of educational decisions, which leads them to discover and think critically about some of the theories behind the decisions. For example, they may question the compositionist's idea that there are significant parallels between decision making and the writing process. And those interested in management, either as a discipline or a condition of employment, may compare collaboration with other theories about how to lead people in the effort to produce quality work.

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