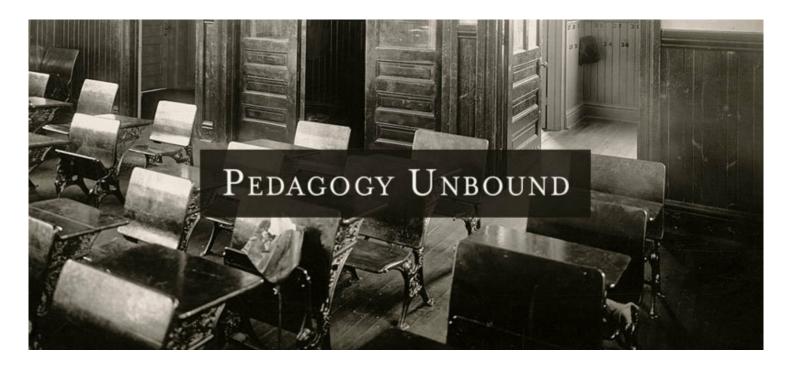# Doing Your Own Assignments First

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One of the biggest differences between the experience I had as a student and the experience students have in my classroom has to do with assignments. When I was a student, assignments often had no discernible relationship to what we were doing in class. Oh, we would have to write about a text we read for class. But once the assignment was given out, we were generally on our own — there were no opportunities to work on it in class, to reflect on the skills the assignment asked us to practice, to share and workshop our ideas with our classmates.

The courses I teach are different. A sequence of major assignments form the backbone of the semester. Almost everything we do in class is explicitly linked to one or more of those assignments. We break them down into stages, work on them collaboratively, and discuss the challenges students might face along the way. Like many teachers, I design assignments not just to assess performance, but also to give students opportunities to practice and develop important skills.

An assignment is not merely an instrument to measure learning; it's a way to engender it. So I devote large swaths of class time to major assignments, letting students try out ideas on me and their classmates, foregrounding the process of knowledge creation.

Back in March, in a column on how to improve your assignments , I wrote about the process of "dogfooding" — or completing your assignments before your students do. It's a concept borrowed from the tech world, in which companies encourage their employees to try out products before releasing them to the general public. The point is to find and fix any bugs before the product "goes live." I wrote about the idea after reading a blog post about it by

Jennifer Gonzalez. Despite the extra work it requires of teachers, dogfooding is a great way to sniff out problems with our assignments before our students get them. It's a mode of quality control.

But a different blog post, this one from British education writer David Didau, opened my eyes to another application of dogfooding. When we go to the trouble of completing our own assignments, we give ourselves specialized training in just the skills we're asking our students to practice. We can then use that training to teach better. Let me explain.

Let's say you assign a research paper that asks students to investigate and compare two contrasting scholarly texts and then make an argument that one is more persuasive. When you do it yourself, you'll have to go through the process of searching for sources, evaluating and selecting them, figuring out what's relevant in the literature, developing your argument, and, of course, drafting and revising the paper itself. Just reading that list of tasks, it should be clear that going through this process lends itself to a series of lessons that can help students better understand the choices they'll have to make as they complete their assignments.

Because you've done each of these tasks yourself, you can easily talk about the experience, allowing students to listen in on your thinking as you made your way down the same road they'll soon have to travel.

You can also produce models. I've written before about modeling the work that you want students to do — both by using past student work and by opening up about your own scholarly work. Dogfooding allows you to combine those two, so students benefit from seeing how an expert would approach student work. You can show a paragraph, for example, and walk the class through the decisions you made at various points in writing it. Then you can prompt a discussion on the decisions the students will have to make when drafting their papers.

Didau links to an excellent variation of this kind of modeling, in which the instructor shows poorly done models — purposely simplistic early drafts of an assignment — and asks students to improve upon them. That very nicely lends itself to small group work, and I can imagine students getting a kick out of the idea of improving their teacher's work.

Assignments typically make up a large percentage of a student's final grade — clearly they are important. So it makes sense to make them an important part of our teaching as well. Think deeply about what you want your students to achieve with each assignment. Break down the assignment into clearly delineated tasks, and integrate those tasks into your lesson plans. Then, before students get to it, take the time to complete the assignment yourself. As you do it, you'll find yourself coming up with ideas about how to teach the assignment's skills. You'll produce models that can help students see what to aim for, and what to avoid. And your students will appreciate that you haven't asked them to do anything that you weren't willing to do yourself.

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