Read Long and Prosper: Five Do’s and Don’ts for Preparing Students for College

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Abstract: Too often, students reach college without the learning, critical thinking, and literacy skills they need to succeed in higher education. Recent educational trends that promote teaching to the test, short reading and writing assignments, group work, and technological resources contribute to students’ difficulties transitioning to college-level work. Instead, students need practice in sustaining attention to longer readings and writing exercises, researching through more traditional library methods, learning from a variety of teaching styles, and working individually to show subject mastery and creativity. These five Do’s and Don’ts of preparing students for college represent a college professor’s wish-list of secondary classroom experiences to help students make a smooth transition to higher education.

Keywords: college preparation, literacy, critical thinking, student research, reading

So now that I’ve found these books in the online card catalog, how do I get the book from the library?” The college freshman posing this question to me last fall was puzzled but determined. In the process of doing research for a 7–8 page paper, she had hit a significant roadblock. This student, I thought, has not been well served by her high school education. She is an honors student at a selective liberal arts college, and yet she has never had to physically check out a book from the library. And she is certainly not the only one. What has gone wrong here?

I often hear from friends and family in the trenches of high school teaching about the latest trends in curriculum, instruction, and evaluation. Usually I am impressed with the rigor, dedication, and creativity of high school teachers as they seek to prepare their students for college coursework. But every now and then I hear about trends that, as I reflect on the difficulties many college freshmen experience, seem to contribute to students’ lack of preparation for the realities of college academics.

Despite educators’ good intentions (or perhaps because of them), students arrive on college campuses without sufficient preparation for what college-level academics will require from them. They may be forced to take remedial classes in reading or mathematics, unable to write, read, or listen in a sustained manner, overly reliant on technology. In short, many very bright high school graduates are overwhelmed by the high level of literacy required for college coursework. A high percentage flounder and even drop out. The ACT testing service report “The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2012” announced, “60 Percent of 2012 High School Graduates At Risk of Not Succeeding in College and Career” (ACT 2012). The nonprofit organization College Complete America notes that almost 20% of students entering four-year colleges or universities will be required to take remedial courses and that these students are significantly less likely to complete their degrees (College Complete America 2012, 6–8). Students’ lack of preparation also makes it more difficult for college faculty to do their jobs. A recent Faculty Focus survey found that, for the second year in a row, faculty said that their biggest daily challenge, making their jobs more difficult today than five years ago, was “unmotivated and unprepared students” (Bart 2013, para. 6).

Often, even good students are not adequately prepared, a trend noted by former Bates College president Elaine Tuttle Hansen in a recent article in The
Many secondary educators already do what I am suggesting. Others struggle against the forces Bernstein mentioned that require teaching to a variety of standardized tests. For teachers who may need a little support for their efforts from the other side of the high school diploma, I identify five “don’ts,” which represent what I see as problematic trends in secondary education. For each “don’t” I recommend a “do,” which more closely replicates the kind of teaching and evaluation methods students are likely to face in college.

1. Don’t Assign Only Short Readings. Do Assign Longer Books.

Short readings can be useful and serve an important purpose, especially in teaching the skill of close reading. As a historian, I often assign shorter readings when the sources are older documents whose language may be difficult for students to interpret. But college students will also need to be able to read longer works.

If students are going to learn to read the more complex and lengthier texts needed to develop their intellectual skills, they must be presented with that opportunity through their secondary education. Our culture currently emphasizes short forms of communication; Twitter’s 140-character limit is a good example of this, but texting is even more concise. Think, too, of how short newspaper articles are these days and the way the Internet creates brief summaries in place of more extended treatment of subjects. Given this emphasis on the quick and pithy communiqué, many students will not find a reason to attempt longer readings on their own.

Yet complex ideas, events, and relationships often need a longer format to be fully and truthfully expressed. College professors seeking to explore the central issues of their disciplines routinely assign substantial books which students must read on their own. The recent, controversial book Academically Adrift (Arum and Roksa 2011) has made a significant impact on many college teachers by recommending that we assign more reading and more writing to first- and second-year college students in order to advance their critical thinking skills. The authors argue, “having demanding faculty who include reading and writing requirements in their courses (i.e., when faculty require that students read more than forty pages a week and write more than twenty pages over the course of a semester) is associated with improvement in students’ critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills” (Arum and Roksa 2011, 93). Especially as faculty take this advice to heart, students may have several hundred pages of reading to complete in a week. If they have no experience navigating longer readings, however, they may know neither how to comprehend longer readings, nor how to retain information they read.

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Students must develop sustained attention through reading, an ability to concentrate that grows with practice. Although getting students to read longer books may be challenging, teachers must make the effort. If teachers consistently expect students to read longer works, and if they present appealing books like novels (even popular ones), students will gain some of the exposure to long readings that they need. Students will (and should) get more such practice in college, but if they have not had any reason to “read long” in middle school or high school, they may abandon the attempt before they realize that this is something they can actually do.

2. Don’t Assign Only Short Papers. Do Assign Longer Papers for Students to Write in Multiple Stages.

Sustained attention to a subject through writing is another valuable skill students should practice before reaching college. I routinely assign a short research paper (7–8 pages) to my honors freshman section of World Civilizations II. Many, perhaps even most, of these students—who represent the best and brightest of their high schools—find the length of the assignment overwhelming. Some have never had to write a paper longer than five pages; others have never even written a paper longer than two pages. While some may believe college students will not have to write anything longer, this is not true. In fact, a study by Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) of first-year students’ writing assignments revealed that freshmen in 2008 wrote papers two and a half times longer than those in 1984.

Certainly, there is a trend in our texting and tweeting culture toward brief, sound-bite-style communication. However, the long research paper continues to be the dominant mode of expression among the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) also found that first-year college assignments were much more likely to require research than those twenty years before. Top students routinely must complete thesis-length projects to achieve college honors. When they have had no preparation in writing longer papers, students become overwhelmed by the assignment. They do not know how to formulate a topic that can be explored in more than two or three pages. I have found that many honors freshmen expect that a seven-page paper can cover everything from the Code of Hammurabi forward. Without prior experience, students lack confidence that they can write at length and in depth and that there is even anything worth saying beyond page two.

To make longer research papers accessible for middle and high school students, have them approach the process in stages. Have students turn in a paper topic, including a thesis or hypothesis, a bibliography, and multiple drafts—each part of the process to be graded separately. Students who have a process like this under their belts from high school can then deploy it when they encounter long assignments in college.

3. Don’t Focus too Much on Group Discussion and Projects. Do Encourage Students to Work Individually.

With the intent of helping prepare students for “team-oriented” workplaces, some instructors have emphasized group work: discussions, projects, presentations. While group work can provide useful skills in how to work well with others, it tends to undervalue individual work. The recent book Quiet, by Susan Cain (2012), suggests that elements like this in the educational system work against the naturally introverted, who are thereby forced to work more like extroverts do. Moreover, group work may not be as effective as working alone. Cain’s chapter “When Collaboration Kills Creativity” explores the myths of group productivity and quotes Apple co-founder Stephen Wozniak, who said in his memoir, “Work alone. You’re going to be best able to design revolutionary products and features if you’re working on your own. Not on a committee. Not on a team” (Cain 2012, 73–74).

Many academics at the college level are introverts, and college professors by and large still focus on individually-demonstrated skills. Some of us are leery of group work because of the difficulty in assessing whether each student has mastered the desired concepts and the challenge of corralling the “shirkers.” Especially in larger universities, students may find themselves taking a class without an immediate study group of friends to help them prepare for tests; so they must know how to study by themselves without group interaction. Students will be required to turn in their own individually-written papers; so they must know how to formulate ideas by and for themselves. Students will be evaluated individually on how well they understand and communicate concepts; so they must be able to stand on their own feet without aid from others. And if the research cited by Cain is correct, they will be more creative and productive as a result.

4. Don’t Play too Much to Individual Learning Styles. Do Encourage Students to Develop the Ability to Learn from a Variety of Teaching Methods.

Identifying learning styles and knowing how to address the differences has certainly helped teachers and students to bridge divides in order to enhance learning. Yet too often new college students expect their professors to bend to their styles or they dismiss courses and professors who do not play to their particular mode of learning. While few college professors have had courses in pedagogy, nevertheless, most have a general understanding of the learning styles concept and its value. Most of us are not responsive to student demands to
teach to their learning style not because we do not understand how to do it, but because we dismiss the notion that one should learn only in the style that is most comfortable.

At the college level, professors expect students to do the bending. It behooves students to be adaptive so that they can learn in whatever mode is presented. Encouraging students to believe that their learning style should be catered to cripples their ability to succeed in the wide variety of classrooms they will experience in college. Encourage them instead to develop an ability to learn from a variety of modes: lecture, group discussion, presentation, reading, research, experimentation, and so on. All are valuable. Those who will be able to continue educating themselves even beyond the classroom need the ability to learn from a variety of sources. This is not just a college skill but a life skill we should all be working to help students develop. Employers as well as college teachers will value this ability.

5. Don’t Over-Emphasize Technology for Researching, Writing, and Note-Taking. Do give Students Opportunities to Step Out of the Virtual and into the Real World.

No question about it: Technology is revolutionizing the way we access information, express ourselves, and record important moments and ideas. Technology has also helped teachers enhance student learning in creative ways. Students are coming into their classrooms with ever more access to the Internet and other technologies—even at a young age—and certainly need to become tech-savvy. But it is not sufficient to substitute technology entirely for more traditional research methods. Particularly as the Internet provides a fast, easy path to information, students who understand the many other paths that exist, and know how to use them, will have an edge in higher education and the workplace.

In order to give students experience with more traditional sources of information, I specifically prohibit the use of Internet sources for most of my research assignments. Many professors rightly or wrongly are scornful of online information sites like Wikipedia. When it comes down to it, these are mostly encyclopedia-style ways of communicating information in short-hand ways. To delve deeply into a topic, students will need to access more scholarly sources, including books from the library or articles from professional journals. Some of these may be available online or through research databases like JSTOR or Historical Abstracts, but many are not. In my field, at the higher levels of scholarship we still must do archival research—looking at manuscript and primary sources in the flesh, as it were—in order to uncover history’s untold stories. Students encountering this kind of research are sometimes overwhelmed at first but then become fascinated by the tangible quality of such sources that allow us contact with people across time.

Students also increasingly ask me about taking notes in class via their laptop computers. Many professors and even entire departments have policies banning laptop use in the classroom. Beyond the concern that students are checking email or surfing the web while they should be paying attention, professors worry that when students type their notes in class, they become stenographers instead of critically-thinking note-takers who must make choices about what they write down. Also, in contrast to handwriting notes, typing does not seem to help students remember what they have recorded. A recent issue of Scientific American Mind suggests that “Pens and pencils do seem to engage our brain in a unique manner, especially as children,” and consequently, “society ought to be very careful about putting its pencils away for good” (Keim 2013, 56).

Strikingly, perhaps because of the decline of cursive writing, students seem to be losing the ability to write by hand quickly. As a result, on timed tests they simply cannot write as much as they need to in response to essay questions. A good balance of technology and more traditional forms of researching and writing—including handwriting—will help students with the variety of assignments they will encounter in college.

Final Thoughts

Bernstein’s (2013) piece in Academe calls on college teachers to speak out against the educational trends of the last decade that have, he says, impeded students’ abilities to think and write critically and thus to be prepared for college. The Chronicle of Higher Education recently noted a report by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities demanding that colleges help address the problem of unprepared college freshmen, one important part of which was to align secondary education requirements with college expectations (Kelderman 2012). And so, let me add my voice to Bernstein’s, the college presidents’ in the AACS report, and other teachers’. At the middle and high school level, we need to prepare college-bound students by teaching them traditional skills: to sustain attention while reading and writing assignments, to work individually, to learn from a variety of educational sources and methods, and to develop resourcefulness beyond the Internet and keyboard. The ability to do each of these will not only prepare them better for the challenges of college coursework, but also for life beyond the classroom.

REFERENCES


