

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Project-Based Learning: Three-Part Reflection Paper

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

Through an iterative process, students complete a reflection paper in three parts over the course of a semester. This informal writing project moves students through a process in which they must identify the “what,” “so what,” and “now what” of a specific topic. The instructor describes the process as informal since the objective is not on the mechanics of writing or to learn a specific style of writing. The overarching goal, which the instructor outlines in detail on the syllabus and in a grading rubric, is to help students think critically about a topic, process information instead of simply remembering basic concepts, and craft a well-organized paper.

For each of the three phases of the paper, the instructor carves out time in class for students to engage with each other and discuss their papers with peers. After students have decided on their topic during the first phase of the paper, they present their topic to the entire class, highlighting their reasons for choosing their topic. Assigned in random pairs, students review each other’s work and provide feedback at each point when drafts are due. As the students are discussing their papers, the instructor walks around each pair to check on their progress, answer questions, and provide feedback. The instructor provides written feedback on each paper and attaches a copy of the rubric for the assignment that indicates where the student’s work currently

stands. When needed, the instructor will meet with students individually outside of class to provide additional guidance on how to improve their writing or will refer students to the writing center.

“What”

The purpose of the first writing assignment is to practice comprehension. Students select a topic covered in the course, such as attachment, belonging, bullying, or others. Students must write about their reason for selecting the topic, provide a summary of key points, and define key terms or concepts. The instructor assesses this paper based on how well students demonstrate an accurate understanding of the topic.

“So What”

In the second phase, students write a paper in which they explain the relevance of the topic, offer examples, and demonstrate an applied understanding of the topic. Students are encouraged to make the topic meaningful by using examples from their own lives to illustrate their understanding. For example, students may discuss how they developed a sense of belonging after starting at a new school.

“Now What”

The third paper explores the usefulness of the topic toward students’ chosen careers and offers a critique of the information provided about the topic in the

course textbook. Students can use outside sources to identify pieces of missing information and additional points that can help improve the topic content. Students are also required to construct new knowledge by developing a unique response to the topic that proposes a new approach to understanding the topic, offers a solution to a problem that emerged from examining the topic, or outlines recommendations for using key concepts in their work. Continuing with the example of belonging, a student may propose a program for helping children develop a sense of belonging when starting at a new school.