

Giving Developmentally Appropriate Writing Assignments

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Have you ever felt like the students are not performing up to your expectations of a college student? One possible reason for this is that you may be offering assignments that are not in keeping with the intellectual development of college students.

Below is a summary of the stages of cognitive development of traditional college students as identified by Marcia Baxter Magolda in her longitudinal study of Miami University college students . (See Baxter Magolda's *Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students' Intellectual Development*. Jossey-Bass, 1992. Beneath the description of each stage are some assignment ideas for students in that developmental stage.

Note

Baxter Magolda and other educational researchers suggest that in order to help students move from one stage to the next, it is important to offer their assignments that are in keeping with their developmental level and to offer a few assignments that are in keeping with the level above where they currently are.

Stages of Student Development

Stage I - Absolute Knowing

Absolute answers exist in all areas of knowledge. Uncertainty exists when students don't have access to the absolute answers at the time. Differences of views are ignored or viewed as inconsequential opinions or misinformation. The right answers can be gained from authority figures or experts. This is similar to Perry's dualism stage where knowledge is seen in true-false, good-bad dichotomies. 68% of first-year college students, 48% of sophomores, 11% of juniors and 2% of seniors are absolute learners.

Patterns of Absolute Learning:

- **Receiving** learners (more of whom are women) take a more private approach to acquiring knowledge. Receiving learners tend to take notes and listen quietly; they use peers to clarify the knowledge gained from the authority.
- **Mastering** learners (more of whom are men) adopt a more public approach to learning. Mastering learners ask questions, seek verbal interchange with instructors and use peers to quiz one another to gain control over the knowledge disseminated by the expert.

Suggested Assignments for Absolute Learners:

- Self-evaluation or progress report
- Interview (with experts from disciplinary or professional fields)
- Analytical essay using simpler forms of analysis (critiquing a text using stated criteria; tracing a theme or metaphor, investigating rhetorical features of a text, etc.)
- Simple questionnaires, surveys or direct observations of disciplinary practitioners;

- Annotated bibliography on a certain topic
- Reflective essay on one's learning and/or writing process.
- Academic and personal journal
- Description
- Summary
- Definitions, informational pamphlet, fact sheet, glossary, lexicon
- Question-and-answer column
- Charts, diagrams, flowcharts
- Dialogues (imaginary or real)
- Letters (to editor, classmates, professor, authority figure)
- Commentary, review, or critique
- Memoir, biographical sketch
- Personal essay, exemplification
- Narrative
- Peer review

Stage II - Transitional Knowing

Knowledge can be separated into certain and uncertain categories. Discrepancies among authorities or uncertainties are viewed as a result of the answers being unknown. This stage is similar to Perry's multiplicity stage where students begin to recognize that the world may not be divided dichotomously into right and wrong elements. 32% of first-year students, 53% of sophomores, 83% of juniors and 80% of seniors are transitional learners.

Patterns of Transitional Learning:

- **Interpersonal** learners (more of whom are women) prefer to be involved in learning by interacting and exchanging ideas with others. They want others to hear their views and to offer new ones. They seek rapport with the instructor to enhance their self-expression, and they resolve uncertainty by relying on their personal judgment.
- **Impersonal** learners (more of whom are men) want to be forced to think for themselves. They prefer to exchange ideas via debate and expect to be challenged by their instructor. They tend to resolve uncertainty through logic and research.

Suggested Assignments for Transitional Learners:

- Position paper (argument following the norms of a certain discipline)
- Analytical essay
- Comparison/contrast essay
- Lab report
- Naturalist essay
- Research essay with specified criteria (certain number and type of sources, focused topic)
- Critical review (of film, book, article, event, performance)
- Feature article for popular magazine
- Short story
- Poem
- One-act play
- Reflective essay; self-evaluation

Stage III - Independent Knowing

Knowledge is open to many interpretations and thus uncertain. Everyone has their own beliefs. Differences in opinions of various authorities represent the range of views possible in an uncertain world. Students begin to see themselves as equals with valid opinions. 0% of first-year students, 1% of sophomores, 5% of juniors, 16% of seniors and 57% of those in their first year after graduation are independent learners.

Patterns of Independent Learners:

- **Interindividual** learners (more of whom are women) have a dual focus: thinking for themselves yet also engaging the views of others. They believe the classroom should foster an open exchange of ideas.
- **Individual** learners (more of whom are men) also value interchange, but their primary focus is on their own thinking. They want the classroom to assist students in defining their own learning goals.

Suggested Assignments for Independent Learners:

- Position paper involving a clear research method;
- Position paper incorporating a theoretical angle;
- Evaluation of a research method and how it suits a certain discipline or type of problem;
- Evaluation of a theory or theories and their applicability to certain problem or issue;
- Comparison/contrast essay examining different research methods;
- Comparison/contrast paper examining two or more theories;
- Research paper, meaningfully incorporating a research method;
- Self-evaluation, personal reflective essay;
- Research paper, incorporating an array of primary and secondary sources;
- Personal essay, comparing a theory with the student's own experience;
- Peer review of another's research project.

Stage IV - Contextual Knowing

Individuals create their own perspective by judging evidence in a context. Thus, some knowledge claims are better than others depending on the particular context. Judgments of what to believe are possible, but they must be made based on evidence. Teacher and student share a collegial relationship. No gender patterns are discernible among college students. This stage seems to be similar to Perry's contextual relativism and commitment within relativism stages where students begin to see knowledge in the context of a particular situation and where they comprehend that they must make decisions based on their own values. 1% of juniors, 2% of seniors and 12% of those in their first year after graduation are contextual learners.

Suggested Assignments for Contextual Learners:

- Senior project that requires students to integrate in a self-conscious and critical manner two or more disciplines in order to respond to or solve a question, topic, issue or problem of their own choosing. Depending on the nature of the topic, projects should display a meaningful use of theory and/or methodology. While projects can and should vary greatly from student to student, all of them should cover most (if not all) of these steps: defining the topic; determining all knowledge needs; developing an integrative framework and questions to be

asked: specifying a study to be undertaken; gathering information; resolving disciplinary conflicts; evaluating; integrating; and concluding. The sequence of the steps and the depth with which they are covered will differ from project to project.

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