



Expanding the Boundaries for Learning: Moving Beyond the Classroom Walls

A recurring dilemma in higher education is how to design and implement the most powerful and productive learning experiences for our students. As a partial response to this question, Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek (1994) suggest that to expand the boundaries of



learning beyond the classroom walls, college faculty should create instructional opportunities that "...integrate in-class knowledge with their [students'] out-of-class lives" (p. 79). This recommendation supports the maxim that learning in higher education gains depth and significance based upon the degree to which students are invited to apply, process, personalize, and engage instructional content (Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Spence, 2001).

Integrative out-of-class learning experiences can include a focus on building and enhancing relationships with faculty as well as enriching content-related knowledge and understanding. Tutt and McCarthy (2006) articulated the following learning outcomes that can flow from a connection between in-class knowledge and the out-of-class lives of our students:

- Expanding aesthetic and literary knowledge
- Increasing content domain knowledge
- Reflecting on practical day-to-day life applications of instructional content
- Learning and practicing skills
- Taking into consideration complex cultural issues
- Becoming aware of the impacts of spiritual or emotional experiences that are part of the learning process

In this issue of *The Toolbox*, we will explore some practical ways to make these important connections outside of the classroom.

Learning-centered faculty view undergraduates as active partners in learning rather than empty vessels to be filled. They exhibit an intellectual inquisitiveness that is contagious, thereby creating a sense of wonder and excitement in their students. They have high expectations for student performance, and challenge students to discover and use their intellectual and social capabilities by using the institution's resource for learning to full advantage. . . . They recognize that, for most students, knowledge must be applied to be useful and relevant. For this reason, learning-centered faculty members design assignments and class projects that help students purposefully integrate in-class knowledge with their out of class lives. . .

Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994, p. 79

Oral Examinations

One alternative to multiple-choice or true-false tests is the oral examination. Students are scheduled for a 30-minute conversation that requires them to integrate and apply course knowledge, skills, and dispositions as they respond to questions or scenarios posed by the instructor. To keep the process honest, the instructor asks students to select two or three questions randomly chosen from a pool of 8 to 10 available questions. Student responses are assessed based upon a rubric that identifies the big ideas that could or should be part of a comprehensive response.

This is a time-consuming activity, limited to small to medium class sizes, but one that yields great results and more face-to-face interaction for faculty and students. In the long run, however, oral examinations may take no more time than conventional grading of written examinations—and provide a significantly greater personalized learning process. For larger classes, where this strategy may be difficult to implement, consider offering this option as an alternative to traditionally assigned examination requirements.

Face-to-Face

As part of the required learning experiences for the course, students are asked to engage in a 15-minute interview or conversation with the instructor. These sessions are scheduled during the first two weeks of the semester. Meetings can occur in the instructor's office or in a campus coffee shop over a latte. These times of conversation offer an opportunity for students and faculty to begin sharing their story (e.g., who they are, how they ended up at the college, their aspirations for the future) and building a relationship. Face-to-face meetings are great ways to learn more about what students are thinking and feeling about the course and about their lives.

For classes with larger enrollments, consider the following options:

- Offer this option as an extra-credit experience.
- Provide students with the option of meeting with any instructor on campus and preparing a brief reflective summary of the interview. Although this does not accomplish the goal of creating interactions between you and your students, it does create an opportunity for students to build relationships with faculty.

Explorations

Quite often, group research projects are based on reviews of the professional literature and summaries of current research. Those elements are important and serve to ground students in understanding the current state-of-the-art issues and the topic of concern. You can expand that exploration by requiring students to interact with professionals in the field who are actually doing the work the student is investigating. Explorations provide students with the opportunity to interview, shadow, and interact with the real world and with real people. One strategy for implementing these explorations is to require that students use one live source as a reference for their research projects. As an additional enticement, students could earn extra credit for including additional live references in the repertoire of informational sources.

Summary

Think of classroom walls as a porous material with information flowing in both directions. Consider ways to create knowledge and learning connections for your students that extend beyond the walls, across the campus, and into the community—connections that can also flow back within the walls and add new life and meaning to your course content. This can be how powerful and productive learning happens.

Cox, B. E., & Orehovec, E. (2007). Faculty-student interaction outside the classroom: A typology from a residential college. *Review of Higher Education*, 30(4), 343-362.

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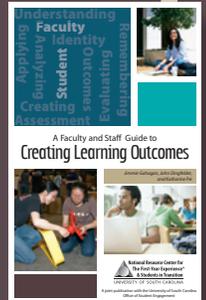
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A Faculty and Staff Guide to Creating Learning Outcomes

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Produced in
association
with the Office of
Student Engagement,
University of
South Carolina



(2010). 32 pages.

ISBN 978-1-889-27167-5.

\$3 each. Special shipping rates for bulk orders are available.

www.sc.edu/fye



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The First-Year Experience®
& Students in Transition

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The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

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