Best Practices for Designing Effective Assignments

I. BEFORE DESIGNING THE ASSIGNMENT

1. **Align and integrate the assignment goals/objectives with the course objectives**

   - Students need to see the relevance of the assignment to the course; skills they will gain through this assignment and how it will be helpful for them in future courses and on the job (real life connection).

   - How does this assignment fit into the class? How do these assignment goals contribute to the overall course goals?

   - Where possible, provide real setting and real audience
     - See example http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/fys/translategoals.cfm

2. **Determine the goals for the assignment**

   What do you want students to show you in this assignment, for example: demonstrate mastery of concept, demonstrate critical thinking, or develop new idea?

3. **Determine the type of the assignment**

   - What is the level of abstraction of the assignment? Use specific verbs in the assignment question, for example the verbs "define" and "identify" assesses the students' knowledge, while verbs "design" and "construct" assesses the students' synthesizing skills.

   - Decide the type of assignment, for example short essay or research paper.

   - Bloom's Taxonomy provides more details:
     - http://coun.uvic.ca/learning/exams/blooms-taxonomy.html
     - http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/assessment/multiplechoicequestions/blooms.html
     - http://umuc.edu/library/tutorials/information_literacy/sect4.shtml

4. **Determine whether it's an individual or group assignment**

   - If it is a group assignment, determine first if working in a group meets an assignment objective. If not, then perhaps it should be an individual assignment.

   - If it is to be done by a group, what are the rules for the group process and how will the individual student's work and contribution be assessed?

   - Group assignments are best when collaborative learning is one of the course objectives. See *Designing Effective Group Activities: Lessons for Classroom Teaching and Faculty Development* by Larry K. Michaelsen, L. Dee Fink, and Arletta Knight from the University of Oklahoma available at http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/suppmat/activity.doc

5. **Know your students**

   - Keep a writing portfolio of each students past written assignments for comparison

   - At beginning of term have students write one page in class to get evidence of writing level for future

- Plan to assign several short papers during semester

6. **Make sure the assignment complements class work**
   - More at http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/wilkinson.html

II. DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE ASSIGNMENT

1. **Design an assignment that does not lend to plagiarism**
   - Use a new set of topics for each new class
   - Use current topics
2. **Work with a subject librarian in the assignment design** as part of the course design
3. **Make the assignment clear**
   - Use unambiguous wording, always in writing
   - Assign narrowly focused topics
   - Be specific about your expectations — length, type of sources, currency, style, scope
   - Define discipline-specific jargon and library jargon
   - Specify level and quantity of research expected
   - Create clear parameters for assignments
   - Define appropriate online resources carefully
   - Additional notes:
     o Students (especially first year) tend to interpret assignments literally and are easily confused by terminology and jargon. What is "peer-review"? What differentiates magazines and journals?
     o Require specific components in the paper. For example, "The paper must make use of two Internet sources, two printed book sources, two printed journal sources, one personal interview, and one personally conducted survey." (Harris, R. 2002)
     o What kinds of research materials are acceptable? Keep in mind that students often don't differentiate between web sites found through Google and articles found through the library's databases.
4. **Divide the assignment into sections**
   - Require "process steps" for the paper
   - Give more time to the early stages of the paper
   - Emphasize process and critical thinking
   - Have specific parts due throughout term — title or statement of focus, thesis statement, preliminary summary, outline, note cards, first draft, draft of bibliography
   - Structure assignment as a series of steps — abstract, bibliography, draft
   - Require bibliography a week before paper is due to check for anomalies
   - Have students write one or more drafts in class

- Additional notes:
    - This is called the "stratified" method. See the Leckie article in the Selected Resources list for a good discussion and example of this method. Examples are also provided in the sites listed in the attached sheet of suggested readings/resources.
    - By dividing the assignment the paper will be more instructor-directed, but if done well, will lead to a greater understanding of research methods by the students, as well as lesson the likelihood of plagiarism
    - For more details, see Harris, R. (2002). Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm

5. **Require elements that support the research process**

    - Ask for copies of cited or footnoted articles and make sure that they clearly mark those copies so that you can find the quoted and paraphrased material
    - Require a certain type of source material (journal) as well as require recent publication date
    - Have students create a 'person-noting' page acknowledging all persons who provided any type of assistance on their project
    - Require an annotated bibliography with one or two sentences describing the item
    - Require an integrity statement attached to the term paper
    - Use downloadable papers to demonstrate examples of poor writing

6. **Use a non-traditional format**

    - Ask for three possible openings to a paper
    - Ask for a multimedia presentation rather than straight term paper
    - Find facts to support or contradict an editorial
    - Do poster sessions
    - Ask for a web page rather than term papers
    - Require comparison of two viewpoints or documents on same issue
    - Ask for a diary based on an historical event

7. **Check the assignment before deploying it to students**

    - Test the assignment yourself using the resources available to your students.
        - Make sure there are no outdated methods and sources
        - Are the resources available?
        - Can it be completed in the time allotted?
        - Allow for students' inexperience and for movement of materials in the Library.
        - Were key resources sometimes not to be found on the shelf?
        - Expect students to encounter at least two times as many difficulties as you did – and to take at least twice as long to complete the assignment.
        - More http://writing.mit.edu/wcc/resources/teachers/createwritingassignments#checking

8. **Use the assignment writing check list**

    - Examples of assignment writing check list:

- o http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/fys/checklists.cfm
- o http://www.ryerson.ca/academicintegrity/faculty/preventing/assignments/design_assignments.html

III. DELIVERING THE ASSIGNMENT

1. **Consider what method of delivery is the most effective** in terms of students' learning, between doing the assignment at home and submitting it online or doing it as an interactive activity in class (such as peer sharing and peer grading)

   - Study shows there was no difference on students' performance. However the students self-efficacy improved when the assignment was delivered online and coupled with interactive in the classroom activity on the assignment.
     - More at http://jolt.merlot.org/vol4no4/ivanov_1208.htm
   - Consider the following when students are submitting the assignment online:
     - o Give a small percentage toward the final grade, because you may not know who actually does the assignment
     - o If possible, know the student or have the student present the assignment, so that you have some knowledge if the student did the assignment or not
     - o Provide an alternative way of submitting the assignment, in case of system failure
     - o See Blackboard Support website for recommendations on setting up assignments
       - Details available at http://www.ryerson.ca/courses/assessment
     - o Allow for flexible window of opportunity to submit, e.g. generous allotted time frame, allow multiple attempts, allow saving prior to submitting

2. **Refer to some tips for group assignments**

   - Consider the group work common issues – see page 39 of the following document http://learningandteaching.unsw.edu.au/toolkit/content/group/groupwork_WebV1_Jan2006.pdf
   - For more group work / collaboration learning resources, visit the LTO site at http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/learningstrategies/collaborative/CLResources.html#Group

3. **Prepare the students**

   - Provide guidelines for citation and paraphrasing
     - o Paraphrasing online tutorial from Dalhousie University available at http://www.library.dal.ca/kellogg/guides/Writing/paraphrase/
     - o http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/563/01/
   - Provide students with comprehensive guidelines in writing the assignment
     - o Provide sufficient information on the elements of the assignment, e.g. outlining, footnotes, bibliographic format
     - o Assume minimal library and information gathering experience. Most students have never been presented with the number of information choices they find in a university library. Students often do not understand the way scholarly literature works and the importance of it. They have difficulty in narrowing readings on their topic or interpreting different points of view.   They may also experience "library anxiety". Especially important for 1st

year students, mature students returning to school after a long absence, ESL students. See the Leckie article.

- Integrate the Library in the assignment
  - o Place any useful items on reserve or e-reserve
  - o Have a librarian conduct a session on library resources
  - o Dedicate a class time for students to do research in the Library
- Do not allow students to change topics at the last minute

4. **Take time to talk about plagiarism**

- How to avoid it, anti-plagiarism software as a tool, the Student Code of Academic Conduct, how to find legitimate material.

IV. MARKING THE ASSIGNMENT

1. **Recognize and detect plagiarism**

- Take advantage of the anti-plagiarism software, e.g. Turnitin (see Ryerson Blackboard support site for more details on using Turnitin available at http://www.ryerson.ca/courses/assessment/assignments/turnitin/

- Oral reports; have students defend their ideas via question period

- Have students present their papers orally in class

- Ask for examples of the students' own personal experiences relating to the topic

- Ask students to include a response to ideas developed in class discussions

- Have students summarize or abstract main points of paper after it is handed in

- Have students reflect about the research process undertaken through a "meta-learning" essay or a research diary

2. **Separate concept and flow of thought from grammar**

- Keep in mind that some students may have understood the concept, but not necessarily have the skills to write their thoughts in correct grammar or beautifully. A good example will be the case with an ESL student.

3. **Read all student assignments through once without marking** to get the sense of how the class did overall. This will also help in creating the benchmark

- More details available at http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/commenting/processinsight.cfm

4. **Use rubrics**

- More details available at http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/commenting/rubrics.cfm

5. **Use a grading sheet**

- More details available at http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/grading/pop2c.cfm

6. **Analytic vs. holistic** - Consider the method for marking the assignment between the analytic method or holistic method

- More details at http://www.cidde.pitt.edu/writing-essay-items

7. **Provide constructive feedback**
   - More details available from
     - o http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/grading/pop2a.cfm
     - o http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/commenting/index.cfm
     - o Giving Effective Feedback on Student Writing retrievable from http://www.mwp.hawaii.edu/resources/givingfeedback2007-02.pdf
8. **Have students do a peer-review assessment**, where possible; this activity will also sharpen students' analysis skills.

V. EVALUATE THE ASSIGNMENT EFFECTIVENESS

Ask for feedback from your students and Librarians when the assignment has been completed.

- What they learned from the assignment. What problems did they face and how did they overcome them? What research strategy did they follow? Where did they locate most of their sources? What is the most important thing they learned from investigating this subject?

SELECTED RESOURCES

Baldwin, A. (2007). *Practical plagiarism prevention*. Retrieved March 30, 2011, from http://www.scu.edu/provost/facultydevelopment/teaching/plagiarism.cfm

Dalhousie University. (2010). *Designing assignments* Retrieved March 30, 2011, from http://academicintegrity.dal.ca/Faculty%20Resources/Designing_Assignment.php

Harris, R. (2010). *Anti-plagiarism strategies for research papers*. Retrieved March 30, 2011, from http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm

Lawrence University. (2003). *Alternatives to term papers*. Retrieved March 30, 2011, from http://www.lawrence.edu/library/instruct/alternatives.shtml

Leckie, G. J. (1996). *Desperately seeking citations: Uncovering faculty assumptions about the undergraduate research process.* Journal of Academic Librarianship, 22(3), 201-208.

Smith Library, Eastern Connecticut State University. (2010). *Creative tools to prevent plagiarism: Alternatives to the research paper*. Retrieved March 30, 2011, from http://www.easternct.edu/smithlibrary/research/plagiarism/alternatives.htm

Texas A&M University Libraries. (2001). *Creating effective library assignments: A guide for faculty*. Retrieved March 30, 2011, from http://library.tamu.edu/services/tours-classes-orientations/creating-effective-library-assignments