



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Encouraging Students to Become More Involved Readers

Twenty-five years ago, as a senior at Notre Dame High School in Harper Woods, Michigan, I recall writing a report for an economics class on the book *The Rich and the Poor* by Robert Theobald. On the day the report was due, Fr. Rancourt, our teacher, collected the reports and then collected the paperback copies of our books. We stared in bewilderment at the stack of books on his desk.

After pausing for a moment, Fr. Rancourt asked us why we thought he collected our books. When he didn't get a response, he asked another question: Do you think I can tell who really read the books by looking through them? He then gave us a brief lecture about the importance of marking a book. This lesson made a lasting impression on me.



In my English Composition classes at Hutchinson Community College, I have carried on Fr. Rancourt's technique of examining books. However, my approach differs from his method in several respects. During the first week of class, I quickly move from student to student, looking at the pages of their assigned readings. My students give me the same puzzled look that Fr. Rancourt received when he collected *our* books. As I look at the texts, I make jokes about how clean some of them look. "Not a mark or smudge," I quip as I glance through a student's text. If I do find some underlining, highlighting, or writing in the margins, I praise the student. However, frequently at the beginning of the semester, many students' texts reveal few or no marks.

When I finish examining their texts, I again move around the room, this time showing the students my text, which is filled with notations, underlines, and other types of marks. After doing this, I comment on the importance of marking a book.

My main point is that marking a book gets the reader more involved with the text. Involvement, I stress, is one of the main factors in becoming a successful student. In "How to Mark a Book," Mortimer J. Adler writes about the importance of involvement:

If, when you've finished reading a book, the pages are filled with your notes, you know

that you read actively.... The physical act of writing, with your own hand, brings words and sentences more sharply before your mind and preserves them better in your memory.

Adler contends that "reading a book should be...a conversation between you and the author.... And marking a book is literally an expression of your differences, or agreements of opinion, with the author." Most of my students agree that underlining improves retention and assists in reviewing for a test. However, few students write comments in the margins that express agreement, perplexity, and so forth. When a reader writes comments in the text, he becomes an active participant in what he reads. The act of writing forces the student to slow down and consider what he reads. I also mention to the students that how thoroughly the text is marked depends upon the complexity and importance of the reading material.

This semester, after I showed a class the underlining and notations I made of Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," one of my students asked me why I marked the story in pencil, red ink, two shades of blue ink, and black ink. I used this question to get into a short discussion on the concept that great literature should be read more than once. Each time a person reads an outstanding work of literature, he often finds new ideas and modifies old ideas. When I read O'Connor's story for the first time, I used a pencil. On the second reading, I happened to have a red pen. With each new reading over several semesters, I added comments, reconsidered previous remarks, and, in a sense, became a better student of the story.

My students should see how I read a story or essay. When I write an article, I show students my numerous rough drafts to let them see that I have to struggle for a finished paper. The same principle applies to reading. I want students to notice that I read thoroughly and involve myself with my reading. I expect them to do likewise.

In one of my composition classes, I recently looked at my students' texts for the third time. (I don't check their books during each class session but rather check



randomly about 10 times each semester.) During this third check, I noticed that some of the students were beginning to underline passages and write notes in the margins. One student had more notations than I had written in my text.

My technique for encouraging students to become more active, involved readers has two advantages. First, it doesn't take much time. Before I begin a lecture or discussion, I can usually look quickly at every text and show the students several pages of my text in about five minutes. (On average, there are 17 students in each of my writing classes.) Another advantage is that nearly all content area instructors can use this technique and modify it in a number of ways.

It can work well in such diverse courses as ecology, philosophy, psychology, and art history.

I do not force my students to mark their texts, and I never check to see what they underline or write in the margins. My purpose in checking their texts and showing them how I mark my texts is to encourage an involvement with what they read, and I hope that such involvement will become a habit.

Bob Gassen, *Instructor, English*

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Using Crib Cards: Developing Study Skills

I have tried many ways to help students become better at studying for tests and at taking tests. Recently, I hit upon a scheme which seems to be valuable to my students and which has the potential for teaching them some much-needed study skills. The scheme was this: About 10 days before the first major test, I told the students that each could bring one 3 x 5 card, with anything written on it, to class and could have access to this "crib card" during the test. (I also told them that any card larger than 3 x 5 would be *cut to size!*)

On the day of the test, all students arrived with their cards. Some had written notes in such tiny print that they couldn't have been read without a magnifying glass. Some had written on both sides, some on one side only. I noticed that students exhibited an unusual excitement and camaraderie as they came in to take the test, and there was more conversation and less anxiety than usual.

After this test had been graded, handed back to students, and discussed, I asked the class to tell me how they felt about the crib cards, how the cards affected their test taking, and what they learned from

the experience. The most common response was that once they had completed the card, they no longer needed it to do well on the test. Some said they hardly gave it a glance, but knowing it was there helped their confidence. Others said it was the first time they had ever done anything to study for a test other than reading over the material. All agreed that the synthesizing and outlining required to make maximum use of the 3 x 5 space was what helped them most. Some realized for the first time that there was a need to identify and prioritize the most important material. Students have indicated that they plan to use the crib card method to *study* for tests in other classes.

Claire Gauntlett, *Evening Dean*

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