

Food for Thought: Redesigning Required Courses for Student Engagement, Relevancy, and Retention

As educators, we share the annual challenge of keeping our students engaged and retained. Engagement and retention issues have been amplified by COVID-19. Many instructors lost students during the immediate shift to online learning. As we look ahead to the next academic year, it is particularly important that we seek new ways to motivate, engage, and ultimately hold onto our students, especially in online or flexible learning environments. One method of keeping students engaged is by bridging course content with the real world through topically themed courses. When students clearly see how the course content affects their lives, student motivation and engagement are more likely to increase, greatly influencing overall persistence and success rates.

Why Themed Courses?

More Meaningful Learning Experiences

Themed courses make content immediately relevant to students by finally answering the perpetual question: “How does this class pertain to my life and the real world?” By choosing a universal theme, instructors can bring the real world into the classroom, creating more meaningful teaching and learning experiences for students and educators alike.

Making Connections Independently

Quite often, the content in liberal arts courses, such as composition, can seem disconnected. When using multiple textbooks, each writing unit may suffer from a “one and done” feeling that hinders continuity and relevancy among the units themselves. Instead of appearing random, a theme organizes content and invites students to make connections between major concepts, authors’ ideas, and arguments more naturally and independently, with little assistance from the instructor.

More Meaningful Teaching Experience

Lastly, themed courses allow instructors to reignite their own waning motivation after years of teaching, or the draining effects of teaching in a COVID-19 world. We can cater the theme to our own interests which boosts our enthusiasm and fosters student motivation.

Choosing a Theme

For a themed course to be successful, instructors should choose a topic of interest that they are not too passionate about to allow for healthy discussion and to avoid any biases in the learning environment. The topic should also be broad enough to capture the interest of a large number of students and appeal to universal experiences.

For example, my *ENG101: Food for Thought* sections explored food’s influence on identity, culture, morals, and ethics. I chose this topic because food affects us all, and I was already deeply interested in how food influences my own personal life. My interest level allowed me to balance my enthusiasm with any biases or overwhelming emotions that would negatively impact the learning environment, which is vital to the success of the chosen theme.

Another good example for a themed section that appeals to a large number of student may be sports. My institution has a strong athletics program; we recruit student athletes from all over the country and world, so a sports-themed composition course would be very appealing to a large portion of Harford Community College’s student-athlete population.

Themes to Consider

Food, sports, sustainability/environmentalism, civility, healthy lifestyle choices, the importance of arts and humanities in a STEM-driven world, social justice, the human pursuit of happiness, the concept of freedom.

Themes to Avoid

Any topic that is inflammatory and impedes student learning or negatively compromises the learning environment, such as politics or religion. The suggested themes should be broad enough to allow sub-topics to naturally form and allow for healthy discussion that is relevant to today’s students and world. For instance, my Food for Thought sections were organized into these sub-topics:

- The Purpose of Food
- The Power of Food
- Food, Culture, and Identity
- Real Food Versus Pseudo Food
- Food, Society, and Power
- Food, Morals, and Ethics

The readings were organized under each sub-topic, regardless of where they appeared in the textbook. Under these sub-topics, we discussed such issues as the pandemic's impact on food accessibility, food insecurity, social inequities, how personal and cultural identities are influenced by food, and whether it is ethical to eat another living being.

Getting the Course Up and Running

First, obtain approval from your department chair or dean to redesign the existing course at your institution. All student learning outcomes should be the same as any other section offered at your institution; only the content will be thematized. It is important to write a summary of the themed course and publish it in the schedule of classes before registration begins so students know ahead of time that all readings and assignments will be on one theme only. This allows students to decide whether they are interested in the topic. As we all know, capturing an audience that is already invested in the subject makes for a richer learning experience for everyone.

Academic advisors are your best friends when it comes to getting the themed courses filled. When I poll my students and ask how they heard about the class, most tell me they heard about the class from academic advisors. Some say they read the description in the schedule of classes, and there are always a few who tell me they did not know this was a themed section of Composition 1.

Choosing a Textbook

Instructors have a few options here, depending on their discipline.

1. You can take the existing textbook used for the course and reorganize the order in which you will cover the content for your theme.
2. You can make your own "textbook" by using snippets of content from OERs and the internet.
3. You can contact a major publisher in your field and ask whether a topically themed book already exists.
4. I was fortunate enough to find a major academic publisher who already had several topically themed anthologies published for instructors to use. I highly recommend this option if it is available to you.

Positive Outcomes

My food-themed sections filled quickly, students were more excited about the content, pass rates were higher, and attrition rates much lower than in previous years when I taught non-themed composition sections. I also found that students were much more invested due to my enthusiasm for the topic. As educators, we know this can make all the difference in creating a positive learning atmosphere.

Negative Outcomes

The most common negative outcome was that students unknowingly enrolled in the themed section and were not interested in spending an entire semester discussing the myriad topics related to food. Some chose to stay in the class and their motivation and performance suffered greatly, no matter how I tried to engage them. Some chose to drop my class and enroll in a standard composition section after the first day of class.

Conclusion

One of most appealing aspects of themed courses is that they are just as engaging online or in flexible learning environments as they are in the physical classroom, with little to no modification required. So, go out there, find a theme you are interested in, and bring it into the classroom. Make the content exciting, relatable, and relevant to students so you can retain a few more than in your non-themed composition sections. Not only will this approach be refreshing and engaging for students, it just might bring the right amount of inspiration educators need right now to face another semester online in a COVID-19 world.

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