



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ACADEMIC WILDFIRES: USING A TASK BOOK TO CLARIFY COURSE OBJECTIVES AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

While images of this summer's devastating forest fires from New Mexico to Montana are still vivid in our imagination, we educators may pause to learn more from the school of fire management than the sometimes dangerous consequences of a century of fire suppression and a half-century of Smokey Bear might otherwise suggest. Whatever the merits and demerits of the U.S. Forest Service's general policies or its specific practices, there is considerable wisdom in how the Forest Service trains and evaluates its personnel.

I speak from experience, for in addition to having been a teacher for a dozen years and a university professor currently, I am fortunate to have been a Wildland Firefighter. At times in the midst of smoke and flame that seem especially thick and hot toward the end of a term, I am tempted to return to the real smoke and flame of seasonal work in the woods of the Kaibab National Forest in Northern Arizona—work and woods I love so much.

While the woods are never far from my thoughts, neither are some of the methods the modern Forest Service uses to ensure that the men and women it sends to a fire are safe and qualified for the dangerous job. One of these methods is using Position Task Books to list performance requirements for a variety of positions on the fireline, many of which must be demonstrated actively by persons seeking certification for particular positions.

Through classroom instruction and hands-on experience, basic firefighters must demonstrate a variety of skills essential for safety and job completion. They must understand the Fire and Fire Behavior Triangles, know what the acronyms LCES and the standard Fire Orders mean, and be able to identify 19 "Watch Out Situations." In addition, they must demonstrate the correct use of

various tools like a Pulaski, chainsaw, or shovel. After passing introductory courses on basic wildland firefighting and earning their "Redcard" certification as qualified firefighters, they are encouraged to become advanced firefighters by taking other courses and by recording their demonstrations of more sophisticated skills in Task Books.

My last season on the Kaibab, I began working on my Task Book for Advanced Firefighter/Squad Boss. This Task Book consists of 20 items which are coded according to whether they should be demonstrated in *any* situation (e.g., in the classroom, during a field exercise, in daily duties) or during a specific incident (e.g., a natural disaster or wildfire). It was my responsibility to request periodically that my supervisor evaluate me when I thought I was able to demonstrate or had demonstrated a task delineated in the Task Book. For instance, Item 7 requires that a squad boss "properly starts, operates and maintains a chain saw in accordance with agency prescribed timber practices, manufacturers' recommendations and safety requirements," and Item 10 specifies that the squad boss "actively investigate fire cause while traveling to, arriving at, and during initial attack of a fire . . . record[ing] and report[ing] all information that might help in determining fire cause and origin," and so on.

A full-time university appointment and an early end to fire season kept me from completing my Task Book, but immediately I saw its application to my teaching. Its great merit seemed to me a combination of two things: first, the Task Book is another way to explain to students the objectives connected to material they study; second, it requires students to measure their own performance and demonstrate their mastery over skills associated with the material. In other words, it provides a happy union between product and process, among course subject matter, objectives, and desirable student outcomes.

So far, I have applied the Task Book principle to my composition courses, but I may adapt it to all classes I teach. I began with the composition courses because I wanted to align my teaching and evaluation of students with the goals and outcomes established by ongoing



assessment of programs at my university and my department's revision of syllabi for composition courses in an attempt to clarify course objectives and student outcomes. Furthermore, I was frustrated and unsatisfied by my awareness that although I have always spent a tremendous amount of time preparing for class and grading student papers, many students were not grasping the material presented to them in class nor taking an active interest in how their work was being evaluated. Although I had been exploring methods of creating a more active environment for some time, my application of the Task Book has become one of the most demanding and effective tools I have employed for making students think about *what* they are doing and *how* they are doing it.

I divide my composition Task Book into ten categories representing a skill or a cluster of skills that I want students to demonstrate in their writing. Some of them are quite common to any writing class. For instance, I want students to know how to recognize and use a thesis statement, write topic-controlled paragraphs, and synthesize sources. Other categories pertain to class procedures, such as following assignment requirements and editing.

I give students the Task Book at the beginning of the term, and it forms the basis of class lecture, discussion, group work, and out-of-class assignments. When students believe they have demonstrated a Task Book skill more than one time in their own writing, they must write a paragraph arguing that they should receive credit for that category of their Task Book. They keep these paragraphs and their Task Book with a portfolio of all their work for the term.

Toward the end of the term, they schedule one or two meetings with me so I can verify their competence in the Task Book skills that they have completed. They bring their portfolios and make their cases for as many categories as they can complete. If students can demonstrate that they understand the skill and prove it in their own writing, then I sign that portion of the Task Book. If they have not made their case or they do not have the proof to back up the claim, I will not sign—that would be the academic equivalent of the Forest Service sending its firefighters to a fire without their "proper protective equipment."

At the end of the term, the students submit their Task Books and receive credit for as much of the material as they are able to have me verify. However, this is only a small percentage of their grade. It is a complement rather than a replacement for the other assignments and essays I ask them to write, all of which receive their own grade. But it is an essential part of their grade and one which reflects the recursive nature of writing, something

students fail to recognize when they view such assignments as essays as completed projects rather than as continuing processes. If students do not complete at least a portion of the Task Book, they may not be able to pass the course. More importantly, they will have missed an opportunity to evaluate themselves according to the course outcomes.

The procedure for applying and assessing the Task Book can be adapted for the purposes of the course and the term. For instance, while teaching during a summer term, I discovered there was not enough time to schedule the necessary meetings with students to assess their Task Book. To compensate, I had students write an evaluative essay of their own writing using the Task Book criteria as their subject matter. This essay was submitted along with the portfolio, and it served a similar purpose to meeting with students in conference. Of course, having students write an evaluative essay may be more attractive to some teachers than the thought of meeting with students for the 20-30 minute sessions that the typical Task Book session requires. The more students in a class, the more creative teachers may have to be at modifying the Task Book to achieve its purpose.

But by nature, it is a flexible tool. It can be applied in any course where objectives and desirable outcomes are clearly stated, and where the categories and criteria reflect the goals of the course and the teacher's expectations of student outcomes.

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