



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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FUN-DAMENTALS OF AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

How can you cover all of the substantive content typically found in an introductory course? What skills are you trying to assess? Is there a way to assess the students' grasp of traditional skills associated with a particular discipline while allowing the students to have "fun" demonstrating their grasp of those skills? Which assessment methods, other than traditional tests or quizzes, might be developed for an introductory course?

How many times have you pondered those and similar questions when planning an introductory course? Strategies to help answer those questions are described here. While suggested for use in an entry-level course in a well-defined career field (paralegal), these ideas are adaptable to many first-year introductory classes in other programs.

First, identify what purpose the introductory course reflects in the student's overall program of study. More than likely, the program has a set of clearly defined outcomes. If so, develop a "curriculum map" in the form of a standard chart, listing the program outcomes in the left column and key courses in the program across the top. Under each course, use a code letter or word to indicate whether that particular course addresses any or all of the elements of each program outcome for the first time, alludes to those elements again but not with major emphasis, or significantly emphasizes the elements involved. For a program director or coordinator, collaboration with faculty who teach the courses will facilitate such an analysis. Bear in mind that not every course necessarily addresses each program outcome. This approach is an adaptation of an audit device that identifies where collegiate departmental goals are being taught and assessed in various courses.

Having completed this analysis, it is quite likely you will discover that the introductory course serves the function of introducing most, if not all, of the program's outcomes. If so, there is now a direction to pursue in integrating various FUN assessment tools into a content-rich course basic to the overall program outcomes.

Consider a simple multiple-choice or true/false *pre-test* at the first class meeting consisting of one general question from each chapter of the text. This assessment does not need to be a part of the student's final course grade, but a statistical analysis can include how many students achieved a particular benchmark score, how many students missed each question, and how the class performed overall. At the end of the semester, administer the identical test again; and add an analysis of improved scores to the other factors previously evaluated. Students quickly become involved emotionally in what they knew going into and coming out of a course, and friendly competition often ensues.

Tests and quizzes traditionally were the vehicle-of-choice to assess content knowledge and critical thinking skills and, by no means, should be abandoned completely. What is available now, however, is an opportunity to become creative and supplement the learning process with other FUN assignments to measure important skills and learning outcomes.

Early on in the course, students were asked to answer questions related to typical paralegal functions via a scavenger hunt-type assignment. Questions were divided into categories related to professional organizations, legal directories, local courts, and the college's paralegal curriculum—subjects typically included in an introductory paralegal course. Now, however, students immediately became involved in discovering and learning about those topics, providing them with foundational skills and an appreciation for the program's curriculum. Such questions can be designed by researching websites often used by members of that profession and visiting the college's library.

To ensure students do the work themselves (individually or in groups), issue a cautionary instruction that students are not to contact any government or organization officials to obtain the answers to the questions. Incorporating questions that require students to visit the library for titles, authors' names, or descriptions of relevant publications assists them in embarking on information literacy early in their collegiate careers. For the instructor, this is a sustainable and reusable assignment; depending on the questions asked, the answers often



change each year—e.g., where a national conference is being held, the principal officers of an organization, semesters certain program courses are offered, etc.

After some time spent looking at the fundamental building blocks of the profession in the introductory course, assign a project in which students (now hypothetically working in their chosen profession) have been invited by their children to speak at a high school “Career Day” seminar. Using the paralegal profession example again, students have been assigned a speech outline addressing the paralegal profession, in general—e.g., origin, national organizations, licensing issues, ethics, etc. In addition, they are asked to create a hypothetical client’s case and describe a “day-in-the-life-of” the paralegal working on such a case in the office. If time and class size permit, allow for oral presentations.

One other assignment that students may find FUN is “you-pick-‘em.” For example, offer students a set of five questions, and ask them to pick any two to be answered and completed by an assigned date. If the groups of questions are spread throughout the semester, the students take responsibility for working on time management and organizational skills (something we are trying to inculcate in their learning anyway) in order to earn the credit associated with the assignments.

These types of assignments can be FUN and meaningful for student learners and will assist faculty in assessing important learning outcomes. In the words of the young lad in the old cereal commercial, “Try it; you’ll like it!”

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