When Saying "No" to a Student Might Be Saying "Yes" to Learning!

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Last summer, I reached the point of eligibility for early retirement. I thought about taking the leap but decided against it. I resolved to keep teaching, asking myself, *how hard could it be to teach for another few years?* Harder than I imagined, as it turned out.

For most of my career teaching composition in community colleges, my students have tended to be adults, older and more mature than the typical high school graduate. Increasingly, however, my students are young, immature, and not particularly well attuned to the expectations of college teachers. A recent incident with one such student taught me something about the value of saying "no" to students.

This student has been homeschooled by her mother for a good part of her education. The student also shared in one of her essays that she has a disability—I suspect a learning/processing disability—but she has requested no accommodations, nor has she visited the campus's disability services office to discuss the possibility of such accommodations.

Instead, this student hands in assignments that miss the mark, and when she gets them back, she offers to resubmit them after she has "corrected" whatever needs to be "corrected." In conversations with her, I get the sense that she thinks missing the connection between a text she has read and an essay she has written in response to it can be "corrected" by simply inserting a period here or deleting a comma there. I don't blame the student (or her mother, for that matter) for thinking that an assignment can simply be redone and resubmitted for a new grade that wipes out any evidence of the previously existing grade; it is an unfortunate expectation that a number of students seem to be bringing with them into the higher education arena.

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I don't know if this is an unintended consequence of what students with individualized education programs (IEPs) experience in the K–12 environment, or if it is simply a consequence of the video games this generation has grown up on. I still recall the first time I saw my son, now 22, "kill" himself (in the form of his avatar) by jumping off a cliff to his death. I audibly gasped, which prompted my son to reassure me: "It's okay, Ma. It's how you get a do-over." At that point, his avatar was resurrected, and the game restarted, apparently without penalty.

The student and I have had several email conversations during the semester. I have even managed to get her to come to my office for a couple of hour-long intensive sessions. But every time I think I have seen a breakthrough in understanding occur, the next assignment comes in showing little or no forward movement. I have yet to see her demonstrate that she has the ability to apply what we discuss in relation to one essay to her planning or drafting of the next essay.

The student and I recently discussed the next assignment: an early draft of an essay that students have been preparing to write for the previous two weeks. For that assignment, students

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find articles on a topic of their choice, read and summarize them, identify the main issues, and analyze the differences between the positions articulated in the articles. It's a synthesis essay, the most challenging assignment of the semester. The student and I met for 45 minutes, during which we discussed this assignment and what she needed to focus on in the first draft.

Learning at the college level

The circumstances surrounding this student may be somewhat unique, but I find myself encountering more and more students who, like this young woman, face a profound challenge when it comes to learning at the college level. This student is eager to redo any assignment she gets back: to "correct," as she puts it, her "mistakes." But when it comes to taking the lessons she is exposed to in one assignment and applying them to her own ideas about the next assignment, she is at a loss. She has not yet experienced what it feels like to take risks—*real risks*—in the classroom. She has not yet had the chance to learn how to accept the consequences of her failures, let alone entertain the possibility that failure has a real value, that it can lead to real learning! She has been taught for years, but she has not yet had the chance to experience what it means to "learn" something on her own.

Yesterday, the student emailed me to ask if we could meet, yet again, before the draft of her essay is due tomorrow. I did not answer right away. I could feel in my bones that this was a message I had no practice sending. It took a couple of hours before I was able to draft and send the following message:

Given the amount of time we spent emailing each other last week . . . as well as the 45-minute conference we had yesterday . . . and the amount of time we have spent on this assignment in class (with the idea that you would then take the time to try to "apply" what we were talking about in class to your own ideas), I think you need to move forward with your draft of essay 3 and let me see what you can do on your own.

Certainly if you have specific questions, I encourage you to ask them via email. If your questions, however, are along the lines of "Is this what you want?" or "Could you look this over and let me know what you think?" I would ask that you consider that that's the point of my asking you to submit a draft. If you are ready to submit that draft sooner rather than later, I would encourage you to do that.

Sound like a plan?

- Beth

The student's response was both prompt and pleasant: "Yes. Thank you again."

By saying "no," I was able to say "yes" to this particular student's learning, allowing her the room to take a risk and learn something independently.

From a Teaching Assistant to a Teaching Professor

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Running undergraduate tutorials and labs is a component of graduate students' training at most departments in North American universities. The experience is meant to prepare graduate students for the transition into academia, if they wish (and are fortunate enough to land a position), and to help departments manage teaching loads. TAs typically deliver material provided by the course instructor, help students better understand course concepts, invigilate quizzes and exams, and grade exams and homework assignments. How big is the change when a TA transitions from providing support to teaching the course? Earlier this year, I found out firsthand.

I'm ABD in a department of mathematics and statistics that has a program that allows a few graduate students to run first-year mathematics courses as instructors of record. I was lucky enough to be selected for this program, and although I had some previous teaching experience in another country, being entirely responsible for a course was a big change. Based on my experiences, I'd like to summarize what I've learned and share it with you as advice—but first a bit about the biggest differences.

The most obvious difference in my case was class size; 40 students in my tutorials, 250 in my course. The second and subtler difference involved added responsibilities. My course was one section of a multisection coordinated course, which meant I had to keep pace with everyone else. In addition, I had the new responsibility of setting up the assignments and preparing the exams. I wondered what I would do if the midterm turned out to be a disaster. Could I gauge the degree of difficulty needed for the final? Finally, there is the small matter of student evaluations. You really don't want to fall below the department average, do you?

Take center stage

Don't be alarmed—I understand the importance of moving toward learner-centered classrooms rather than teacher-dominated ones. To me, taking charge is not the same as dictating what happens in class. The students are looking to the teacher to maintain a productive learning environment, and they will follow your lead. Taking a back seat on the assumption it needs to be a participatory classroom can quickly result in students losing focus, especially when there are more than a hundred of them.

Break the cycle

Always going through the content the same way becomes repetitive quickly. Students get bored and struggle to listen. Avoid the monotony by trying something different. For example, once while teaching geometry, I mentioned the novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, which describes a flat world where circles, triangles, and squares live. Referring to the novel's plot helped me get my point across, but it also created some excitement in the classroom.

Lesson planning

The idea of planning instruction is underrated in STEM classes. Maybe it's underrated in all kinds of courses. Most TAs (and a lot of professors) think that lecturing is about trying to cover as much material as possible and then picking up from where you left off next time. I could not disagree more. Following a systematic lesson plan is the way forward. Personally, I use the BOPPPS (bridge–objective–pre-assessment–participatory learning–post-assessment–summary) model. The *bridge* is what gets students hooked to the lesson and is followed by stating the *objective*. *Pre-assessment* gives the instructor an idea how well prepared the students are. I also use it to gauge students' understanding of previous material. *Participatory learning* takes up most of the time, and *post-assessment* provides feedback on the success of the lesson in achieving its objective(s). A *summary* at the end reiterates the key ideas.

Rubrics

TAs and teachers alike face backlash when grading is strict and not uniform. When you're the professor in charge, students come to you with their objections. Transparency is the best way to address grading issues. I recommend creating detailed rubrics for each assignment, posting them online well in advance, and sticking to them when you're grading. It behooves new teachers to consult with other professors if they don't have much experience developing grading criteria for rubrics.

Establish multiple lines of communication

Grading issues highlight the importance of communicating with students, and not just by answering questions during class sessions. Our various learning management systems make communicating with students easy. I post updates on the weekends outlining the activities of the week ahead and then send an email that directs students to these updates.

Reflection and receptivity

Finally, remember you're a new teacher, and all teachers, even experienced ones, make mistakes. The important thing is to learn from them. Feedback from students, peers, and the department head can help identify areas for improvement, if it's considered with an open mind. Feedback can also alleviate fears. What you may think is a problem may not even be mentioned in the feedback. Positive student comments build confidence and increase your commitment to becoming the best possible teacher. 🌳

A Collaborative Midterm Student Evaluation

Can students collaborate on the feedback they provide faculty? How would that kind of input be collected? Both are legitimate questions, and both were answered by a group of marketing faculty who developed, implemented, and assessed the approach.

The first argument, supported by research cited in their article, establishes the value of collecting midterm feedback from students. Students tend to take the activity more seriously because they still have a vested interest in the course. The teachers have the rest of the course to make changes that could potentially improve their learning experiences. There's also research that documents when midcourse feedback is collected and the results are discussed with students, end-of-course ratings improve. And they don't improve because teachers are doing everything students recommend—sometimes a policy doesn't need to be changed so much as it needs to be better explained.

The faculty involved in this project reasoned that having students collaborate on feedback for the instructor might have several advantages. It could increase student engagement with the process. Almost across the board now, there are concerns about the low response rates generated by online course evaluations. In addition, students don't generally put much effort into the feedback they provide. In one study cited in the article, students self-reported taking an average of 2.5 minutes to complete their evaluations. Because doing an evaluation collaboratively was unique and happened midcourse, faculty thought that maybe students would get more involved in the process.

They also wondered if the quality of the feedback might be improved by the interactive exchange required to complete it. And along with that, they thought the process could increase students' feelings of accountability by virtue of providing feedback in a public venue. Perhaps it would be harder for students to get away with making highly critical, personal comments.

To test all these possibilities, the instructors used the fairly common STOP, START, CONTINUE feedback mechanism in which students are asked to identify what, if anything, the instructor is doing that interferes with learning, what the instructor might do to improve learning, and what the instructor is doing that helps learning. The benefit of using a form like this is that "it specifically requests developmental feedback as opposed to judgmental feedback" (p. 159). It directs students to identify specific things the instructor is or isn't doing.

The faculty research team collected feedback via these prompts plus one additional open-ended query for other comments in multiple sections of several different marketing courses. In each class, half the students provided feedback on these questions via a paper-and-pencil format. The other half of the students provided the feedback in small groups using Google Docs. Any comment students made was visible to the others in the group so that students could answer the questions and comment on other students' comments. After completing either the paper-and-pencil version or the online collaborative one, students were asked to evaluate the evaluation.

It's definitely a novel approach, and the first time the instructors tried it they discovered they had not fully prepared students. Many of them reported being confused. Also, perhaps because students don't take course evaluations seriously and aren't always constructive in their feedback, some students did not take this process seriously and offered irrelevant comments.

The second time, after having better prepared students to work collaboratively on Google Docs, more students took the task seriously. Results from the evaluation survey showed that "students evaluated the collaborative evaluation significantly higher on three measures: 'easier to complete,' 'enjoyed completing the evaluation,' and 'could provide useful feedback'" (p. 162).

Both the paper-and-pencil and collaborative approaches produced useful information, with each having distinct advantages. The responses provided by individuals on the paper-and-pencil form were not influenced by what others in the group thought. They were also completed quickly. The collaborative approach captured the advantages of group synergy as can be seen on the examples included in the article. Students created discussion threads in which they responded to each other's comments, agreeing, elaborating, and sometimes raising related issues.

But perhaps most compelling of all, both ways of collecting midcourse feedback demonstrated its formative value to the instructor. In both cases, over 70 percent of the students' comments were "actional," meaning something a teacher could do something about. Sometimes the action was simple, like suggesting the instructor not "whip" back papers when returning them. The instructor was surprised to learn this was how students perceived the action. She now returns papers more "gently." More serious were complaints about the grading of SPSS projects. The instructor reviewed criteria in class and corrected SPSS program errors with students; as a result, their assignments and grades improved.

It's an affirming article that shows how students can be guided to provide feedback that improves instruction and, in the process, learn something about delivering it constructively.

Reference: Veeck, A., O'Reilly, K., MacMillan, A., and Yu, H., (2016). The use of collaborative midterm student evaluations to provide actionable results. *Journal of Marketing Education, 38* (3), 157–169.

Are the Videos in Your Courses Promoting Learning?

Video material is now an important instructional component of face-to-face, blended, and online courses. Research supports its potential to promote learning, but those benefits aren't automatic—it's not just the video, but how that video material is designed and integrated into the course. Selecting the videos is important, but how they are used in large measure determines the extent to which they enhance learning.

"What, then, are the principles that allow instructors to choose or develop videos that are effective in moving students toward the desired learning outcomes?" (p. 1). That's the question Cynthia Brame addresses. She explores three principles with "elements [that] provide a solid base for the development and use of video as an effective educational tool" (p. 1).

Cognitive load

This cognitive psychology theory suggests that memory has several interconnected components. It starts with sensory memory, which is the extrapolation of information from the environment. That information goes into working (or short-term) memory, which has a limited capacity. The information in working memory must be encoded before it can be transferred to long-term memory. Because working memory has limited capacity, the learner must be selective about what goes into it. Cognitive load theory proposes that those selections are based on the *intrinsic load* or perceived interest, importance, and relevance of the information. Selections are also influenced by *germane load*, which is the level of cognitive activity required—more bluntly, how much work is involved in understanding the content and connecting it with what is already known. Finally, what each learner decides to place in working memory can be influenced by *extraneous load*—what's being delivered that gets in the way of learning, like confusing instructions or extraneous information.

When the material is being conveyed via video, still more factors come into play. The information can be delivered visually or it can be auditory, or it can be communicated by both simultaneously. Information can be processed by both, but either channel can overwhelm the other.

> *If the goal is making videos that minimize extraneous cognitive load and optimize germane load, cognitive signaling or cueing can help.*

If the goal is making videos that minimize extraneous cognitive load and optimize germane load, cognitive *signaling* or cueing can help. It directs attention to on-screen text or symbols that highlight important information. For example, if the color changes or a symbol draws attention to a particular part of the screen, this helps students keep track of what's important. *Segmenting* the material in videos allows those viewing the video to deal with small chunks of new content. YouTube Annotate and HapYak can be used to give learners control over the flow of information. They enable those watching to pause the video. *Weeding* involves the elimination of interesting but nonessential information. A video with music, complex backgrounds, and extra animation increases extraneous load and may mean the learner is missing the most important material. Finally, video material should *match modality* to the content. If the content involves a complex process that can be explained by a talking head, that explanation will be enhanced if it's accompanied with complementary visual material, such as diagrams, sketches, or pictures.

Student engagement

This principle is more widely understood than cognitive load. "The idea is simple: If students do not watch the video, they cannot learn from them" (p. 3). And the best advice here is equally simple: keep it short. Brame highlights research on 6.9 million video-watching sessions by students in massive open online courses (MOOCs). If the video was less than six minutes long, the median engagement time was almost 100 percent, but it dropped to 50 percent when the video was 9–12 minutes and 20 percent for 12–40 minute videos. How the content is delivered in the video also impacts engagement. It's higher when the style is conversational and delivered with enthusiasm.

Active learning

Watching a video is a passive activity unless it has design features that promote involvement. Technology now makes it possible to add questions within the video. Research shows that students who watched videos with interpolated questions did better on exams than students who watched videos without them. Even a set of guiding questions that students consider as they watch the video had positive effects on test performance. Further, videos can be made so that students can control how they're used. They can move back to listen again to something they might not have understood, or they can review certain segments they deem especially important. Finally, Brame suggests making the video part of a larger homework assignment.

These pragmatic suggestions are summed in a well-organized, single-page table included in the article.

Reference: Brame, C. J., (2016). Effective educational videos: Principles and guidelines for maximizing student learning from video content. *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education, 15* (4), 1–6. ♣

Grading Practices: More Subjective than Objective?

A recent survey of 175 economics professors who teach basic principles of economics courses revealed a widely diverse set of grading practices for the course. These instructors taught at 118 different institutions, including doctoral degree-granting universities, two-year colleges, and everything in between. The findings are specific to the course and the field of economics. However, the questions raised by the analysis are relevant to grading across the board. The different grading policies and practices reported here are not uncommon, and one would suspect that findings like these are typical of any number of courses routinely offered by our institutions.

Giving grades vs. earning grades

The authors begin by pointing out that the usual decree that faculty don't "give" grades, students "earn" them is not entirely accurate. The decree makes it sound as if faculty have no role in determining students' grades. In fact, teachers make grading policy decisions that directly influence how students go about "earning" their grades. For example, faculty establish the cutoff levels between the grades. They decide whether extra credit is an option. The authors maintain it is more accurate to say that faculty "assign" grades based on what students "earned."

"The survey evidence from this study shows that there are widespread differences among economics instructors about what constitutes a grade in a principles of economics course" (p. 139). Some of the instructors grade using an absolute standard where the percentage of points needed for each grade is determined beforehand. Others grade on a curve or relative standard that depends on the performance in a particular course. The components used to determine grades—exams, quizzes, homework assignments, papers, or projects—were not the same. And even if there was some consistency, the various components were weighted differently. The exams themselves contained different kinds of questions, mostly fixed-response questions (multiple-choice, true-false), but also constructed-response questions and short and longer essay answers. Then these faculty reported a range of decisions as to whether course activities like participation were graded, whether missed exams could be made up, and whether grades close to the designated cutoff could, in some cases, be bumped up. We like to think our grading practices are objective, but policy decisions like these do add a certain subjectivity to the grade-earning process.

The question is whether this diversity matters. Does it make a difference? The way students shop around for courses–in some cases looking for what may look like easy courses and other times looking for features that fit with how they think a course should be–would indicate that these policy variations do make a difference for students.

Does diversity in grading matter?

The question is whether this diversity matters. Does it make a difference? The way students shop around for courses—in some cases looking for what may look like easy courses and other times looking for features that fit with how they think a course should be—would indicate that these policy variations do make a difference for students. For them it is often about how they'll go about getting the grade, but for the rest of us the concern must also be about what and how students learn the content, and this is where the research lets us down. We don't know what combination of graded assignments promotes the most learning in which courses or for what students, for example. Most likely, there isn't a definitive answer to that question, but at this point we're making these policy decisions based on untested assumptions.

The authors provide one example of where diversity in grading practices is a problem. Researchers regularly examine the relationship between grades and any number of student variables, such as effort in courses, the selection of courses, gender differences in achievement, the willingness to take more courses in a discipline, or the student ratings of the course—the list is very long. In these studies, it is assumed that the letter grade given by one instructor is equivalent to the same grade given another instructor teaching a different section of the same course. In fact "there may be subtle or substantial differences in how each professor grades that can affect the distribution of grades and the comparability of grades across instructors" (p. 346).

We aren't all operating from the same playbook when it comes to how grades are determined. What we have not done is to consider the extent to which that's a problem regarding fairness and objectivity of the grades. We haven't linked our choices to learning. And we haven't spent much time thinking about how the diversity affects students who are already obsessively grade-oriented.

Reference: Walstad, W. B., and Miller, L. A., (2016). What's in a grade? Grading policies and practices in principles of economics. *Journal of Economic Education, 47* (4), 338–350.

Teacher and Peer Assessments: A Comparison

Interest in and use of peer assessment has grown in recent years. Teachers are using it for a variety of reasons. It's an activity that can be designed so that it engages students, and if it's well designed, it can also be an approach that encourages students to look at their own work more critically. On the research front, some studies of peer assessment have shown that it promotes critical thinking skills and increases motivation to learn. In addition, peer assessments are a part of many professional positions, which means they're a skill that should be developed in college.

But for teachers, there are several lingering questions. What kind of criteria are students using when they assess each other's work? Are those criteria like the ones their teachers are using? Given the importance of grades, can students be objective, or do they only provide positive feedback and high marks? To what extent do peer assessments agree with those offered by the teacher?

Falchikov and Goldfinch's (2000) meta-analysis of 48 studies of peer assessment published between 1959 and 1999 reported a moderately strong correction of .69 between teacher and peer assessments done by students. A large educational psychology team decided it was time to update that research, especially given a significant number of digital peer assessments are now being completed. They also wanted to learn more about the impact of certain factors on peer assessments.

This team analyzed 69 studies published since 1999. Unlike Falchikov and Goldfinch, they included studies done in K–12 grade levels. They found the estimated average Pearson correlation between peer and teacher ratings was also moderately strong at .63.

Most interesting in this recent research are findings about factors related to peer assessment. Here are some highlights:

- When the peer assessment is computer-assisted, the correlations drop to .50, but the researchers note a couple of issues. There is wide variation in the kind of computer involvement in peer assessment, and some studies provided no detail as to how computers were used. So, more research is needed.
- As might be expected, the correlations were higher in graduate courses than in undergraduate courses.
- Group assessment correlations were significantly lower than individual assessments. The researchers hypothesize this is because assessment in groups involves interactions among group members and the dynamics within the group.
- Voluntary peer ratings showed more agreement with teacher ratings than when the peer assessments were compulsory.
- Interestingly, the correlations were also higher when the identity of the peer rater was known. Related research has documented that when the ratings are anonymous, the raters tended to be harsher. Also when the rater identity is revealed, there may be a greater chance that the rater will take the task seriously, thereby providing more accurate ratings.
- The correlations between teacher and student ratings were at .69 when students provided both a rating score and comments. Having to make comments forces reviewers to develop a rationale for their rating.
- When peer raters were involved in developing the assessment criteria, the correlations jumped to .86. The research team describes this finding as "striking": "Discussion, negotiation, and joint construction of assessment criteria is likely to give students a great sense of ownership and investment in their evaluations" (p. 256). It also makes the criteria easier to understand and apply.
- Training the peer raters was not a variable that resulted in significantly higher correlations between peer and teacher assessments. The researchers think that the variable quality of the training across the studies may have made its effect difficult to capture.

What is noteworthy about this meta-analysis is the attempt to identify factors that affect the accuracy of student judgments about the work of their peers. The analysis assumes that teacher assessments are the gold standard. Students should be making assessments similar to those of the teacher. It is useful to know those factors that help to close the gap between teacher and student assessments. The research team notes, "We included only theoretically meaningful predictors that could be reliably coded. As a result, the current meta-analysis explained only about one-third of the variation of the agreement between peer and teacher ratings" (p. 258). Could the correlations be affected by whether the ratings were formative, designed to help the recipient improve, or whether they were summative, as in counted as part or all of the grade?

This is relevant work with findings that should be considered in the decision to use peer assessments. As with so much of the research on instructional practices, the issue is less whether a particular approach is viable and more about the best ways to use it.

References: Falchikov, N., and Goldfinch, J. (2000). Student peer assessment in higher education: A meta-analysis comparing peer and teacher marks. *Review of Educational Research, 70* (3), 287-3.

Hongli, L., Xiong, Y., Zang, X., Kornhaber, M., Lyu,Y., Chung, K., and Suen, H. (2016). Peer assessment in the digital age: A meta-analysis comparing peer and teacher ratings. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 41* (2), 245–264.

Helping Adult Learners in the Online Classroom

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Some of the best-known theories about how adults learn have been put forward by Malcolm Knowles, but how might his theories apply to online courses? We've been considering this question in light of two of Knowles's theories—the value of life experiences and the significance of self-directed learning.

In online courses, we believe the discussion board is the heart of classroom. It's the place where concepts get introduced, ideas are explored, and text information is elaborated. Through these discussions our students learn key information and meet additional course objectives, such as those in required assignments. So, we've focused on applying Knowles's theories to our use of online discussion.

Using student experiences in online courses

We have found asking students for examples and experiences related to course topics encourages them to share stories and make connections with the material. For example, when covering the topic of effective communication, we might ask them to write online about "a specific time you used verbal or written communication in an employment situation to work through a conflict. Be sure to include the situation, the steps taken to resolve the conflict, and the outcome." Prompts like these make it easier for students to connect with the content and make their learning experience more meaningful.

We have also discovered that sharing our examples and life experiences models this experienced-based approach and helps students learn. As the discussion progresses, we continue to ask probing questions that help students make more and deeper connections between their experiences and what we are asking them to learn. When providing feedback, we've found that asking these kinds of open-ended, experience-based follow-up questions further cements the content to their experiences. Sharing our experiences and probing theirs often brings the discussion full circle.

> *To encourage self-directed learning, when we receive questions answered elsewhere in course material, we offer guidance and direct the students to where the answer can be found.*

In addition to including leading and probing questions in the discussion and within feedback, we solicit information about our students. One way to do this is by having each student prepare a welcome biography in which they introduce themselves to us and others in the course. We read these carefully, making notes about their various backgrounds, so we can subsequently relate the course topics to their experiences. For example, if the student has children and works full-time, those experiences can be tied directly to content we teach related to time management.

Encouraging self-directed learning in online courses

To encourage self-directed learning, when we receive questions answered elsewhere in course material, we offer guidance and direct the students to where the answer can be found. For example, when a student asks how to submit an assignment, we answer with where that information is located in the syllabus. When we take this approach, as the course progresses, we have found that we need to explain less because students are becoming more independent and self-directed. We also want our students to identify the resources they need to complete the assignments and to develop strategies for using those resources. Those skills can be developed with an activity, such as a scavenger hunt, where students are led to resources—but not without having to look for them first.

To further develop self-direction in learning, we recommend including options for students related to assignments and requirements. Because discussion is such a vital part of our online courses, we let students have some say about how they participate in these exchanges. They can write about their experiences related to the topic, reference class materials, or share and explain their opinions. We also give students credit for posting in various discussion areas rather than requiring them to post in specific areas. Finally, our students can select the days they wish to post (as long as they meet the minimum requirements), and they can opt to reply to classmates, reply to the instructor's post, or generate a new message about some course activity. Providing the freedom to choose among these options allows students to make choices. They experience what it means to be a self-directed learner and a partner in the learning process.

In summary, Knowles's theories about the importance of experience and self-direction in adult learning can be adapted for use in online courses. By encouraging students to make content connections with their experiences and allowing them to be self-directed learners, instructors are better able to meet the needs of adult students. In our experience, doing so also helps our adult learners excel in online courses. ♠