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Reading and Viewing Assignments for Online Learning

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Selecting reading and viewing material for any course can be challenging. Institutional policies may limit instructor's options to titles adopted by a department or to a program's contracted curricular materials. Some schools require use of a rental system and/or impose cost parameters. For the online instructor, additional complications arise. The obstacles might be logistical. When students live at a distance from a campus, they may not have the foresight to order books or course-paks in a timely manner or may lack access to library reserves. If a class requires video content, a student might not subscribe to a particular streaming service. But more common concerns relate to format and learning purpose. I want to consider these items and explore the relationship between what we opt to assign and our pedagogical practice.

In courses taught fully online, the instructor must decide whether to make all of the class materials available electronically. I find that my students increasingly prefer reading on their devices and appreciate the opportunity to click directly through to an assignment. That reality is getting easier to make happen. Appropriate translations of religious texts are readily available. The ability to download articles and chapters in a pdf from library holdings also offers options. When requiring movies or documentaries, an institutional subscription to a streaming service like Swank permits a single-click viewing experience. Additionally, some publishers, like Point of View) specialize in 1500-word pieces on specific topics that can be purchased inexpensively in Kindle-ready form. And scholars in the field are producing free content such as The Religious Studies Project's podcasts (https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/), Andrew Henry's Religion for Breakfast videos (https://www.youtube.com/user/ReligionForBreakfast/featured), Bible Odyssey (the Society of Biblical Literature's site for short articles, videos, and other materials focused on

critical examination of various subjects related to the Bible and its study; https://www.bibleodyssey.org/) that are usable in a classroom setting

But research has demonstrated that students resist clicking on too many different assignment links and frequently lose energy before working through them all. They know that a significant number of short readings or videos can be just as time consuming, and feel just as burdensome, as one longer assignment. Thus, strategizing about what resources to employ and how to get students reading or viewing must always be grounded in what information we want mastered in a class. For example, many of us–online or not–no longer emphasize testing on dates, names, places, and similar specifics once typical of lecture and textbook-based learning, even if the study of a subject may demand familiarity with such details. When one can access factual information with a few, swift keystrokes, asking students to devote significant out-of-class time to reading or viewing, taking notes, assessing what is valuable, memorizing, and then reproducing it all on a quiz feels antiquated. We instead seek to reduce the onerous qualities of learning foundational material and target, in brief, acquiring knowledge of key topics or concepts.

In the online environment, how to achieve this requires going beyond simply providing links to assignments. For example, we can construct reading and viewing with embedded "check-ins" that ensure student contact with basic terminology and concepts. Indeed, this practice can be formulated to provide immediate feedback and personalized suggestions of linked resources for a term or an idea a student does not grasp. This practice thereby expands learning (while reading or viewing) by teaching both content *and* how to identify and seek further clarifications regarding important material.

Good design can also move beyond students answering simple feedback questions and toward demonstrating understanding, interpretation, and application. This approach is particularly important with longer readings or viewings (such as novels or movies), as well as with assignments that may be difficult going (reading theory, for instance). Again, technology permits querying students as they work, thus promoting not only completion of reading and viewing assignments in full, but also comprehension via critical immersion in the material that can then be integrated into class discussions, paper writing, or research activities.

Without doubt, building these resources requires additional time for the instructor (and can involve the need for some technical expertise depending on the learning management system utilized). Links for more in-depth study also require regular updating. The investment at the front-end, however, can formulate assignments that are a better fit for the online environment given students often work asynchronously in diverse locations and may benefit from guidance not available through regular contact with other students or the instructor in the classroom or on campus.

Moving away from familiar learning practices might feel strange to instructors who come to the online world from face-to-face classrooms and may not be digital natives. But there are two important points to ponder. First, we are more and more teaching students who have grown up

attached to devices that have shaped their learning habits. We want to capitalize on the potential of what is already in their hands. In fact, figuring out how to maximize the strengths of the available technologies in service of our goals is what every generation of instructors does, even if not quite at the same rapid pace required of us today. Second, we need to be more intentional about cultivating our own pedagogical awareness. Graduate schools focus on producing scholars rather than classroom teachers. As new instructors, we thus often replicate teaching that worked for us until we figure out our own styles along the way. But in navigating today's changing landscape of higher education, we should seek deliberate matching between where we want to see our students end up and how we develop assignments (reading, viewing, and assessment activities) that get us there. That work starts with the pedagogical choices we make about the content for a course, how students access it, and what we do to help them navigate it.

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