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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Show Your Work

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In terms of generative AI, I've been mostly hanging out in the "don't feed our inevitable overlords!!" camp, so nobody should be looking to me for tips for ethically and thoughtfully integrating ChatGPT into their teaching this term.

But a problem I do have to face head on is that whereas I used to ask my students to do certain tasks and was reasonably confident they would actually do them themselves, I now am not so sure. For instance, watching movies to prepare for a Religion and Film class. Now, Wikipedia and IMDB were available before – and past students may have availed themselves of these resources – but ChatGPT, Co-Pilot, and all their friends feel like a significant new leap in the "shortcutting work" frontier.

I still think students should learn some of these skills. Reading a ChatGPT summary of a film isn't the same as having the experience of watching the film and taking notes on it. I want them to pay attention to film technique, I want them to notice what personally interests or grabs them, I want them to situate their viewing in the context of a course on religion and consider what the movie is (purportedly) conveying about that religion.

To solve this little issue, I've decided last semester to implement an assignment in my Religion and Film course that's essentially "show your work." I borrowed this from K-12, from my

daughter's 4th grade math class, where she's expected not simply to record an answer that she mysteriously arrived at, but to demonstrate and write out the thinking and the process by which she arrived at that answer. I know instructors, even at the college level, who will give partial credit for answers that are wrong if the student work shown demonstrates the right kind of thinking.

So, for every movie my students are supposed to watch for homework (and it's about a dozen), they need to take their own extensive notes during the viewing. (We read advice about taking notes during movies, discuss note-taking techniques, and practice in class.) They then need to take photos of those notes and upload them on our LMS (Canvas) before class the day we discuss the film.

These are the instructions that I give my students for this assignment (they remain the same for every film):

To ensure that everyone is watching the films in their entirety, and engaging them with the level of focus/attention that this class requires in order to be successful, you will be asked to do the following for every movie:

To earn 4/5 points, please upload photos of your own handwritten notes that you took during the movie. They should:

- span the entire length/duration of the movie (i.e., not just the beginning/end, a few places, etc.)
- focus on more than just plot, characters, and dialogue (i.e., you must address visuals and sounds)
- include particular time-stamped moments that seem significant to you
- convey a level of detail that goes beyond a summary found online or that is fabricated by AI

To earn the 5th point, and full credit, you will also need to include 1-3 discussion questions that you would like us to address in class about this movie. (Discussion questions are usually open-ended, not fact-based, why/how-focused, etc.)

I have been SO pleased with the results. The students are turning in photos capturing pages and pages of amazing, thoughtful, engaged, detailed notes in their own handwriting (which I've come to know and love). They are including timestamps, they are noting the movies' sounds, they are displaying their real-time - often hilarious - reactions ("that dang bell won't quit," "I'm 20 minutes in and I still don't know what this movie is about," "she's only 17??"). I can tell they've watched thoroughly and thought seriously about the films. Their discussion questions are precisely the questions I would have asked, but I can now frame them as originating with the students - and following their own questions and interests.

I've also been thinking about drawbacks or limitations to this type of assignment. For instance, one of my students, an athlete, hurt his wrist/hand this semester and so writing by hand is hard

for him, in and out of class. What do I do about a student with this kind of injury... or a disability that might require note-taking assistance or the use of a computer to take notes? Allowing the notes to be typed out defeats the purpose, because typed notes can be (more) easily cribbed from elsewhere. I don't have great classroom-wide answers to these questions yet (besides making exceptions for individual students).

Still, based on the success of this experiment, I would like to figure out how to apply it in future courses and assignments. Could I have students turn in the notes that they took on reading assignments, for example? (I have sometimes incorporated "reading responses," "reading tickets," or even just questions to answer about the readings into my courses, which seems to be the same idea.) I know some colleagues who have resorted to doing everything in class, on paper, and/or by hand. I'm not sure I want to go this far. I appreciate having my weekly quizzes on Canvas. I don't want to go back to the paper-wasting days of course packets. I need to be able to assign homework. (I also don't want to totally revolve my courses around the assumption that all students are cheating all the time. This may be true, but I don't want to operate in this distrustful, suspicious, surveilling way.)

How can you imagine incorporating "show your work" into your own course designs?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2025/08/show-your-work/>