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Teaching Tips:

Supplementing Courses with Online Assignments

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Most individuals in the academic setting use their computers, tablets, and/or phones to access email, network, and search the web. Technological advancements have allowed us to access information more readily, and students and professors alike take advantage of these progressions. There are e-books and even e-readers that can be used in lieu of hard copy textbooks. Some students opt for online courses rather than traditional in-person courses. Often times, regardless of whether we require students to complete something for our courses electronically, students are online. Thus, finding ways to supplement our courses with online material and assignments can help students learn and become more engaged with the material we teach. These observations and suggestions stem from my experiences using online assignments in a variety of courses such as General Psychology, Lifespan, Cognition, and Health, Cognition, and Aging.

Many recent versions of textbooks come with online supplemental material to encourage student learning. The content varies and may include flashcards, quizzes, pre and posttests, videos, and demonstrations, but each of these offers an opportunity to bolster student learning both in and outside of the classroom. Several advantages exist for students and professors when integrating online assignments. First, this provides students with structured time on the material outside of the classroom. Although students spend time outside of the classroom studying, completing assignments facilitates preparation for quizzes and exams, and retention of learned information, by reviewing the material more regularly. Further, this can help students identify strengths and weaknesses in their comprehension and synthesis of material, so that if need be, they can seek out assistance earlier.

Online assignments also provide an opportunity to apply knowledge gained from lecture. In the many experiences I've had with online assignments, the majority of feedback from students has indicated that completion of these assignments reinforced material learned in lecture and overall helped them gain a more thorough understanding of the material by applying the concepts learned to situations pertinent to "real" or daily life. As instructors, we provide examples in class; however, exposure to more examples allows students to realize how broadly some of the learned concepts may apply and hopefully promotes recognition of the material in their own lives. Online supplements are available for developmental courses that allow students to make decisions and then see the program simulate how their decisions may influence development. Students virtually observe the

impact of individual decisions and environments. This type of program helps students comprehend and appreciate how theories are applicable to development, in addition to recognizing the relevance to daily life and individual differences.

In some courses, online supplements can provide students with hands-on or "real-time" examples of the concepts they have learned about, which is especially important for more abstract material, such as that covered in Cognition. Online lab programs are available that can be used as course supplements. Students have the opportunity to be participants in the online experiments and read about the theory that led to the research and how the results support or refute prior work. Often, this helps students not only understand the basic concepts, but also allows them to consider practical applications. Through discussion in the classroom, students may be able to extend their knowledge and devise experimental ideas of their own. Further, appreciation of individual differences is also gained when results are discussed in groups or as a class. Another example, particularly for developmental courses, is video clips that show progression of skill and ability development and change over time. These also help students synthesize the material, and realize normal individual variation that occurs.

Some online programs have students gauge their confidence and provide feedback as to whether they are over, under, or reasonably confident in their knowledge of the material. For example, with each question posed, not only does the student select or enter an answer, the student also indicates how confident he/she is that the answer provided is correct. This type of information may be helpful to both students and instructors to guide study. For example, if a student is struggling, and the data show that for many incorrect answers the student was not confident in his/her knowledge, this information can be used to direct the student to review that material further.

Requiring online assignments encourages students to stay up-to-date with the material in the class and provides them with additional opportunities to more thoroughly learn, apply, and synthesize the course material. It offers a type of learning experience that may be more active, and sometimes more interactive, than traditional studying habits outside of the classroom. Given the increased integration of technology into our daily lives, incorporating an online learning component in our courses is one way to help keep students interested, active, and engaged in the material we teach.