

'Why Is This Course Required?'

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Last week, in my final rhetoric class of the semester, we did an end-of-term exercise that I've assigned for the past few years. I use notecards to write a series of prompts meant to encourage students to reflect on the semester and what they've learned. Each student comes to the front of the classroom, takes a notecard, and responds to the prompt in front of the class. There are also doughnuts.

Among the prompts is this one: "Before this class, I thought rhetoric was [fill-in-the-blank]. Now I think rhetoric is [fill-in-the-blank]." I got the format from Kimberley Tanner, who calls such prompts "retrospective postassessments."

What struck me last week: The students who answered this particular prompt all noted that they had originally thought rhetoric was going to be a drag — a requirement that they would have to slog through to graduate. (Rhetoric is the one course that all undergraduates at the University of Iowa are required to take.) I'm happy to report: Every student who responded to this prompt said he or she was pleasantly surprised by the way the course actually turned out.

I'm just finishing my third year teaching the university's rhetoric course, and the fact that it's a requirement has certainly influenced my approach. Faculty members face particular challenges every time we teach a course required for a bachelor's degree or major. Students routinely resent having to take the class, which means we have to work harder to motivate them. We have to justify and sell the course, find new ways to offer students a sense of ownership over it, and be even more resourceful than usual in figuring out how to surprise and delight them.

Ruth Kaplan and Kimberly O'Neill, who teach in the English department at Quinnipiac University, discussed those challenges in a recent essay, "Teaching Required Courses: Pedagogy Under Duress." It was prompted by the many features they kept finding in both of the two required courses they teach for English majors — Kaplan on Shakespeare and O'Neill on underrepresented writers. Each instructor said she struggled to motivate students who, after all, are taking these two courses not because they are interested in the subjects, but because they have to. Kaplan said she asks her Shakespeare students at the beginning of every semester if they would have taken the class without the requirement; frequently no one raises a hand.

Student motivation is a fundamental ingredient in any successful learning environment. Getting students to buy in to our course objectives is one of the most important tasks we have, particularly at the beginning of a semester. As Kaplan and O'Neill write, "research on the relationship of autonomy to motivation suggests that the very fact of the requirement itself may exacerbate student resistance to the course."

I've written before about the ways that extrinsic motivation (like fear of a failing grade) can actually detract from intrinsic motivation. With a required course, the worry is that students never see the subject as something they might actually want to learn, and end up just going through the motions.

The solution that Kaplan and O'Neill advocate: Encourage as much autonomy and agency as possible in required classes, even more so than in others. It is precisely because students have no choice but to take the course that we should offer them more choices within it.

Here's how that works in practice:

- Reminiscent of Chris Walsh's "blank syllabus" strategy, O'Neill asks students in her course on underrepresented writers to choose texts that will be included on the syllabus. To do so, she comes up with a list of relevant books and films and asks students to sign up for one each. They spend some time with their respective texts, then make a pitch to the class for its inclusion on the syllabus. O'Neill and her students discuss the possibilities and vote on which books and films to include.

- In Kaplan's Shakespeare course, for each play to be discussed in class, she comes up with 10 to 12 contemporary primary sources on the relevant themes. In addition to a few required readings, students choose one additional reading from that list and write up a short response discussing how the play and their chosen text handled a particular issue.

In both courses, Kaplan and O'Neill report, student motivation improved, and more choices led to livelier discussions. That made the course more interesting for the instructor to teach as well.

I've been taking the same give-them-more-options approach in my required class in rhetoric. For example, students have freedom to choose the subject of their final paper. I assign a version of Ken Macrorie's I-Search paper, in which they have to pursue a question that fascinates them, then write up a detailed narrative of their search for answers.

It's a great assignment — not least because they are actually invested in what they're writing about. I was delighted by the quality and variety of my students' papers this semester. Grading papers is a lot easier when you're reading essays about why people eat ice cream when they're sad, what might be going on in the unexplored regions of the oceans, and whether those crosswalk buttons actually do anything. When I give students as much choice as possible, I've consistently found that I benefit as much as they do.

Required courses seem to present a paradox: The very classes that a department views as most valuable are the ones least likely to be "freely chosen," write Kaplan and O'Neil. Instead of ignoring that paradox, turn it to your advantage by bringing it up in class. Students are annoyed that some committee decided they had to take this course. So talk about it.

As Maryellen Weimer argued in a 2011 article about teaching large introductory survey courses, "these courses are required for good reason." The fact that a department — or an institution as a whole — has required a course is an important bit of information. Ask your students: Why do they think they were required to take the class? What does the requirement say about the discipline, the department, and the institution? What can we learn about a college's priorities and its view of education by looking at what it thinks every student needs to learn? Don't ask just once. Check in with them at various points of the semester: Does mastering this topic seem necessary for their major? At the end of the course, ask them to reflect on whether the course should have been required. It's valuable for them to be thinking about what goes into their degree.

Many departments have started asserting more control over what is taught in required courses — instructors may have to use a syllabus template or an assigned textbook. Such imposed elements can be frustrating, but they also offer further opportunities for class discussion — getting students to think, for example, about why a certain textbook is used in an intro chemistry class.

Even with such constraints, there are always elements of any course left up to the instructor. Consider them carefully as you design the course. Think about how to shape it in ways that will best serve your students. And make sure you leave some aspects for them to decide.

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