Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Willing to Innovate: The Attitude of "Willing to Try"

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When I reflect on what I have developed for the classroom, I think less about being innovative and more about being grounded in trying to reach all students and provide opportunities to promote understanding and transfer. Innovation comes as a wonderful side effect of being "willing to try". For example, in developmental courses, students struggle with not only content knowledge, but also the business of being a student. For many students, long-term goals are far off and out of mind in the day to day struggle to keep up with the semester. I thought students would benefit from creating and assessing short-term goals and strategies that fit in the long term academic/professional goals they have set for themselves. This lead to developing a portfolio and self-regulated learning (SRL) assignments for students in developmental mathematics. Portfolios, and the assignments created for them, turned out to be wonderful tools at all course levels.

The development of the portfolio and assignments was however, not a quick path. It was a learning process for me. In fact, I did not set out to create a portfolio for the course; it came from a variety of experiences and work with colleagues both in and outside my discipline. Understanding how topics I was teaching informed students' work, in both content and expression for other courses, became the basis for several assignments. As I thought about the transfer of learning for my students, the idea of reflecting on their work over the semester

became important not only from a test of concepts point of view, but also in understanding of their education as a whole. It took many iterations and participating in various faculty learning communities to arrive at a model of an effective portfolio for both the students and myself. I had to be willing to listen to the feedback from students and colleagues about whether these efforts had merit. The assignments grew to include modules on successful study strategies, creating review sheets for exams, time management exercises, and student reflections on how they were progressing and how to deal with any hurdles they saw in achieving short and long-term goals.

Students often struggled with the portfolios as we were working through the term. I discovered, through trial and error, when there should be checkpoints in the term to provide guidance. Students still struggled, but this was part of the process, and in capstone reflections many students remarked that they could see how the work all fit together. It was very exciting to see the shift, and I can now see that they continued to take this confidence and understanding with them to their next course and life outside the classroom.

Although I do not require a portfolio in many of my college level courses, I have still found ways to incorporate many of the assignments developed from this work in portfolios. In physics courses, I began to ask students to complete "Ignite" presentations and article summaries in order to provide new contexts with real world applications and write about them. Calculus students reflect and analyze models for real world applications that have no one clear answer. This gives a new perspective for students that think there should always be one set answer in a math course. In being "willing to try", I believe I have become more aware of opportunities to incorporate ideas for many assignments. At the same time, I am aware it may be just the start of the process. To make sure the goals I have in mind can be met, I will always have to adapt, provide clearer examples for expectations, etc.

The development and adaptations of the portfolio did take time in planning and assessing; however, the modules created were designed to take five to ten minutes of class. In addition, examples, templates, and rubrics for each step along the way were posted on the course site and did not take from the always precious time of developing course concepts.   It took a shift for me to see that this five to ten minutes was equally as valuable. Being willing to try and having the flexibility and freedom in the classroom provided the opportunity. The work in the courses, including reflections, showed the students were building confidence in their own abilities and could see real growth in their own understanding.

There are many lessons from trying something new and giving it time to flesh itself out. First, the process models how we want students to view learning. It is a process that includes failure and adaptation. As instructors, we are the expert in the material being presented, so this change in perspective, to a student view, provides a window for compassion: we need to remember what it was like to be a student for whom the material was new. Telling students that you are working to help them and try adaptations, also connects the classroom. Secondly, it does not have to be a big intervention to yield big results. As I was working on assignments for the portfolio, just making small connections and then asking for reflections provided students with an "Aha" moment.   This attitude of "willingness to try", being flexible in how I teach, can keep students engaged and provide meaningful contexts for learning. I find that I am able sustain this attitude when I read a reflection where a student talks about new confidence in doing math, and their own abilities to actually do math. We can become too comfortable as instructors; we could spend all of our resources pursuing other learning instead of teaching. It is uncomfortable to be in front of a classroom trying something new, but this anxiety can fade away if everyone in the

classroom is invested together. Being an example in the safe space you are creating, showing it

is okay to make mistakes and take risks, is highly effective, and worth the time and effort.