

# The Questions We Should Be Asking Our Students

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How much do you know about how your students study? I've been asking the question a lot lately and I'd have to say most of the answers I've heard aren't all that impressive. They're more about how the faculty member thinks students study, how they should study, or how they aren't studying.

We need to be talking more to students about their various learning experiences in our courses. And we need to stop thinking about student feedback as evaluations of our existential worth as teachers. Some of what we may discover about how students do or don't study, write their papers, read their texts, work together, or listen to lectures may have implications for how we teach. But many of us (or is it most of us?) have become so sensitized to evaluative feedback, that we hesitate to ask. What if we discover something incriminating? But what's really incriminating is not asking.



What we most need from students are the descriptive details, not evaluative assessments. When do you study? For how long? How do you study? What methods do you use? How do you decide that you've studied something enough? What do you do when you're studying and discover that you don't understand something? What study strategies work best with the content in this course? What instructional methods encourage you to study? Are your study efforts in this course being supported? If yes, how? If no, why not? What study strategies do you need to develop?

Answers to those kinds of questions generate information that teachers can do something about. If students cram for exams, you probably can't prohibit it, but you can disrupt the process with quizzes that promote more regular interaction with the content and you can include more test questions that can't be answered with memorized information bits. If the data reveal that most students aren't doing the reading before they come to class, you can

bring your text to class and use it—point out a graph that contains evidence supportive of the theory you’ve just described, or remark that the explanation offered on p. 54 for X (content they need to know) is so good, you aren’t going to talk about it in class.

I hear some of you pointing out that student performance on exams and assignments does provide feedback as to the effectiveness of their studying, and you are right. However, it’s after-the-fact feedback. If a student does poorly on the exam, chances are good that they didn’t study, but all you know for sure is that they didn’t learn this important course content. That should concern us and them. Moreover, you don’t know for certain if they just plain didn’t study, as in life intervened, or if they studied ineffectively. To make good decisions about the best way to respond to poor performance on exams or papers, you need better information.

What we also regularly fail to realize is the power of good questions about learning experiences to develop students’ understandings of themselves as learners. They need to learn content, yes indeed, but in addition to what they are learning, they also need regular confrontations with how they are learning. We can no longer teach students everything they need to know about anything (if we ever could). A lifetime of learning confronts them, as it has confronted us, and what carries us across and through subsequent learning are good, solid learning skills.

The issue for students is the same one I’m wanting us to face. If students don’t have a clear and accurate understanding of how they respond to learning tasks, they aren’t in any sort of position to make good decisions about other approaches to learning. For them and us, it’s the very old notion of knowledge being power. In most cases, knowing something gives you the option of doing something about it. And in the case of learning more about teaching that promotes learning, it’s the catalyst that launches a powerful chain reaction. As we make more decisions that increase our instructional effectiveness, students complete the learning tasks more successfully. That motivates them, which motivates us, and that makes for even more success. We can start this constructive process by asking questions that help us better understand how students study and learn in our courses.

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