



# White Board



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## Five Ways to Get Students Thinking about Learning, Not Grades

THE PAST SEVERAL decades have seen an interest in learning surge. It's always been part of our educational endeavors, but the recent focus on it has been intense—that is, for teachers. Our interest is not shared by most of our students. They are still pretty much all about grades, preferably those acquired easily. They will work for points, but not very enthusiastically, if at all, without them.

Grades are important; we can't say they don't matter. They're what gets students financial aid, job interviews, and admission to grad school. But in the larger scheme of life, grades don't matter all that much. When was the last time someone asked about your GPA? It's the knowledge and skills acquired in college that make a difference in what we do and how we live. Yes, grades are supposed to measure learning and they do, but not all that definitively.

Somehow we've got to get students more focused on learning and more accurately understanding what it requires. So many students still cling to the notion that grades measure ability, and that good grades result from big brains, not time and effort devoted to study. How do we make the point that IQ matters far less than the commitment to hard work?

Most of us aren't naïve enough to imagine whole bunches of students being converted to learning enthusiasts simply because we so convincingly proclaim that it matters. We need to be thinking more along the lines of water droplets eroding rock with a slow and steady drip, drip, drip. Forward movement too slow to see, but powered by a relentless commitment to reposition thinking about grades and learning. Here are five ideas that illustrate these less splashy ways of advancing the learning agenda.

### 1. Assignments as learning opportunities – For most students,

assignments are tasks they do please the teacher. We hear that when they ask what we “want” in the paper, project, or presentation. What if we introduced every assignment by discussing the knowledge and skills it advances? Or we could put the question to students, “What might you learn by doing this assignment?” and constructively be in their faces until they answer.

**2. Learning reflection** – Students need to move beyond the “Whacha get?” exchange when we return graded work. Here's an interesting approach one teacher uses. Early in the course, he asks students to think about their professional destination or even the kind of life they hope to live one day. “What skills and knowledge are you going to need that you don't have or don't have enough of?” Students make a list (yes, they get a few points for doing so) and they keep it handy. After every assignment or activity, they look at the list and write a short reflection on how what they just did supports what's on their list.

**3. Evolving assignments** – Most assignments, activities, and even exams are something students do once and then move on to the next task. One-time assignments don't illustrate how learning is an evolving process and they don't teach students how to do more work on something they have already done. Let's rethink that approach with a paper written in installments, or a reaction to one reading, followed by a reaction to a second in light of comments made about the first, and so on. Installments in a single document are submitted every time a reaction is due. There's teacher feedback (not necessarily every time) but no grades. The need-to-know on the grade front is calmed by announcing that everyone has at least a B unless they hear otherwise. The paper is graded once, at the end, with a few summary comments.

**4. Better collaboration with peers** – Students go to peers with lots of learning related questions: “Who should I take for econ?” “Were her tests hard?” “Is that a class you can skip?” Unfortunately, these aren't particularly good questions. Students can learn important things from peers but they've got to ask better questions. How can we help them to ask better questions when they're deciding whether to take a course?

**5. Change the conversation** – Talk “learning” with students. I once had this exchange with a student. “So, you're taking political science? Tell me what you're learning in the course.” To which the student replied, “Nothing.” “Really?” I asked incredulously. “And what's going to happen when you're interviewing for the job of your dreams and the interviewer says, ‘Gee, I see you took a poly sci course. That's such an interesting field. Tell me what you learned in that course?’” I loved how the student's eyes widened.

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Grades Due - May 4  
Summer 1 Classes Begin - May 17  
Memorial Day - May 29

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# 10 Tips for Creating Effective Instructional Videos



INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE is an important component of effective online teaching, and video can help make it happen. Instructional videos have become increasingly easy to create and can turn a good online class into an engaging learning experience. Video humanizes the online experience by letting students know their instructor as a real person, not an abstraction. Good quality webcams are available for less than \$100, and there are numerous free and easy-to-use resources for creating and publishing video content so it can be streamed back into our courses.

Staring into a webcam and pressing the record button can be intimidating for some of us—after all, we're teachers, not TV personalities—but it's actually easier than you might think. Here are 10 tips that will soon have you broadcasting like a pro.

1. Forget the headset. If your computer doesn't have a built-in camera and microphone, buy a webcam that does both. Webcam sound quality is almost as good as a headset's, and it lets you be "you" without the Mickey Mouse ears.
2. Keep it short. Students have been raised on YouTube. Try to keep your videos brief. Few students will sit through videos where the instructor drones on and on. If you have a lot to say (and sometimes we do!), chunk up the message. Make a video mini-series with 5-10 minute chapters.
3. Prepare well and then wing it. Some people like to start out with a script, but this can feel artificial. Sometimes a brief outline taped next to your webcam is all you need to stay on track without

sounding like you're reading from your notes. However, if the video is only five minutes or so, you might just re-record until you get it right—not necessarily "perfect."

4. Position the camera above your eyes, so you look slightly up at it. Avoid looking down at the camera. Your audience does not want to look up your nose. If you're using a laptop, put a stack of books under it so you raise the camera. Position your head to appear at the top third of the screen so the recording includes your face and most of your torso.
5. Location, location, location. Your work or home office are usually safe choices as a background for the recording. Outdoors can be a nice change. Try putting your back to a neutral wall with the light source in front. Avoid sitting in front of a window, as the glare will make you appear as if you're in a witness protection program. And this should be obvious but it needs to be said: don't record with your bed, pajamas, laundry, or bathroom in the background.
6. Move it out. Don't always shoot your videos from the same spot. Your audience will tire of seeing the same background. Start with your office, but also consider a quiet place on the campus quad or maybe your kitchen or backyard. Keep the backgrounds neutral but varied. Your audience will appreciate it.
7. Look right at the camera lens. Looking anywhere else looks weird. Your audience will think you have an avoidance problem.

8. Cover your screen. Once you get everything ready, consider taping a piece of paper over your computer screen so you're not distracted by seeing yourself while you record. Remember, you do not need to be perfect! Try not to be overly critical of yourself.

9. Say "cheese." Smiling helps everything. Whether you're recording a webcast of your face or just your voice, smiling makes you look and sound better.

10. Avoid over doing it. The wacky music, goofy fade-ins, and spinning transitions that come with some video editing software can make home-videos look corny. Leave most of those tools for the professionals (who don't really use them either).

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Michael Smedshammer, PhD; 10 Tips for Creating Effective Instructional Videos; Faculty Focus; March 31, 2017 [ <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-with-technology-articles/10-tips-creating-effective-instructional-videos/> ] April 24, 2017.

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The idea for this list came to me after rereading a *Journal of Education for Business* article, which contains a list of recommended practices for learning-centered classes. The ideas shared in the article are related to, but not the same as, my list here.

Farias, G., Farias, C. M., and Fairfield, K. D., (2010). Teacher as judge or partner: The dilemma of grades versus learning. *Journal of Education for Business*, 85, 336-342.

*Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Five Ways to Get Students Thinking about Learning, Not Grades; Faculty Focus; April 12, 2017 [ <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/five-ways-get-students-thinking-learning-not-grades/> ] April 24, 2017.*