

*Using Multiple Course Assignments  
to Make Sure My Students Read Textbooks  
and Read Them Critically*

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I have been teaching method courses at SUNY Cortland for five years. I wonder if I am the only instructor whose students do not read textbooks or they do not read them critically. Like you, I find many textbooks designed for method courses useful, but feel that they are just short in the focus on promoting social justice and bringing about transformational learning experiences for my students. I started with such method books, but found myself frustrated to realize that students did not want to move beyond their comfort zones. Few of them would venture into new ways of thinking, learning, and teaching. As I reviewed unit plan after unit plan on the 13 Colonies, landforms of New York State, and the locations of world capitals at the end of my first semester at SUNY Cortland, I considered myself a complete failure regardless of the impressive course teacher evaluation.

My students often come to me and ask for “recipes” so that they can easily copy and use in their classes. By “recipes”, I mean quick and easy lesson activities and ideas. While recipes are necessary and useful, inspiring chefs must know the nutritious ingredients and complicated food processing procedures to masterfully present a meal. Similarly, master teachers make sure their students become critical thinkers rather than information containers of limited volumes. Reading is a basic first step towards becoming critical thinker. To make sure my students read textbooks, I started to rethink about my course assignments related to the textbooks.

I chose two books as major texts in my social studies method course. One of them is *50 Social Studies Strategies for K-8 Classrooms* by Kathryn Obenchain and Ronald Morris. This book has more than just “recipes”. It shows connections of these instructional strategies with the thematic strands of the National Council of the Social Studies. Our students can read along the course on their own and select to use these strategies in their lessons and unit plans. My final course project requires them to use at least 4 strategies from this book to teach the social studies concepts in their unit plans. My students do not need any assistance in completing this part of the task.

The other is Howard Zinn’s “A People’s History of the United States” and it is available online. I select five chapters from this book to particularly demonstrate that multiple perspectives must be taken as we review history in elementary schools. Perspectives of the Native Americans (Chapter 1), perspectives of African Americans (Chapter 2 and Chapter 17), perspectives of women (Chapter 6), and current perspectives of the citizens who voted in 2000’s Presidential Election (Chapter 25) in the light of the war on terrorism must be presented to our students. Zinn challenged my students in his call for teaching the U.S. history from the

perspectives of the oppressed people, a vastly different approach as compared to the traditional history survey books my students read in their history courses.

For each selected chapter, I provide students with a list of questions to guide their reading. Students are also encouraged to come up with their own questions based on the content of each chapter. To make sure they read these chapters and read them critically, I have the following assignments for each chapter.

For Chapter 25, *The 2000 Election and the "War on Terrorism"*, which we always read first at the beginning of the semester, students will take a quiz in class. All questions they need to respond to as quiz items are provided beforehand. All questions are based on their understanding of this chapter about the 2000 presidential election and the war on terrorism. Students always do very well for this quiz. The purpose of this assignment is to help students understand that teachers assess student learning only after students have the opportunity to learn. When we teach to the test, students can do well in tests, but they will not very likely retain the information they have learned. Reading this chapter helps students understand current issues and their roots in history.

For Chapter 1, *"Columbus, the Indians, the Human Progress"*, I continue to use a quiz to make sure they read the content in this chapter. This time, I do not provide questions to guide their reading. Students usually cry at this quiz, for they might not be able to answer the questions that require their critical reading skills. After the quiz, students would ask me to keep providing guiding questions and make sure the quiz items are selected from the guiding questions. I use the opportunity to encourage them to become independent and critical reader. Gradually, they learn how to follow the author's argument and his way to develop the argument with evidence. From Chapter 1 on, I add a performance assessment piece to the traditional quiz. After students read Chapter 1, they write a response paper, in which they make their argument to agree or disagree with Zinn and support their argument with specific examples selected from Chapter 1.

For Chapter 2, *"Drawing the Color Line"*, I ask students to create a timeline of slavery to document major events and years described in this chapter. Students' creativity in this assignment has been so powerful that they realize when you keep your assignment open-ended, students can find multiple ways to best demonstrate their learning. Using the timeline they each create, students will ask questions, use the timeline to answer these questions, and challenge to extend their timelines by adding new events and times beyond this chapter. Besides this timeline assignment, students take a quiz to improve their reading comprehension of this chapter.

For Chapter 6, *"The Intimately Oppressed"*, I encourage students to write a short profile for each of at least five women depicted in this Chapter and explain their remarkable efforts in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that have paved the ways for "modern women" in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Again, students use story boards, posters, PhotoStory, and booklets to present their profiles of women who fought in the past for women to enjoy the freedom and rights today. Students also take a quiz to demonstrate their content knowledge they have learned from this chapter.

For Chapter 17, *"Or Does It Explode?"*, which depicts the African Americans' responses to racism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chapter has poems that express the frustration, passion, and

struggle of African Americans trapped in racism and reveals to our students what they do not usually learn from a chapter on the Civil Rights Movement in a traditional history textbook. Besides the quiz I create for students to assess their reading of the chapter, it is the students' turn to create a quiz. Their quiz should have at least six questions with one at each of the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive learning objectives. Students shared that this is a tough assignment that they have to go back to the chapter over and over again to make sure their questions and tasks promote higher order thinking skills.

Method courses are an important experience in our students' professional development. I would like to use these assignments to closely facilitate students' learning. At the same time, I see course assignments as a wonderful opportunity to model for our students, who are pre-service teachers, what it means to differentiate assessment to make sure students have multiple ways to demonstrate their learning.

If you are interested in the rubrics I use to assess these performance based assignments, I would be happy to share them by email. I could also share the quizzes that made my students cry. You can get in touch with me at [lin.lin@cortland.edu](mailto:lin.lin@cortland.edu)