

On Assignments

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As an undergraduate, c. 1982, I enrolled in a class outside of my major because I had an idea that I wanted to develop. The idea, then novel, was land-for-debt swaps, i.e., that rather than “develop” their forests and jungles for agriculture and resources to obtain hard currency to pay off debts, Brazil and other deeply indebted nations could, instead, forego “development” in return for debt forgiveness, thereby reducing the deleterious effect on the environment. Even back then, global warming loomed as a cataclysmic problem facing the planet and, by implication, humanity.

Hoping to develop the idea, I enrolled in a political science class on Latin America. When I told the class TA about this, she said that that’s not a good reason to take the class, that the class had a set structure and assignments, and that the purpose of it was to teach a body of material, not to help me develop my idea.

So instead, I wrote the idea without guidance or course credit and published it in a school publication, where it died without acknowledgement. The idea was subsequently developed by others, but by then, in another type of career, I was unable to participate, and possibly even help push it along earlier and further than it otherwise went.

My TA’s opinion notwithstanding, I felt then and still feel today that “using” a course for one’s own purposes is the best possible education. Indeed, standardized course assignments may be the world’s greatest wasted opportunity. Consider all the time and energy that you personally have spent attending class and complying with course requirements. Now, imagine that time and effort optimally applied. Properly focused, you could have landed a job (or several), written a book (or several).... Changed your world, or at least some part of it.

Granted, some classes may help you get a job or embark on a career. Technical courses may be part of larger programs with lockstep assignments designed to bring you to the point of hire-ability in entry level positions. But more and more students are engaged in studies outside of a core technical curriculum or already have a job or career. In these situations, standardized assignments too often take up the time and effort that almost certainly could be applied more valuably.

To try to realize that value, I ask students to carefully consider why they are enrolling in my course and what they hope to get out of it. What would be the best possible outcome of having taken the course? What is your dream assignment? Dream project? Is there anything you really want to do or accomplish towards which this course may be helpful?

“Accomplishments” could include:

- Publish an article or make a video on an idea you have or something you’ve learnt
- Do a project that might get you a desired job, i.e., by showing potential employers your ability to do something useful for them.
- Write a grant proposal to get funding to pursue a larger project
- Apply course subject matter towards helping an organization that otherwise could not afford that help
- Build/ design something – either a concrete thing or an organization
- Develop a website, “hub” or interest group around a particular issue
- Help gather organizational or political support for a valued project

Ideally, course assignments or accomplishments are not isolated projects, but rather components in the larger construct of your university program or degree. The effort you put into getting a degree represents a significant portion of your life and a very large proportion of disposable time, i.e., time which is not obligated towards family or employer. As such it’s precious, and ought to be treated that way. It is ultimately the student who derives the benefits (or suffers the consequences) of a given course so, ultimately, it’s incumbent on the student to make sure that the course meets his or her needs.

There is only so much a teacher can do anyway. And sometimes less is more. Dreams are often deeply submerged – and barely flickering – underneath many layers of “have-to”s of busy lives. Often quiet time and encouragement is necessary to permit these dreams to emerge.

Rather than add to have-to’s, teacher and student ought to explore (and, if necessary, excavate and revive) a student’s “want to’s.” Both ought to carefully consider the purpose of any given assignment and appropriately personalize it. The long-standing paradigm of education puts assignments somewhere on the tail end of the process, an evil necessary only so as to ascertain whether a student demonstrates minimal competency in a (somewhat arbitrary) domain. But given the scarcity of “free” time and the even more limited opportunity for expert guided endeavor, designing worthwhile assignments should be the centermost core of education, around which everything else ought to revolve.