

The Great Assignment: A Study for Effective Assignment Design in Religious Education
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One of the persistent challenges for religious education in the past century has been how to effectively integrate process and content in education for holistic spiritual development.

Traditional approaches tend to focus on content, while progressive approaches tend to focus on process. Many studies have focused on defining content and process in religious education, while others have sought to reinterpret content and process in the search for more effective approaches to religious education. The theme of this year's the joint meeting of APRRE and REA, "Text and Context," reflects this ongoing interest and concern in religious education.

My own interest in the challenges of integrating content and process in religious education has been peaked by the need for some mainline Protestant churches to do a better job of educating persons in the history, traditions, theology and spirituality of the Christian tradition, including the particularities of denominational traditions and beliefs, while continuing to value the role of personal experience and enculturation into the community as important aspects of spiritual formation. I have been inspired to address this need by the opportunities I have found to observe undergraduate college professors and students in their "quest for academic excellence." As a college chaplain, I regularly listen to students and faculty as they share about their courses. When professors and students are engaged in great assignments, it shows. They display a mixture of energy, enthusiasm, consternation and commitment that leads me to want learn more about what they are up to.

One of the great opportunities of a working at a liberal arts college is exposure to the value placed upon developing the whole person through a myriad of educational opportunities in and out of the classroom. The "educated person" in this context refers to persons who can read and think critically, express themselves well in written and oral communication and acquire

knowledge that will help themselves and others to better understand the world around them for the purpose of helping to make the world a better place. While “a religious emphasis,” once prominent in mainline denominational colleges, has declined in many liberal arts colleges, I believe the pairing of the so called “values of a liberal education” with religious education is still a good match. My interest in this study is to find what religious education can learn from liberal undergraduate education, in its pre-professional courses in particular, for improving assignment design in religious education.

I am in the process of studying three assignments given to undergraduate students by professors in the context of their respective disciplines and course offerings. Through the use of questionnaires and interviews, I am looking for information on how these assignments include certain values or skills of learning, including: informational knowledge, personal authority, critical thinking, sensitivity and creativity. I am also interested in learning how the parameters of the assignments assist students in achieving the learning goals of the professor and what other support is offered to students so that they may effectively complete the assignment. I am hopeful that such analysis of assignment design can helpfully inform the development of great assignments for use in religious education.

For the purpose of preparing participants for the colloquia session at the upcoming meeting in Denver, I am including copies of the research protocol submitted to the Southwestern University Human Subjects Review Committee, the questionnaires and interview questions used in this study. During the colloquia session, preliminary results of the study will be presented for review and discussion. Bridging the findings of this study of undergraduate college assignments with the development of great assignments for use in religious education will be the focus of the discussion.

Human Subjects Review Committee
Research Protocol
Southwestern University

1. Principle Investigator: Beverly J. Jones
2. Other Investigators: none
3. Project Title: The Great Assignment
4. Type of Research: Professional Paper
5. Purpose: This proposed study is an expression of my interest in assignment design for religious education. The process and/or results of the study will be presented at the joint meeting of the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education and the Religious Education Association. After the study has been completed, I will consider how the results may be used for publication (journal article, practical helps for religious educators, etc.)
6. Measures: Written questionnaire, interviews, and review of assignment instructions (in the form presented to the students by the professor.)
7. Participants:
 - a. Target Population: Three Southwestern University professors and three to six Southwestern University students (over the age of 18).
 - b. Recruitment: Participants will be solicited to participate by a personal contact (in person or over the phone) to explain the proposed study and to request their voluntary participation. I will explain the goal of my project (as stated in #7 above) and the method of the study (as stated in #8 above). I will explain that their responses will be analyzed and presented. I will ask if they prefer to be referenced in the presentations anonymously. To the professors: I will explain that I will interview them first with a set of written questions sent by email or as a hard copy (their preference). This will be followed by an in-person interview that will be recorded in order to accurately report information gathered for analysis. I will share with the professors that I anticipate the written questionnaire to take around 20 minutes to complete and the interview to last around 45 minutes. Students: I will share with the students that I anticipate the written questionnaire to take around 20 minutes to complete. No interview will be required of the student participants.
 - c. Freedom from Coercion: I will explain to participants that this study is voluntary and that they may choose to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. I will explain that the results of the study will be used for my presentations (written and oral) to improve and enhance assignment design in religious education and not for any other purpose. No inducements will be offered for participation in this study.
8. Confidentiality/Anonymity: I will be collecting names, email addresses, campus phone numbers and SU Box numbers for the purpose of communicating with participations. This information will not be shared among participants without their knowledge and consent. This information will not be included in the presentation of the study, nor will it be shared with anyone included or not included in the study, without consent (verbal or written).

9. Deception: Participants will not be deceived or misled in any way in this study.
10. Sensitive/Personal Information: No personal or sensitive information will be requested.
11. Offensive/Threatening Material: No material will be presented that is threatening or degrading.
12. Assessment of Harm/Risk: Participants will not be asked to encounter anything that will present a known psychological, social, physical or legal risk. If a question or concern arises, participants may request that their participation in the project be revised or withdrawn.

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Questionnaire (Faculty)

Thank you for participating in this study on the selected assignment from your class. Please complete the following in written form (email or hard copy) and return to:

Beverly Jones
jonesb@southwestern.edu
SU Box 7440

1. Please send a copy of the selected assignment as presented to the students. Include the timeline of the assignment in context of the class. (e.g., the date students were made aware of the assignment, dates various parts of the assignment were due, completion dates.)
2. Please state the goal(s) of the assignment.
3. What materials (book, supplies, etc.) and activities (class attendance, observations, tasks, etc.) were required of students to successfully complete the assignment?
(If these were indicated in the class syllabus, you may send a copy of the syllabus to answer this question. If this was included in the copy of the assignment submitted in question 1 above, then you may skip this question.)
4. From your point of view, was this assignment successful from the beginning or did it evolve? Please explain.
5. From your point of view, what were the strengths of this assignment?
6. From your point of view, what, if any, were the weaknesses of this assignment?
7. Were any values or skills promoted or achieved through this assignment that were unintended, or were not part of your goal(s) as stated above? If so, please describe.

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Interview Questions (Faculty)

Keeping in mind the assignment identified for this study, please review the questions below and be prepared to answer them during the interview. If you prefer writing out the answers or using notes, please bring them with you to the interview and be prepared to turn them in after the interview is complete. The interview will be recorded.

Skills and Values Relevant to the Assignment

A. Information (defined as vocabulary and concepts in context)

1. Did you see informational knowledge as an important aspect of the assignment?
2. What information was needed for students to successfully complete the assignment?
3. Describe how information was to be utilized in the assignment.
4. How were students informed of the information they were expected to know and/or use in successfully completing the assignment?
5. Was the information to be utilized in the assignment learned during the course? through the assignment itself? prior to taking the course?
6. Was informational knowledge measured for evaluation in the assignment? If so, how?

B. Personal Authority (defined as the confident assertion of one's self, knowledge and abilities expressed in the process of engaging and fulfilling a task)

1. Did you see the expression of personal authority as an important aspect of the assignment?
2. Where in the assignment were students expected to express personal authority?
3. How were students informed about the desired or required expression of personal authority in the assignment?
4. Was expression of personal authority encouraged in the course? in the assignment itself? If so, please explain.
5. Was expression of personal authority measured for evaluation in the assignment? If so, how?

C. Critical Thinking (defined as the ability to bring relevant information and values to bear on decision making)

1. Did you see critical thinking as an important component of the assignment?
2. Where in the assignment were students expected to use critical thinking skills?
3. How were students informed about the desired or required use of critical thinking skills in the assignment?
4. Was critical thinking encouraged in the course? through the assignment itself? If so, please explain.
5. Were critical thinking skills measured for evaluation in this assignment? If so, how?

D. Sensitivity (defined as showing respect, care and insight for the limits and potential of oneself and others (including material objects) in context.)

1. Did you see sensitivity as an important component of the assignment?
2. Where in the assignment were students expected to show sensitivity?
3. How were students informed of the desired or required expression of sensitivity in the assignment?
4. Was sensitivity encouraged in the course? through the assignment itself? If so, please explain.
5. Was sensitivity measured for evaluation in the assignment? If so, how?

E. Creativity (defined as the imaginative use of a skill to bring about something new or a new stylistic variation on a previous production.)

1. Did you see creativity as an important component of the assignment?
2. Where in the assignment were students expected to be creative?
3. How were students informed of the desired or required expression of creativity in the assignment?
4. Was creativity encouraged in the course? in the assignment itself? If so, please explain.
5. Was creativity measured for evaluation in the assignment? If so, how?

F. Other

In the above questions you have shared about the values and skills of informational knowledge, personal authority, critical thinking, sensitivity and creativity.

1. Could you now please share any insights you have on how these values and skills were related to or integrated with each other through the assignment?

2. What other skills or values were promoted or achieved through this assignment that you feel are important?

II. Parameters and Support

A. Parameters (defined as limits placed into the assignment to help determine the process and product desired)

1. Did you see setting the parameters of the assignment as an important aspect of creating the assignment?
2. What were the parameters of this assignment that you feel most helped your students to succeed in the assignment? Why?
3. How were students informed of these parameters?

B. Support (defined as materials, words or actions which encourage others continue with a task in a positive manner)

1. Did you see the offering or structuring of support for students as in important aspect of their fulfilling the assignment?
2. In what ways were students supported to achieve success with the assignment?
3. Were there key points or moments in the assignment when support was especially needed?
4. How were students informed of the availability of support?
5. Was support offered in the course? in the assignment itself? If so, please explain.

C. Are there any other components of assignment design that you feel were important to the development of this assignment? If so, please explain.

III. Is there anything else you would like to share?

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Questionnaire (Students)

Thank you for participating in this study examining academic assignments in order to identify key values, skills and other components of assignments that are especially engaging for students. Below are some questions about the assignment in which you participated in Professor *Name's* course: *Name of course*. Thank you for offering your frank responses to these questions. All answers will be confidential. Please use the space provided. If you would like more space to complete your answers, please feel free to lengthen the space for your answer (or use the back of the page, clearly numbering it so I will be able to correspond your answer with the right question). When completed please return (email or hard copy) to:

Beverly Jones
jonesb@southwestern.edu
SU Box 7440

1. What do you remember about the assignment? Please include a description of the assignment as you remember it and what you did in the process of completing the assignment.
2. What aspects of the assignment did you like best?
3. What aspects of the assignment did you like least?
4. Below are some qualities that I am trying to assess in assignments. Reflecting on the identified assignment, please rate the your success in engaging the following qualities in the assignment:

a. Information (defined as learning vocabulary and concepts in context)

Least successful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Most successful

b. Personal Authority (defined as the confident assertion of one's self, knowledge and abilities expressed in the process of engaging and fulfilling a task)

Least successful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Most successful

c. Critical Thinking (defined as the ability to bring relevant information and values to bear on decision making)

Least successful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Most successful

d. Sensitivity (defined as showing respect, care and insight for the limits and potential of oneself and others (including material objects) in context)

Least successful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Most successful

f. Creativity (defined as the imaginative use of a skill to bring about something new or a new stylistic variation on a previous production)

Least successful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Most successful

4. In your opinion, do you feel the parameters of the assignment were too narrow, too broad, or about right? Why?

5. Did you feel that you received adequate support to achieve success in the assignment?

If so, what provided this support to you?

If not, what kind of support would have helped you?

6. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience in fulfilling the assignment or about the assignment itself?