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### Reflection assignments to better connect with students

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## Reflection assignments to better connect with students

18 June 2020

At the end of spring term, I invited faculty to share their experiences with online teaching, what had been challenging, and what had worked well. One of the challenges that many faculty noted was how much harder it was to create connections with students when more informal communication opportunities were constrained.

Sarah Deel (Biology) shared how she employed a [series of reflections](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c9Xs2rGs3z7HHbKJr4a27hkJfdlwbV_/view?usp=sharing) ([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c9Xs2rGs3z7HHbKJr4a27hkJfdlwbV\\_/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c9Xs2rGs3z7HHbKJr4a27hkJfdlwbV_/view?usp=sharing)) in Bio 126 that allowed her to get to know her students better, as well as giving her some insight into their experiences both within and beyond the course. Sarah found the almost-weekly reflections (submitted through Moodle) helped her engage and monitor students a little better than she otherwise would have been able. With the exception of Week 1, students had a choice of reflection prompts. For the first week, Sarah asked students to set an intention for the term and to share their goals. Sarah described her motivation for using reflections:

The idea was that they could use this to think about what was motivating them in this term with only S/Cr/NC grades. Then I gave them the option to reflect back on their goals and motivations at midterm and at the end of the term. For the students who chose to write about this, they seemed to really appreciate it. While I heard of students who really stopped engaging during the term, none of my students did. They were able to voice their frustration and lack of motivation in their Reflections, and I feel like that might have helped.

Sarah also noted that because students had a choice about which prompts to respond to, not all students reflected on their motivations at midterm and end-of-term time, but she hoped that even just seeing that as an option gave students a nudge to think back to what their intention was from the start of the term.

Here a selection of prompts that Sarah found particularly useful:

- This week, I'd like you to think about what your intentions are for approaching the Bio 126 labs. What are you hoping to gain from the lab? What is your internal motivation for doing the work? You will not have the usual external motivator of grades, since all courses are mandatory S/Cr/NC, so you will need to rely on intrinsic motivation. The more clearly you can articulate that motivation for yourself, to set your own intention, the easier it will be for you to stay on track and feel good about what you're accomplishing. Sharing this with me will also help me support you in your goals. Please describe your motivations/intentions for the lab course; there is not a length minimum or maximum. You may type directly into the text box here, or you may upload a document in the program of your choosing. Your language does not need to be formal, but you should be as clear as possible in your writing. You will not be graded on the quality of the work; you will receive full points for turning in a completed reflection. I will respond to your reflection, but will not assess it in a traditional sense.

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- How has participating in group work gone so far for you in lab? Do you have any particular successes or concerns to share?
- How has the relative lack of extracurricular activities affected your learning and college experience this term?
- Now that we are midway through the eight weeks of lab, go back and look at your response to the first Reflection this term. Do you think these motivations are still working for you? Do you need to make adjustments to your intentions to help keep you motivated?
- Look back at your initial motivations and intentions for the course (these are in the Lab 1 Reflection). Comment on how you think you did and if you're where you thought or hoped you'd be. Do you think it was a useful exercise to list those out early in the term? Did it help you become more aware of the need for intrinsic motivation?

Sarah noted that she might modify the question about group work in the future to ask about challenges of group work to encourage students to be more reflective about their group's functioning.

When looking at Sarah's list of prompts, the extracurricular question jumped out for me. I don't think it is something that I would have thought to ask about. Sarah noted:

The lack of extracurricular activities question really struck a chord with some students, and I was glad I asked it. It was good for me to be reminded that the folks on sports teams were really struggling with missing their team and the support they got from it, missing competing, and also missing how it structured the rest of their time and helped with time management. It was good for the students to recognize that this was something that was affecting them.

Sarah found one key to making the reflections work well was to emphasize to students in the prompts, verbally during class, and in her feedback, that she genuinely was interested in what they had to say, and that she was using this as a way to get to know them a bit better. That helped with buy-in from most students. Although Sarah provided individual responses to each reflection, she notes that might not scale well with larger numbers of students, and in such a situation, it might make more sense to respond to the reflections of the lab section of a whole, rather than individually.

What were your favorite approaches for building connections with students this past term?

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