Why Aren’t Students Reading?
Ask The Practical Professor #2

Dear Practical Professor,

My students aren’t doing the reading, and this really frustrates me. What do you suggest?

B.S. – Well, I’ve learned if I thoroughly cover the reading in class (as in PowerPoint presentations), I teach my students that they don’t need to do the reading.

J.F. - The opposite is also true. If I assign reading and then never use it in class in any consequential or accountable way, I communicate to students that reading for my class isn’t immediately necessary.

B.S. – Yeh. We’ve got to do something with what they have studied – build upon it, critique it, help students understand, have students work with the information.

J.F. – But we can’t just assume that students have really read. When you ask your students to “read,” have you taught them how to read successfully for your class?

B.S. – When most of us say “read,” we really mean “study.” And most students don’t know how to do that. Again, my students taught me that I need to teach them how to study, not simply read as if they were reading a fun novel.

J.F. – I’m a student in your Monday class and it’s Sunday night. In addition to work and family demands on my time and energy, I have two other classes tomorrow in addition to yours. Why should I read for your class? Forget the test in two weeks or that next week builds upon this one (I don’t care about that; I’m just trying to get through tomorrow). What is the immediate consequence if I don’t read the assignment and/or what is the immediate reward if I do it?

B.S. – In management, we say that most people respond well to immediate rewards. Immediate. Not something 6 weeks in the future. Every week I give “open note quizzes” – easy to answer questions that students can use their notes to answer. A colleague gives a short paragraph where students explain the two key concepts in the reading. Another has students trade notes and critique each other. Yet another randomly asks 6 – 8 students to hand in their notes. The key thing is to give a grade based upon doing the reading, not on understanding it – the understanding part comes during class.

In the next The Practical Professor: Student Feedback Technique Series #3
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Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty

The Top 10…

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No. 6 – Components of a Well-Planned Class
No. 7 – Observe Your Teaching Tendencies
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