**Activity**: The Blank Syllabus

**Goal**: To give a sense of real-life stakes to a college writing assignment, and to help students gain a sense of ownership over the shape and progress of the course.

**Class**: Expo E-25 –Academic Writing and Critical Reading

**Introduction/Background**:

In "The Blank Syllabus" activity, the instructor leaves assigned readings blank for some of the class sessions. The second writing assignment requires students to choose a reading from the course anthology--a reading that is then assigned to the class, thus filling in the blanks on the syllabus. The students get practice in writing about a reading of their choosing in the first assignment.

**Procedure:**

1. **Before class.**
   1. Students browse through the course anthology and choose a text to write about. In Expo E-25, this is typically a war poem.
   2. Students are required to choose a reading that does not already appear on the syllabus, and assigned to write an essay that amounts to a critical appreciation of the reading they have selected.
2. **In class.**
   1. The instructor distributes a revised schedule. Under October 25th it might read:
      1. Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” (B: 980–991; Tess and Calla)
      2. Bryant “Thanatopsis” (B: 1072–1074; Jenn and Oscar)
   2. Students' names appear next to their selections in order to give them credit for the selection.
   3. To initiate discussion, the instructor might say: "Tess, remind us why you thought it would be a good idea to read "Concord Hymn." What did Emerson mean by "the shot heard round the world"?

**Comments**: The instructor encourages all educators to give it a try. He notes that it requires a bit of a leap of faith--in the power of the material, in the ability of the students to grapple independently with challenging texts, and in the educator’s own ability to handle a variety of text--but it's a leap worth making.

**Assessment**: The instructor grades the papers that students write as a crucial part of this activity.

*Submitted by Christopher Walsh, Expository Writing*

Peer Instruction,Other,Jigsaw

individually,in pairs,in groups,as a class

Other,Paper,Presentation

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Extension

Expos

Faculty Member

Expo E-25

Academic Writing and Critical Reading

Humanities

Seminar

Term/Year

Stimulating Students to Think (i.e., activities designed to get students thinking appropriately for the context of a lesson.),Group and Cooperative Learning,Fostering Motivation (i.e., activities that support the affective aspects of a learning situation and/or foster motivation.),Authentic Learning (e.g., simulations, lab, field, research, case studies),Expanding Depth and Breadth (i.e., activities that deepen or broaden students\_Ñé conceptualizations of what they\_Ñéve learned beyond what might otherwise occur in the context of a lesson or course.)

I recently published a short piece on "The Blank Syllabus" approach in a book called The Pocket Instructor: Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom, which came out a couple months ago from Princeton University Press: http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10620.html

The last document I uploaded was what was published, and I'm not sure in Princeton UP would like that particular document being made available. I'd be glad to check.... Thanks for your time and trouble.