

What Do College Students Consider “Busy Work”?

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ABSTRACT. This study examined college students’ conceptualizations of “busy work” in a course that incorporated student-centered learning and collaborative learning groups. About 40% of the students felt that there was no “busy work.” Those that did most frequently reported that in-class group assignments and providing feedback to group presentations were “busy work.” Examinations were least likely seen as “busy work.” It is recommended that faculty explain the pedagogical rationale when student-centered learning techniques are used.

Introduction

Increasingly, higher education faculty are encouraged to employ teaching techniques that promote students becoming active learners (Jungst, Licklider, & Wiersema, 2003; Machemer & Crawford, 2007). Students, however, may not always understand the pedagogical rationale of active learning and therefore may not value such experiences (Huxham, 2005; Malikow, 2007; Qualters, 2001). From personal experience, it appeared that the more I built active, student-centered learning into the courses I taught, the more I heard complaints about “busy work.” This article is a preliminary investigation into what college students consider “busy work.”

Each semester, a few students out of approximately 150 wrote comments about “busy work” on teacher evaluations. No clear theme about what assignments students considered “busy work” emerged from their comments, making it difficult to know exactly what students considered “busy work.” The following comments illustrate the lack of coherent pattern in student comments:

- Projects were good but more “busy work” than I would have liked.
- I felt like there was too much “busy work” in the class. I liked doing the surveys, but the amount of reading plus assignments was at times overwhelming.
- Too much “busy work,” which was unnecessary.
- I liked the class. I thought there was a lot of “busy work.” I liked working in groups so that I could meet new people.

While I have heard students talk about “busy work,” the term appears infrequently in teaching and learning literature. For example, in the ERIC database, only 26 references have the term “busy work” in the abstract (search conducted on May 13, 2008). Out of the 26, 19 are in reference to student “busy work” and only 7 have been published since 1990. In most instances, these articles use “busy work” to connote the idea that students were given homework or assignments that did not promote learning (e.g., Ferzli, Carter, & Wiebe, 2005; Sullivan, & Sequeira, 1996). Malikow (2007) asked students about

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professors’ irritating behaviors and 28% said that one irritating behavior was that faculty would make students stay the entire class period and even create “busy work” to keep students occupied. He indicated that he was planning to do a follow-up study with professors to see their perception of “busy work.” Given the lack of scholarship in this area, I defined “busy work” as assignments that took up the students’ time but lacked intellectual rigor and a specific learning outcome or pedagogical rationale. Clearly, more research on what students in higher education consider “busy work” needs to be conducted (Malikow, 2007). Because I taught a course where a variety of teaching and learning methods were used, I viewed this as an optimal situation to learn more about what students considered “busy work.”

The course was a general education course designed to expose students to theories and concepts commonly used in human development and family studies. Students were placed in collaborative learning groups to facilitate discussions and interactions that would expose students to differing perspectives. Two sections of the class met twice weekly in back-to-back 75 minute sessions (1:05 and 2:30 p.m.). The two sections were taught by the same instructor and students in the two sections were primarily female (119 out of 140 students). Across both sections, there were 17 sophomores, 73 juniors, 47 seniors, and 3 fifth-year seniors. The class was designed to have simulations (e.g., poverty simulation as described by Loughlin, 2004) and hands-on activities (e.g., creating a family system sculpture as described by Wedemeyer & Grotevant, 1982) to facilitate active learning. Additionally, the following teaching and learning methods were used to assess learning. There were 805 total course points:

- *Daily or almost daily in-class individual quizzes.* This assessment method was used to encourage students to keep current on their reading, and thus the questions were not difficult but designed to be questions that almost anyone who had completed the reading could answer. The quizzes were worth a total of 60 points and students could drop their lowest 10 quiz points.
- *Periodic in-class group quizzes and/or assignments.* On certain days, groups were allowed to collaborate on quizzes. At other times, students were asked to discuss a topic or set of questions with their group and then one individual would record the group’s responses. These quizzes or assignments were worth a total of 60 points and students could drop their lowest 10 group quiz or assignment points.
- *A portfolio assignment.* Students were required to complete a portfolio on a specific topic of their choice (White, 2004). In essence, the portfolio was a series of assignments that allowed students to receive feedback on their learning as they completed each assignment. Each component of the portfolio is briefly described below:
 - Portfolio A required that students find a scholarly, peer-reviewed article on a self-selected topic. After the article had been approved by me, students would review the article, which was referred to as Portfolio B. Portfolio A was worth 30 points and Portfolio B worth 60 points.
 - Portfolio C consisted of a community-based learning experience that was closely related to their portfolio topic. For example, if a student was learning about the national program Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), he/she would volunteer at WIC, such as creating a bulletin board at the local WIC office. Portfolio C was worth 50 points.

- Portfolio D was a reflection and integration of the student’s learning across the semester and was worth 100 points.
- Portfolio E consisted of assembling all of the components of the portfolio and submitting them in an attractive binder or notebook, worth 25 points.
- *Group presentation.* Within the collaborative learning groups, group members would each research a similar topic area for their portfolio. As the capstone experience, students would give a group presentation about their topic to the class. To ensure that the class audience was engaged during the group presentation, students were given points for providing peer feedback to the group about their presentation and were required to give feedback to four groups. The presentation was worth 100 points and the peer feedback worth 10 points for each feedback, for a total of 40 points.
- *Examinations.* Three objective exams were given, each exam worth 100 points for a total of 300 points.

The purpose of this study was to determine what students considered “busy work” from the assignments described above. Based on the social norms theory (Carey, Borsari, Carey, & Maisto, 2006) that hypothesizes individuals’ behaviors are partly based on what they perceive the social norm of behaviors and beliefs of others to be, attributions students make about what their fellow classmates considered “busy work” could provide information about their own beliefs about “busy work” and were therefore included. Finally, students’ were asked to speculate about the instructor’s rationale for not exclusively using a traditional lecture format.

Method

About a month after students received their final semester grades, 140 students in two sections (70 in each section) of the course were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate in an online survey. Approximately 71% of students (N=99) responded to the survey, with a response rate of 65% (N=46) in one section and 75% (N=53) in the other. Students were asked to respond to three questions. Each question had forced-choice responses, and students could select more than one response and/or select “other.” In addition, students could provide comments to the first two questions. The questions were:

- *Please consider the following when you think about what you perceived as “busy work” in [the course name]. Which of the following did you consider “busy work”? You may respond with more than one answer.* Students could indicate any of the following, including:
 - No “busy work”
 - In-class individual quizzes
 - In-class group quizzes
 - In-class group assignments
 - Portfolio A (finding a scholarly article)
 - Portfolio B (reviewing a scholarly article)
 - Portfolio C (community-based learning experience, e.g., service learning)
 - Portfolio D (integration-of-learning paper)
 - Portfolio E (assembling all portfolio assignments)
 - Group presentations

- Providing peer feedback to groups about their presentation
- Exams
- Other
- *Now consider what friends, group members, or other class members might have considered “busy work.” Which of the following might others have been referring to? You may respond with more than one answer.* The assignments listed above were also included here.
- *Because [the course name] is not taught as a traditional lecture class and students are exposed to a variety of ways of learning (reading, discussing, doing applied assignments), how might this relate to some students’ perception that there is too much “busy work”? You may respond with more than one answer.*
Possible responses included:
 - Some students are not very motivated and do not want to do anything more than show up for class and take notes. In other words, students just want the knowledge put into them by the instructor rather than them learning on their own.
 - Students may not appreciate that some other students learn in different ways and that courses should provide a variety of ways to learn.
 - The instructor did not do a very good job in explaining the purpose and reason for various assignments and/or specific assignments and how they would facilitate student learning.
 - The assignments were not intellectually stimulating. In other words, the assignments were too easy.
 - Other

Results

Table 1 contains the total number across both sections and average percentages of respondents that felt certain assignments were “busy work,” and the assignments they believed their classmates would view as “busy work.” Table 1 also contains the number and percentage for each section.

Table 1.
Students Report of Their Beliefs About “Busy Work” and Their Perception of What Classmates Thought was “Busy Work”

Response for Students Reporting “Busy Work”	Both Sections (N=99)		Response for Students Making Attributions about Classmates Ideas of “Busy Work”	Both Sections (N=99)	
No “busy work”	39 39.4%		I do not know what other students perceive as “busy work”	24 24.2%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	20 43.5%	19 35.8%		13 28.3%	11 20.8%

What Do College Students Consider “Busy Work”? 109

In-class individual quizzes	9 9.1%		In-class individual quizzes	34 34.3%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	3 6.5%	6 11.3%		14 30.4%	20 37.7%
In-class group quizzes	7 7.1%		In-class group quizzes	29 29.3%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	1 2.2%	6 11.3%		10 21.7%	19 35.8%
In-class group assignments	31 31.3%		In-class group assignments	49 49.5%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	16 34.8%	15 28.3%		22 47.8%	27 50.9%
Portfolio A (finding a scholarly article)	16 16.2%		Portfolio A (finding a scholarly article)	24 24.2%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	7 15.2%	9 17.0%		11 23.9%	13 24.5%
Portfolio B (reviewing a scholarly article)	15 15.2%		Portfolio B (reviewing a scholarly article)	23 23.2%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	7 15.2%	8 15.1%		9 19.6%	14 26.4%

Portfolio C (community-based learning experience, e.g., service-learning)	18 18.2%		Portfolio C (community-based learning experience, e.g., service-learning)	29 29.3%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	6 13.0%	12 22.6%		11 23.9%	18 34.0%
Portfolio D (integration-of-learning paper)	14 14.1%		Portfolio D (integration-of-learning paper)	18 18.2%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	4 8.7%	10 18.9%		7 15.2%	11 20.8%
Portfolio E (assembling all portfolio assignments)	17 17.2%		Portfolio E (assembling all portfolio assignments)	20 20.2%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	7 15.2%	10 18.9%		7 15.2%	11 20.8%

	section (N=46)	section (N=53)		section (N=46)	section (N=53)
	8 17.4%	9 17.0%		9 19.6%	11 20.8%
Group presentation	14 14.1%		Group presentation	18 18.2%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	3 6.5%	11 20.8%		6 13.0%	12 22.6%
Providing peer feedback to groups about their presentation	27 27.3%		Providing peer feedback to groups about their presentation	34 34.3%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	10 21.7%	17 32.1%		14 30.4%	20 37.7%
Exams	2 2.0%		Exams	3 3.0%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	0 0%	2 3.8%		0 0%	3 5.7%
Other ¹	4 4.0%		Other ²	2 2.0%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)		1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	3 6.5%	1 1.9%		1 2.2%	1 1.9%

¹One respondent indicated the poverty simulation, two respondents reported in-class writing assignments, and one respondent did not clarify the assignment.

²Neither respondent indicated an assignment.

For both sections, a large portion of the respondents (39.4%) reported that they felt the class had no “busy work.” About a quarter of the students indicated that did not know what other students would perceive “busy work” (24.2%). If students did believe there was “busy work,” the most commonly reported assignment was in-class group assignments (31.3%), followed by providing feedback to groups about the group presentations (27.3%). The assignments respondents most believed that their classmates would consider “busy work” were in-class group assignments (49.5%), in-class individual quizzes (34.3%), and providing peer feedback to groups about their presentation (34.3%). Respondents were least likely to endorse as “busy work” exams (2.0%) and in-class group quizzes (7.1%). The assignment respondents least believed that their classmates would indicate as “busy work” was exams (3.0%).

Minor differences between the two sections were found. Respondents in the 2:30 section reported more assignments as “busy work” (106 vs. 68 responses). In particular, they described individual and group quizzes, portfolio C and D, group presentations, and peer feedback on the group presentations as “busy work.” The 2:30 p.m. section also

indicated that their classmates perceived more assignments as “busy work” (169 vs. 114 responses). Considering that both sections had identical assignments, it may be that there was some contagion effect on complaints about “busy work.”

Students had the option of indicating “other” and providing comments about what they thought was “busy work” and the attributions they made about what their peers thought was “busy work.” These comments were analyzed to find common themes. Out of the 99 students responding to the survey, 30 commented about what they perceived to be “busy work” and 20 commented about what classmates perceived to be “busy work.” Four themes were identified and examples of student comments that reflect each theme are provided below.

The first theme reflected an appreciation for the assignments and class format. These students did not feel that assignments were “busy work” but that each assignment contributed to their learning. The following four quotes illustrate this theme.

- *I really enjoyed doing the portfolio work and the group presentation. I enjoyed the group of girls I worked with. I think college students just like to come to class and show up for the test. I really enjoyed this class and looked forward to it on class days. I hate classes just with lecture. I don't learn much. This class was very hands on and you really have to work for your grade.*
- *I loved this class and I got so much out of it. I did not feel any of the assignments were “busy work.” I thought they really made you think for yourself and learn something.*
- *I felt everything we did in that class in one way or another helped me understand and grasp the concepts we were learning about.*
- *I really liked the discussions we had. I learned more from that than if you would have just lectured. With the theories it help[ed] to do activities with them so I could understand them better.*

Another theme that appeared in students’ comments was that “busy work” referred to specific assignments, such as community-based learning, the peer feedback on the presentation; or to a specific learning activity, such as the family system sculpture or poverty simulation. However, the assignments that some student identified as “busy work” were identified as helpful, or even powerful, learning experiences by other students. Interestingly, students would sometimes compare assignments or aspects of an assignment that they felt were not busy work (e.g., *group discussion*) with those that they identified as “busy work” (e.g., *writing down content of that group discussion*). Another example of this type of comment was “*I didn't mind the book readings and finding an article to review, but I really didn't like the group presentation. I felt it added too much to think about on top of the other work, and group projects are really hard in a class like this.*”

Some students reported that “busy work” was really having too much reading and/or work assigned in the course. These student quotes illustrate this theme: “*The assignments were fine but when you combine the reading assignments with the portfolio assignments it was a lot of work, [especially] when you are taking other classes that have about the same workload.*” and “*Lower the [number] of feedback ratings needed from each group. Instead of four [feedback ratings], only 2.*”

The final theme was reported by only a small number of students. They indicated that the class was not structured in a manner that they anticipated. For example, one student

who completed the family systems sculpture, which required using construction paper and markers, said “[The instructor] taught the class like we were all five-year-olds and had to do projects with construction paper and markers like a preschool class.” Another student felt that the constraints of a large-lecture class created a setting where “busy work” was necessary. This student indicated that “Because there are so many students in [course name] and because this is only a three-hundred level course, I feel there has to be “busy work” in order to determine grades. Maybe some students expected this class to be a survey class, consisting mostly of lecture and tests.”

The final question on the survey asked respondents to reflect on the fact that in this class information was not presented in a typical stand-alone lecture format and assignments were developed to target different ways of learning. Respondents were then asked to decide how the nontraditional assignments and class structure might have contributed to students conceptions of too much “busy work.” Table 2 reflects the student responses to this question. Very few students endorsed the notion that “busy work” assignments were not intellectually stimulating (14.1%). However, more respondents believed that other students were not motivated and that they just wanted to show up for class and take notes (57.6%) and/or students may not appreciate other ways of learning (44.4%). About 20% of the respondents felt that the instructor did not offer students a pedagogical rationale for the assignments and set the stage for their learning.

Table 2. How Different Ways of Learning Relate to “Busy Work”

Response	Both Sections (N=99)	
Some students are not very motivated and do not want to do anything more than show up for class and take notes. In other words, students just want the knowledge put into them by the instructor rather than them learning on their own.	57 57.6%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	29 63.0%	28 52.8%
Students may not appreciate that some other students learn in different ways and courses should provide a variety of ways to learn.	44 44.4%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	17 37.0%	27 50.9%
The instructor did not do a very good job in explaining the purpose and reason for various assignments and/or specific assignments and how they would facilitate student learning.	20 20.2%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	8 17.4%	12 22.6%
The assignments were not intellectually stimulating. In other words, the assignments were too easy.	14 14.1%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)

	6 13.0%	8 15.1%
Other	13 ¹ 13.1%	
	1:05 section (N=46)	2:30 section (N=53)
	5 10.9%	8 15.1%

¹ Respondents indicated several other responses, including four respondents who stated a general discontent with the class (e.g., grading, not wanting interactive activities every class period, the content was too disconnected); three respondents who commented on how such assignments were just additional work; two respondents who reported that the assignments did not seem to have a purpose or any practical application later in life; one respondent reported that the assignments were a waste of time; one respondent indicated that compared to other formats in higher education courses, this one seemed like a lot of work; one respondent recommended that the course format should not change; and finally one respondent indicated “no response.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine students’ beliefs about what they considered “busy work” in a course that had active learning components. Almost 40% of the students reported that there was no “busy work” in the course. One of the themes from the student comments reflected this belief as well, with students commenting about how active learning facilitated their learning more than just lecture would have. When asked to attribute why other students may have felt that learning activities would have been “busy work,” almost 60% of students felt that other students were not motivated to be active learners in class and about 45% of students indicated that other students may not appreciate different ways of learning. This finding supports Qualters’ (2001) observation that many students come to higher education with expectations of passive classroom experiences. Surprisingly, my definition of “busy work” as assignments not being intellectually stimulating was endorsed by only 14% of the students. Clearly, my definition of “busy work” did not match the majority of the students’ definitions. In Malikow’s (2007) study about professors’ behaviors that students find irritating, he predicted that if another study was conducted, he would “not be surprised if ... students and professors do not agree on what constitutes ‘busy work’” (p.30).

Other themes from students’ comments were that the course assignments did not meet their expectations in how much work would be involved in the course or that they expected a more traditional lecture format. Related to the amount of work, Malikow (2007) found that 38% of students indicated that professors that assigned work “as though their class is the only one or most important one” were irritating to students. In this study, one in five students indicated that the instructor could have been more thorough in explaining how assignments or certain types of assignments would facilitate their learning.

In-class group assignments and providing feedback to groups about their group presentations were two assignments that were most frequently endorsed as “busy work” both for students and what students perceived their classmates to believe as “busy work.” Examinations were least likely to be reported as “busy work.” These findings can be interpreted in light of the somewhat contradictory research on active learning. If students

understand why active learning techniques are used (Jungst, Licklider, & Wiersema 2003) and are exposed to classes that employ active learning early in their higher education experience (Qualters, 2001), active learning was viewed positively. While Yuretich (2003) found that students gave equally positive evaluations for the usefulness of lectures and active learning activities, Machemer and Crawford (2007) reported that working with cooperative learning groups greatly diminished students’ beliefs about the value of either lectures or active learning. In several sections of a physical therapy course, some were taught using active learning and others using traditional lecture format, and students were asked about their learning and their perception of course and instructor effectiveness (Lake, 2001). Students in the active learning course obtained higher grades but felt they had learned less than those in the traditional lecture sections. Students rated the course and instructor effectiveness lower in the active learning sections. Additional research into students’ perceptions about active learning and “busy work” needs to be conducted. Because the semester had ended when this data was collected, I did not share the findings of this study with class members. However, it would be interesting to solicit students’ reactions and explanations for the findings of this study.

Several recommendations for instructors emerged from the study. First, educators should utilize a variety of both active and passive learning activities in their classroom. For each class period, active learning can be scheduled to break up the more passive lecture times. An example might be to lecture about a family theory and then ask small groups of students to discuss together how to apply that theory in their own families. To keep students accountable for the group time, I require them to submit information about their discussion and application of course content. However, based on the findings from this study, if this accountability measure was built into every class period, students might find this to be “busy work.” Considering that students may find it irritating that create “busy work” to keep them in class (Malikow, 2007), it might be advantageous to situate the active learning in the middle of the lecture.

Second, mid-semester informal comments elicited from students can provide faculty with a sense of the overall experience of students. Using open-ended questions, such as “*What activities do you most enjoy in our class?*” or “*Is there any aspect of the course that you feel should be changed?*”, can inform instructors about the balance between active and passive learning. In-class writing assignments, such as the minute paper or muddiest point (i.e. students are asked to describe what about the content remained muddy or unclear to them after the lecture), assigned at the end of the class period can help instructors determine if the students captured the content they hoped students would learn from the activity (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Since conducting this research, I now offer students in some classes the opportunity to select from a variety of learning activities for major class projects, such as the group presentation listed above. In one course, students could decide if they wanted to prepare and give a group presentation, make a storyboard based on their research, conduct a mini-research project, or write a paper. Students seemed to appreciate the ability to select the major projects because they could accentuate their preferred learning style.

Finally, faculty who utilize active learning techniques, especially active learning within groups, should provide a pedagogical rationale to students for these techniques. Malikow (2007) has stated “what students perceive as ‘busy work’ might be purposeful

in a way that is not apparent to them.... It might be helpful to both parties if professors would explain the purpose of any work they anticipate might be misperceived by students as ‘busy work.’” (p. 30). As more higher education institutions employ active learning earlier in a students’ education, active learning may become more normative and require less justification to students by faculty. Until that occurs, however, instructors may need to explain frequently why a variety of learning techniques are used in the class. Instructors might explain to students that by writing down their comments after group discussion, instructors are better able to determine if the concept has been thoroughly taught and is clearly understood by students. By using an assessment of student learning styles, such as the VARK (VARK: A guide to learning styles, n.d.) at the beginning of the semester, faculty can refer to how various active learning assignments will tap into specific learning styles. When simulations, such as the poverty or chronic illness simulation, are used in class, it has been my experience that the majority of the class appreciates these activities. But for the few who do not, instructors can share what they hope all students will learn from the experience and comment that not all students react to the experiential learning similarly.

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