### Some General Principles of Assignment Design:

- A series of short assignments gets better results than a long one.
- A long assignment (e.g. term paper) works better if broken into stages.
- A mixture of assignment types accommodates different types of learning styles (e.g. journals, learning logs, freewrites, formal papers, reflective pieces, creative pieces).
- Structured assignments promote more growth. Specify a problem to address, clarify expectations (content, structure, length), make grading criteria explicit.
- Opportunities for group work and experiential learning will assure that students learn from each other.
- Assignment sequences that increase in levels of difficulty should provide many chances for early success. An explanation for the purpose of every assignment motivates students to “stay with the program.”
- Frequent and timely feedback will encourage students, guide improvement, and reduce worrying.

### The Learning Cycle & Types of Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Cycle Phase</th>
<th>Suggested Writing Assignments</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Concrete experience</strong></td>
<td>1. Nongraded personal writing that records personal thoughts, raises questions, expresses puzzlement</td>
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<td>Introducing new concept through film, demonstration, observation.</td>
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<td><strong>Reflective observation</strong></td>
<td>2. Exploratory writing connecting new material to personal experience &amp; previous knowledge</td>
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<td>Reconsidering concepts after readings, lectures, class discussion, exchange of differing perspectives</td>
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<td><strong>Abstract conceptualization</strong></td>
<td>3. Autobiographical experiences with a concept</td>
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<td>Mastering &amp; internalizing conceptual components, seeing relationships between new material &amp; other concepts</td>
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<td><strong>Active experimentation</strong></td>
<td>4. Personal reflection, thinking aloud on paper rather than thesis with support</td>
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<td>Using new concepts to solve problems</td>
<td>5. Formal academic papers with thesis-based analysis &amp; argument</td>
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<td>6. Position papers based on cases that use the concepts</td>
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<td>7. Laboratory reports or field research using the concepts</td>
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<td>8. Proposals applying new concepts to solve real-world problems</td>
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<td>9. Creative pieces demonstrating grasp of new concepts</td>
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*This handout is adapted from John Bean, *Engaging Ideas* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996). See Bean’s discussion of Kolb, 41-43.*
Try it Yourself! Write and Share

Please divide yourselves into groups of three to four. Respond to the writing prompt your group receives. Write for 5 minutes. Then please take 10 minutes to share what you wrote. Elect someone to summarize your responses. Your spokesperson will share your summarized responses with the rest of us.

**Group One:** What questions, doubts, or concerns do you have about the material you’ve looked at on assignment design and assignment types?

**Group Two:** What’s been your most successful writing assignment—either one that you’ve given to your students, or one that you have done yourself as a student? How do you account for its success?

**Group Three:** Briefly state your own stance on assigning writing in a course you teach. Give a thesis, three reasons you feel as you do, a refutation of a perspective that differs from yours, and a conclusion you feel is pertinent to other teachers in your discipline.

**Group Four:** Observe what you see happening as each group begins to do its different writing activity. Based on the materials you’ve examined on this handout, what predictions can you make about the kinds of group interaction and insights each prompt will bring about—including the one for your own group?

**Group Five:** Write a free-verse poem about the pen you’re holding or the piece of paper in front of you. Express something about the concepts of assignment design & types you’ve just reviewed.

1. What are the main units in your course?
2. What are your main learning objectives for each unit? What are the most important concepts or principles?
3. What thinking skills do you want students to develop? E.g. ways of observing, habits of mind, questioning strategies, use of evidence?
4. What are the aspects students have found most difficult in the course?
5. What would you most like to change about your students’ study habits?
6. Ten years later, what do you want students to remember most about your course?

Predominant Learning Styles

**Convergers** are those who prefer quick closure to problems. They seek concrete solutions.

**Diversers** incline toward brainstorming and coming up with a number of alternative solutions to problems.

**Assimilators** collect large amounts of information, contrasting and comparing approaches to problems. They theorize and build models.

**Accommodators** tackle problems with a trial and error approach, basing solutions on the accumulation of experience.

- What category seemed to predominate among your group?
- In what category would you place yourself?
- In what category would you place the majority of your students?
- To which categories would you match each of the brief prompts above?

Questions that Guide the Design of Writing Assignments

Predominant Learning Styles