

How Not To Make An Assignment

William Van Til

Mrs. Jones was worried. Through press, magazine, radio, and television, the message screamed at her: Americans have low intellectual standards. Americans are soft and undisciplined. Americans don't strive for excellence. The flabby American. The materialistic American. The American who is addicted to cars and TV.

Maybe, thought Mrs. Jones, I am one of them, the permissive, sentimental, soft teachers who are not developing trained minds. So she doubled her assignments. Not ten questions a night in the history workbook; twenty questions now. Not fifteen pages of reading a night in the textbook; thirty pages now. Nobody can blame me if we don't raise our intellectual level, thought Mrs. Jones.

Gregory looked at the little notebook in which day after day he carefully copied each assignment for each of his five major courses. He made a number of rapid calculations. No matter how he calculated, it looked like about five hours of homework for tonight. Last night it had been four, and the night before, five.

It's not that I mind work, Gregory told himself. I wouldn't have gotten the award as leading student of the junior class if I didn't work. It's just that this work is so stupid, useless, futile. I get the central idea of a chapter the first time I read it. Why does this workbook repeat the idea over and over again in different contexts? If I could only get on to something new, instead of repeating what I already know. If I only had time to read books I want to read. Or do something important.

The phone rang. Gregory talked briefly, then decided, "It's a good idea, but I just don't have the time. Of course I like the idea of visiting patients in the mental hospital and trying to help them take an interest in things, but I just can't do it. Look, I have even given up listening to the American Issues panel on Thursdays at 10:00. These days I usually finish up after 11:00. Sometimes I let the movie on a late show drug me for half an hour and then I drag off to bed."

I give up, thought Toni. I know when I'm licked and this is it. It's too hard. Most of all, it's too much. If I were a brain like Gregory, but I'm not. I'm stupid. I'd better find me a way out. Better to walk out than to be kicked out. I haven't got it made and I never will.

Maybe if I took to staying away from school, Mom and Pop would get the idea. I could find a job. I wouldn't get the Navy Yard job because that calls for high school graduation. But even if I am stupid, I could do something. If they give me half a chance, I'll quit so fast it will make them dizzy.

MISS SMITH AND THE LIBRARY

"Get the name right," said Miss Smith. "Newman, James R. Newman. And get the title right. *The World of Mathematics*. Volume I. The first three chapters by Monday."

She said almost the same thing in the second period and again in the fourth period.

The public librarian, Marv Johnson, even though she knew it was no use, said again, "Can't you get it at your school library?"

"No, ma'am," said Virginia. "The school's only got one copy of the set and the kids are waist-deep waiting for that one. Any chance your copy will be returned this weekend?"

"It's out to an adult," said Mary Johnson. "If I'd known that there was going to be a run on it, I might have been able to get another set from the Midvale library."

"Do you think they'd have it?" asked Virginia hopefully. "Let me find out," said Mary Johnson. She made a brief call, then reported to Virginia, "They do have a copy, but there are four students over there now trying to get a chance to read it."

"Thanks," said Virginia. "I'll see if Mom will drive me over."

Mary Johnson sighed, and turned back to the growing line at the checkout counter. When she looked up a little later, she saw three worried-looking youngsters peering into the N drawer of the card catalogue. Mary Johnson sighed again and engaged in a few private thoughts about teachers and assignments.

MR. PACKARD AND CREATIVITY

"Write as many pages as you want, as long as it's about literature," said Mr. Packard. Most of the students looked blank, a few wrote down his words verbatim. "The meaning and use of literature. Any way you want to do it or say it. This gives you a lot of room for creativity and--he paused--"independent thought." That's what we want, isn't it? Independent thought? Through the open assignment?

The bell rang, marking the end of the class. The voices rose from the student Tower of Babel.

"I don't get it. What does he mean, 'the use of literature'?"

"What'll you do?"

"I don't know how to get at it."

"Make a bluff; that's what I'm gonna do."

"Vague it up; put in some high-sounding phrases; you'd probably get away with it."

Mr. Packard read the compositions and he sighed: "Literature has a great use in that it inspires people to go to fine things and teaches them to appreciate the really good in life. Literature is really helpful to us all." They seemed so general. Whatever was happening to students' creativity? What the class seemed to lack was independent thinkers. But he hated to give them low grades; some of them were such nice youngsters. He kept on reading.

MISS AARON AND HARVARD

Miss Aaron was constructing her true-false exam in biology. Here was a good item; buried deep in a long paragraph, it might have escaped even the best masters of detail in the class.

It gets harder and harder to distinguish between the sheep and the goats, the washed and the unwashed, thought Miss Aaron. These are bright youngsters in this suburb, and nowadays an unprecedented 92 percent are going to college. A teacher really has to work to find details which they haven't memorized. Ah, I've found another good one. Here's a really obscure footnote!

"But you do want to get into Harvard, Richard, don't you?"

"I'm certainly going to try," said Richard, "My folks are set on it and I don't want to let them down."

"Then," said Miss Aaron decisively, "you will have to work harder on mastery of details. After all, you'll never be accepted by Harvard if you haven't a well-stocked mind." She liked the phrase well-stocked mind and often used it.

"I get the central Ideas," said Richard, "and the facts that support them. It's remembering all those tiny details like that bone mentioned in the footnote that gives me trouble. That bone seemed to me to be a mere fact. It didn't seem to be related to the main ideas in the summary."

"There is nothing mere about a fact, Richard," said Miss Aaron. "A wellstocked mind holds many details. If you are going to study at Harvard, Richard, you must...."

MEANWHILE, BACK AT HARVARD

At Harvard University, William G. Perry, Jr., the director of the Bureau of Study Counsel, reported to the faculty on a twenty-year experiment in teaching Harvard students to read better. He said: "Year by year it has become more apparent that what the students lack is not mechanical skills but flexibility and purpose in the use of them. . . . What they seem to do with almost any kind of reading is to open the book and read from word to word, having in advance abandoned all responsibility in regard to the purpose of the reading to those who had made the assignment."

Mr. Perry described a study by the Bureau which had assigned 1,500 Harvard and Radcliffe freshmen a chapter from a history book, thirty pages of detailed material.

". . . The chapter in question is an admirable piece of exposition, but like many admirable chapters it makes no initial statement of its aims, and it takes a little while to get going. And as a consequence, the reader who begins at the beginning with the Battle of Hastings and reads word by word is likely to find himself at page three hopelessly bogged down. . . . What we were interested to determine was how many students in the face of this burden of detail, the purpose of which was not clear, would have the moral courage, or should we call it the immoral courage, to pull themselves out and look at the ending of the chapter."

Mr. Perry went on to report that "their capacity to answer multiple choice questions on detail was impressive."

But, he continued, "out of these 1,500 of the finest freshman readers in the country only 150 even made a claim to have taken a look ahead during twenty minutes of struggle with the chapter. And the vast majority of these seemed to have looked ahead only to determine how long the assignment was.

"We asked anyone who could do so to write a short statement about what the chapter was all about. The number who were able to tell us, in terms that had something to do with the growth of institutions, was just one in a hundred-fifteen.

"As a demonstration of obedient purposelessness in the reading of 99 percent of freshmen we found this impressive. . . .

"After twelve years of reading homework assignments in school they had all settled into the habit of leaving the point to someone else. . . ."

OUR MISGUIDED ASSIGNMENT MAKERS

Let us consider more closely our four examples of how not to make an assignment.

Mrs. Jones, who wants desperately to help the nation, should look more carefully at individuals and more deeply at what is needed for the national welfare. In addition, Mrs. Jones needs to think about the relationship between her subject (history) and her supposed goal (citizenship).

She will best help Gregory and best foster intellectual leadership in the nation if she gives assignments which challenge Gregory's thought, not merely test his endurance. She will best help Tom and best contribute to the making of a skilled worker if her individualized assignments recognize the limitations of Tom's natural ability.

The principal in Mrs. Jones' school might well become concerned about coordination of assignments, total volume of homework-, and staggering of assigned work. Communication among teachers is a first step. Who is assigning what, when?

Miss Smith, who assigned the outside reading in the hard-to-find mathematics volume, could improve her working relationships with the library world. She might have taken the school librarian and the public librarian into her confidence early through long-range planning.

At the very least, she might have told the school librarian and called the public librarian concerning her assignment on the day she decided upon it. She might have thought of the inconveniences and frustrations ahead for conscientious students, as well as the built-in-alibis for failure to report which she was providing for less-motivated students. Miss Smith meant well but good intentions must be accompanied by good working relationships with those who are responsible for source materials.

Mr. Packard, sponsor of the vague assignment, will never foster the creativity and independent thought he prizes until he sets clearer bounds and limits for the students and for himself. Permissiveness-run-wild too often terminates in dead ends. Possibly the students would benefit from a course in study skills. Maybe Mr. Packard would, too.

Miss Aaron, our hunter for details, is another invention of the author. But Mr. Perry is no figment of the imagination. No doubt he is busy at Harvard today attempting to undo what Miss Aaron hath wrought.

In the name of "what Harvard wants," our Miss Aaron is teaching what Harvard and the university world in general do not want. Miss Aaron stresses reading for small details and is uninterested in ideas, relationships, and concepts. Mr. Perry and his counterparts across the nation are trying to help students see details in perspective and to aim for mastery of meanings, purposes, and relationships.

If misguided Miss Aaron prevails, Richard may give up his present attempt to see the world whole and settle for details. Ironically, he may then end up in remedial work directed by Mr. Perry.

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