

Creating Meaningful and Engaging Assignments

Instructors should:

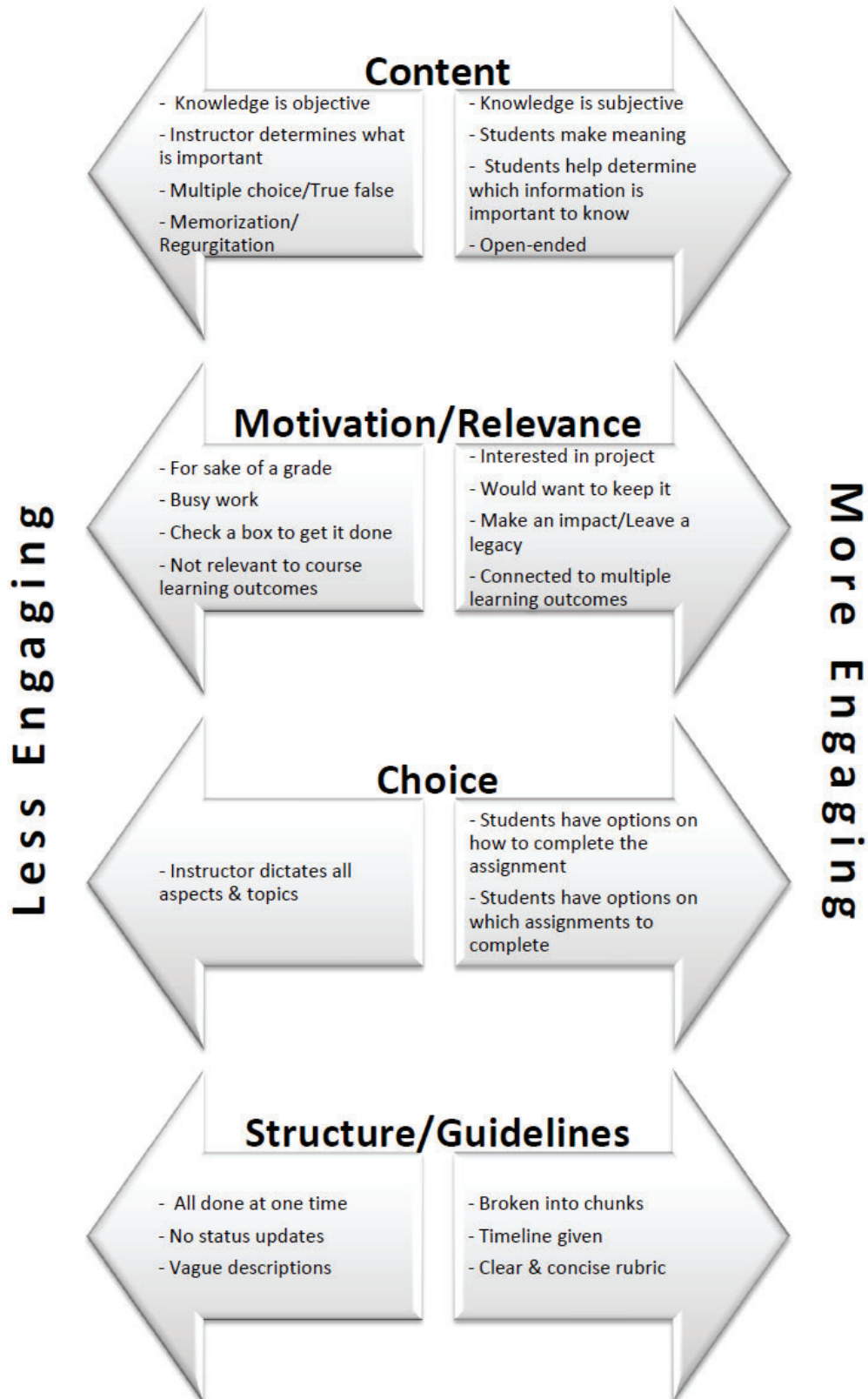
- Provide a strong rationale/purpose for the assignments to their students
- Ensure that the rigor and amount of work matches the number of credit hours earned (these are primarily 0-1 credit hour experiences). Use assignments sparingly to reinforce major course outcomes.
- Seek the buy-in and support of their Peer Mentor on their assignments
- Allow student choice in how they complete their assignments and/or encourage students to develop components of the assignment as a class
- Provide timely, constructive, and meaningful feedback on each assignment
- Build a strong community in their classroom and leverage assignments to support that community
- Model successful work by sharing good examples of student work or the Instructor/Peer Mentor's work

Meaningful assignments include:

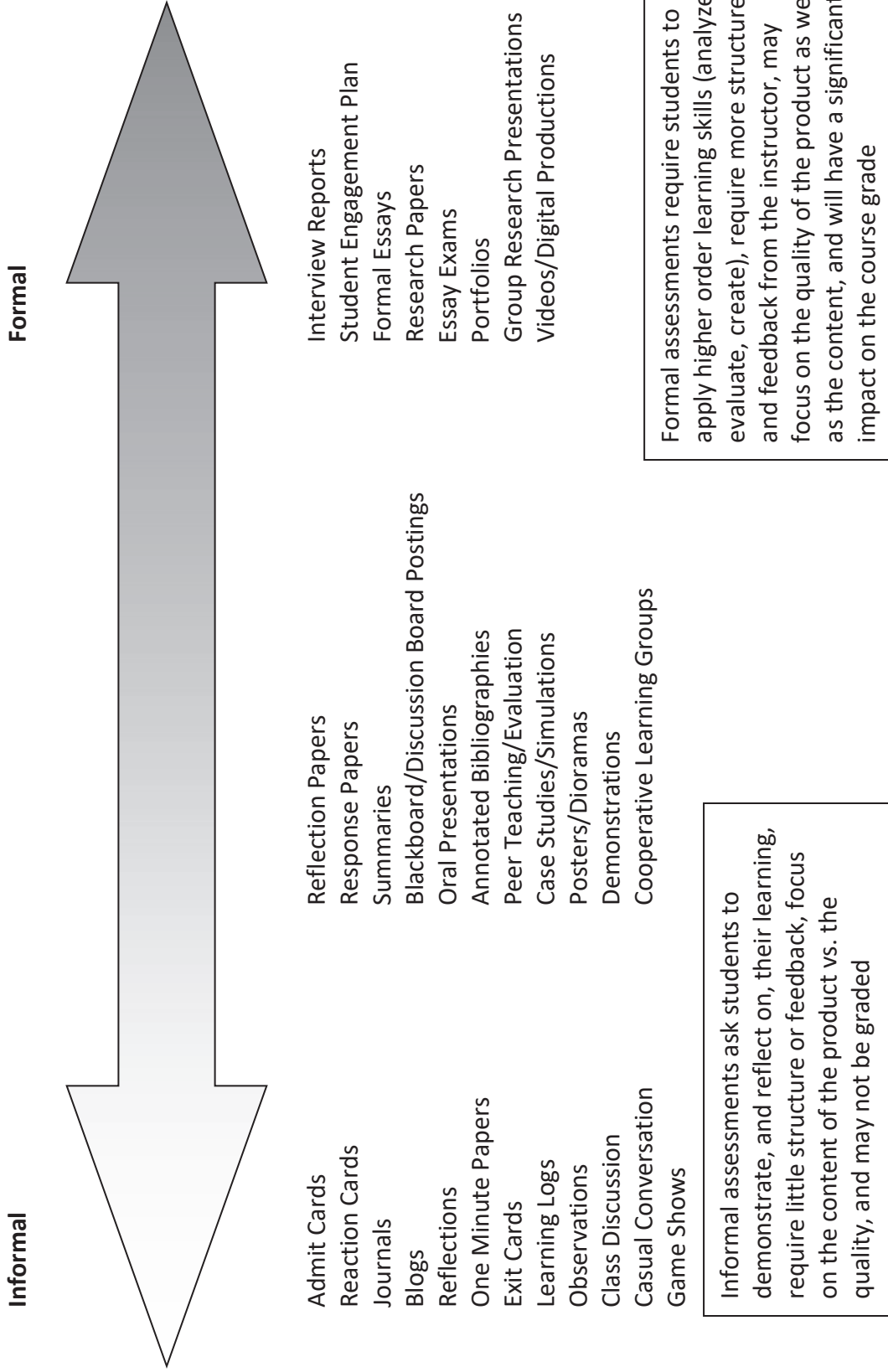
- Reflection (e.g. informal writing, reflective components in all assignments, reflective and cumulative final projects)
- Opportunities for students to apply their learning (in particular, to being a successful student at Texas A&M)
- Beyond-the-classroom expectations/requirements (e.g. engagement experiences, interviews, visiting the library and/or career center)
- Products students could be proud of/want to share with others (e.g. videos, blogs, presentations)
- Clear structure and support from the instructor on how to complete the assignment successfully (e.g. rubrics, examples of good work, class time to discuss/develop skills)
- Opportunities for students to work together and get to know each other (personality or learning style assessments, opportunities for self-disclosure (e.g. lifelines), assignments that require students to work together in groups in and/or outside of class)

Designing Engaging Assignments

(Exams, Projects, Papers, Presentations, etc.)



Methods for Assessing Student Learning



Assignments

Providing Feedback to First-Year Students

The primary function of grading is to communicate as accurately as possible the extent to which students have learned what the course was designed to accomplish. Understanding this, the goals of providing feedback are to...

- improve performance and academic success
- increase interest and motivation to learn
- illuminate and undermine misconceptions
- promote self-assessment
- develop independence

The order in which we give feedback matters, so when providing feedback, do so in the following order:

1. What was done well
2. What still needs improvement
3. What can be done to improve it

Also, consider the following tips:

- When grading assignments, ask yourself, “What does this learner need from me at this time?” Shape your comments accordingly.
- Grade according to predetermined standards and make those standards explicit at the outset (with a rubric or by providing an example of an “A” product). Students are more likely to achieve high standards if they know what those standards are.
- Speak to the learner, not the error. Focus on what the student has achieved and what might yet be achieved.
- Praise the student for the progress made, indicate what needs to be done, and give advice to the student about how to do those things.
- Up to a point, more comments, and more specific comments lead to greater learning. There are three kinds of qualifications to this statement:
 - a) A student can be overloaded with feedback. There are a limited number of things a student can be expected to learn and remedy at one time.
 - b) Motivation for improvement is affected by the balance of encouragement versus criticism. Feedback can be either helpful or detrimental. A heavy dose of criticism may cause a student to quit trying to improve.
 - c) The type of comment makes a difference. Simply noting errors is not helpful if the student doesn’t know how to correct the errors. Helpful comments provide guidance about how to improve.

Best Practices in Grading and Providing Feedback

- If student work does not meet your expectations, first consider if your expectations were clear. Test your assignments by sharing them with students outside of your class, or peers, and try to complete the assignment yourself.
- Assign students work early and often during the semester, and provide timely and appropriate feedback on all of those assignments.
- Provide students adequate structure and support for completing assignments successfully. This may include providing a rubric, sharing examples of high quality work, and/or facilitating lesson plans that help students develop the skills they need to be successful.
- Feedback on assignments must be timely and specific, and should include praise, constructive strategies for improvement, and questions to encourage further thinking.
- Feedback must justify the student's grade and should match the level of effort students put into the assignment.
- Feedback should not overwhelm students. Focus on what is important, fixable, and within in the scope of the purpose of the assignment. For example; are students learning to write or writing to learn, or is this a formal or informal assignment?
- If all else fails, remember TRU DAT. Feedback should be:
 - Timely
 - Relevant
 - Understandable
 - Digestible
 - Accurate
 - Thought-Provoking

References:

Angelo, T. (2013, October). Effective and efficient ways to assess first-year students' learning. Presented at the Institute on Effective Teaching and Learning, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

Erickson, B., Peters, C., & Strommer, D. (2006). Teaching first-year college students. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V.J. (1998). Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.