



INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Teaching Technique 26

Dyadic Essays

ACTIVITY TYPE

- Active/Engaged Learning
- Writing

TEACHING PROBLEM ADDRESSED


- Surface Learning

LEARNING TAXONOMIC LEVEL

- Foundational Knowledge
- Integration & Synthesis
- Learning How to Learn

Dyadic Essays

In *Dyadic Essays*, students complete a content unit, identify a central question, and draft an answer to that question. Next they exchange questions with a peer and prepare responses. Finally, pairs read and compare the model and in-class answers.

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- 1 Clarify your teaching purpose and learning goals for the *Dyadic Essay*
 - 2 Identify the learning task's underlying problem and craft the prompt
 - 3 Set assignment parameters for completing the prompts
 - 4 Develop a plan for learning assessment or grading
 - 5 Communicate assignment instructions to students
 - 6 Implement the technique
 - 7 Reflect upon the activity and evaluate its effectiveness

Step-By-Step Instructions

In this section we provide you with guidance on each of the seven steps involved as you consider this technique.

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Students often fail to think about what's the most important point of what they've been studying and what they might expect to see on a test. In *Dyadic Essays*, they have a chance to do just that while also having a chance to practice responding. This is a flexible technique that can be used across many different disciplines and fields. It could be used after a reading assignment, a lecture, a group activity, or other activity. It could be completed in or out of class. It could be modified and used as a discussion technique instead of a writing technique. Finally, *Dyadic Essays* could be used as a prompt for a research assignment.

As students question and then list key ideas and information, a *Dyadic Essay* provides them with an opportunity to develop foundational knowledge about a subject area. They have to learn the material well enough to formulate a question about it and recognize which is the most important aspect of the topic. They also have to rehearse, integrate, and synthesize information as they develop model responses and then respond to their peer's prompt. Finally, they learn how to learn, through practicing questioning and self assessing their answers against a model answer.

Dyadic Essays are a particularly useful approach for assessing learning. You can assess student ability to formulate critical questions as well as their ability to write about the subject at hand. This information can help you tailor your instruction to best meet their instructional needs and interests. It also provides students with a glimpse into their learning, thus serving as an instrument of self-assessment.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

Choose the content area around which students will develop questions. Provide guidance to students on how to write good essay questions and answers. It may be helpful to distribute a handout that includes a collection of question stems such as those in the **Support Materials** section of the download. It can also be useful to share sample questions and responses with students that model the length and level of complexity and depth that you expect.

Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)

STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

Determine the specifics of the assignment. First, set guidelines for the prompt. For example you might suggest that students:

- Write a general statement that introduces the topic.
- Probe students to connect the topic to recent content, whether from a lecture or reading assignment.
- Set the mode (describe, persuade, argue).
- Identify the audience for the response (e.g. classmates, a professional group, or other).

You will also want to set parameters for the essay. You might consider:

- Will you require a thesis statement or central argument?
- Should it follow a standard essay format, such as introduction, body, and conclusion?
- What is the approximate length of a good response?
- Should the essay response be written formally or informally?
- Should there be a reference page?

STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

This technique will yield several *Learning Artifacts*:

- The student developed essay question.
- The student developed model response.
- The partner's created essay response.
- The student's evaluation of the partner's essay response.

These artifacts provide instructors with rich, in-depth insight into a students' ability to apply and evaluate, with the additional advantage of including a built-in layer of peer evaluation. This technique may be done during a learning unit or module to provide documentation of student progress that has been subjected to peer evaluation. It may also be used at the end of a learning unit or module to help you assess comprehension. As a substitute for the traditional essay exam, this technique can help students strengthen their application of information and development of higher order thinking skills while providing instructors with rich information for summative assessment purposes, both at the individual and aggregate level. How to grade this technique will depend on how much time you ask students to devote to it.

Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)

If it is an in-class activity that you plan to use for formative assessment only, consider it as part of a participation grade. If students work on responses out of class, you will likely want to assign a portion of the final grade to the assignment.

STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

To communicate the parameters, including how the information will be graded, consider preparing a handout. Your handout can contain not only parameters but also sample questions and responses that model the level of complexity and depth you expect.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

- Students complete an activity, such as reading an assignment or watching a video.
- They then formulate and write an essay question about the content.
- Next, they prepare a model response to their own question.
- Students bring a copy of their essay questions and model answers to class, in separate documents.
- Students then form pairs, exchange essay questions, and write a response to their peer's question.
- Next, they trade answers and compare and contrast their in-class answer with their partner's model answer.
- Partners discuss their responses, first for one essay question and then for the other, paying attention to variations in their responses.

STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

When reflecting on the activity and how effective it was, consider the following questions:

- Did the technique match the course learning goals and objectives?
- Did it meet my goals for this learning module?
- Was it appropriate for the students?
- Did the technique keep the students engaged?
- Did it promote student learning?
- Did it provide me with information about student understanding?

If you answer yes to all or most of these questions, next consider how you might improve the activity for the next use.

Support Materials

The materials in this section are intended to help you with the process of implementing this technique.

DEVELOPING ESSAY QUESTIONS

Consider the following sample handout on page 7 to guide your students on how to write good essay questions for this technique.

VARIATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

- Ask students to synthesize their practice responses and the model responses to create a new response.
- Have an external reader review both responses.
- Ask students to do most of this technique as homework. First, students write questions and model answers as homework. In class the next day they exchange questions but take the questions home and write responses as homework. Comparisons to the model response can be done either in or out of class.
- Consider having students evaluate each other's responses. Provide them with a framework to do so.
- Use this activity to help students prepare for an upcoming examination.

SAMPLE SENTENCE STEMS HANDOUT

For developing essay questions for *Dyadic Essays*

- Explain why (or explain how) ...?
- Why is...important?
- How are... and ...similar?
- How does ... contrast with ...?
- How is ... related to ...?
- What do you think causes ...and why?
- What is the solution to the problem of ...?
- What evidence can you present for/against...?
- Why is ... significant? Explain your reasoning.
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of ...?
- What is the point or 'big idea' of ...?
- How could you judge the accuracy of ...?
- Describe ... from the perspective of
- When might ... be most useful and why?
- How could you create or design a new...? Explain your thinking.
- What solutions could you suggest the problem of ...? Which might be most effective and why?
- What might happen if you combined ... and ...?
- What information would you need to make a decision about ...?
- How could you prioritize ...?
- What makes ... important?
- What criteria could you use to assess ...?
- How could ... and ... function together? How do they work separately and together and different ways?
- Which details of ... are most important and why?
- What patterns do you notice in ...?
- How is ... an example of ...?
- What are the most important parts or features of ...?
- How would you classify ...?

Online Adaptation

This section is intended to help you with the process of implementing and assessing *Dyadic Essays* in your online class.

HOW TO START

- Have students individually craft an essay question and answer about a reading or video assignment.
- Form student pairs and have them exchange their questions (but not answers) through messaging or email and then write a response to one another.
- Have partners compare and contrast their answers, and then synthesize them into a collaborative response that they submit in your Learning Management System.
- Alternatively, you can implement this technique in a discussion forum or video conference.

IN A DISCUSSION FORUM

- Have students first post their question (without the answer).
- Next, tell students to answer one of their peer's questions on a first-come first-served basis, permitting one answer per question.
- The students who crafted the question then reply by posting their original answer.
- Have the two students then create a collaborative answer in a discussion thread so all questions and answers are available to the whole class.

IN A VIDEOCONFERENCE

- Assign student pairs to breakout rooms to discuss their questions and answers.
- Then bring students together to share their collaborative response with the class.

Technique Template

Following are two templates to assist you as you think through how you might implement this technique in your own class. The first is a completed template, providing an example of how Claire Major adapted *Dyadic Essays* in her course, *Capstone Seminar in Higher Education Administration*. The second is a blank template for you to fill out to tailor this technique for your course.

Technique Template

Sample *Dyadic Essays* Completed Technique Template:

Content from Claire Major

Capstone Seminar in Higher Education Administration

Course Name

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

This is a course I will teach as part of our online masters program in higher education administration. It is a required course, and it is the last course students take in the program. I anticipate that approximately 15 students will regularly take this course.

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

Students who take this course must demonstrate that they met the competencies for the masters program in Higher Education Administration. Dyadic Essays will be a good opportunity for them to demonstrate not only foundational knowledge of our field but also their ability to integrate information from across multiple courses in formulating a response.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

Students will be given a topic area, such as organization and governance of higher education. They will be asked to write essay questions about this topic and to formulate model responses.

STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

I will provide students with instructions for the prompts and the model essay responses. For prompts, students will need to introduce their topic, tie it to a particular reading from a former class, say what their peers should do when responding (e.g., argue and/or describe), and say who the target audience is (most likely a higher education stakeholder). For the model answers and subsequent essay responses, I will require a thesis; introduction, body, conclusion; and a reference page.

STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

To assess the questions, I'll use a simple scale to determine whether it makes the topic clear, whether it makes the assignment clear, and whether it makes the audience clear. To assess the answers, I'll use a rubric for assessing writing, considering, content, argument, organization, and writing mechanics and style.

STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

I'll present the task in the course Learning Management System. Students will read the assignment in the syllabus and within the specific learning module.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

Within the learning module, students will submit their original essay questions and model answers as an assignment. I will also ask each student to post the question-only as a discussion post. I will post a list of pairs and ask student pairs to respond to each other's questions in the discussion board. That way, all students can see all the questions and responses. After posting a response, I'll ask pairs to post their model answers. Finally, I'll ask them to reflect on how their answers differ from the model answers. I understand that this approach might not work as well for all classes; mine is a cohort that has worked together for two years, so they are comfortable with each other and are used to interacting online and on the discussion board. If I were teaching an online course that's not in the cohort model, I would have students submit their essays and responses as assignments, and trade responses through emails, which they copy me on.

STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

I will reflect on this technique by trying to determine to what extent it demonstrated student learning in the masters program. I will also consider how robust their questions are and thorough their responses; in other words, how much effort they expended on the activity. I'll determine what worked well and what I could improve for next time.

Technique Template

This template is intended for use when planning to implement **Dyadic Essays** in your class. Fill in the blanks below, and use the information provided elsewhere in the Instructor's Guide to assist you in your thinking.

Course Name

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

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How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

References and Resources

PRIMARY SOURCE

Content for this download was drawn primarily from “Collaborative Learning Technique 26: Dyadic Essay” in *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley, Major, & Cross, 2014), pp. 302–306 and “Learning Assessment Technique 25: Dyadic Essay” in *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley & Major, 2016), pp. 230–236. It includes material that was adapted or reproduced with permission. For further information about this technique, including examples in both on campus and online courses, see the primary source:

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H. (2016). *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

CITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Millis, B. J., & Cottell, P. G. (1998). *Cooperative learning for higher education faculty*. American Council on Education. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, pp. 134–138.
- Millis, B. J., Sherman, L. W., & Cottell, P. G. (1993). Stacking the DEC to promote critical thinking: Applications in three disciplines. *Cooperative Learning and College teaching*, 3(3), 12–14.

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