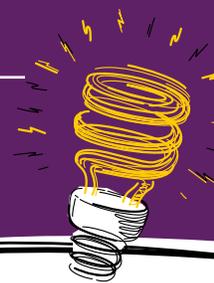




Larry Margerum

Professor, University of San Francisco



Success Story

Instructors Search for Way to Create More Engaging Homework Assignments—and Find it with OWLv2

Larry Margerum, a general chemistry teacher at the University of San Francisco, is outnumbered in regard to the number of students he's tasked with educating and motivating. It's his job to lecture approximately 500 students a year and to supplement those lessons with homework assignments that students find engaging and academically valuable. However, effectively reaching each of those students in a relatively large classroom setting can be difficult.

The problem, though, is one with which instructors have struggled for years; coaxing students into actually completing assignments that'll prepare them for exams. Getting today's student to engage deeply with pencil and paper homework is proving to be even more difficult. Plus, instructors say, traditional homework assignments are copied and turned in for points that artificially inflate academic performance. Instructors, according to Professor Margerum, understand the "drill and kill" homework system in place is not meeting the needs of today's college students.

However, changing the role of homework in college classrooms is a challenge Margerum says is worth confronting. Rather than busywork students can use to game the grading system, reinventing homework as a critical component of learning is an idea Margerum says deserves attention. Not only might a digital collection of tools help achieve this goal, but it could improve how instructors perform in the classroom as well.

Student Demand for Interactive Lessons Met with OWLv2

Margerum's students want more from their homework as well. It's why Cengage Learning's OWLv2, a cloud-based learning system that provides chemistry students with a collection of study and test preparation tools designed to foster engagement and better grades, was met with so much enthusiasm.

"Student complaints went way down when we switched to OWLv2," Margerum said. "The feedback was that students wanted assignments more often and OWL allowed us to assign higher quality homework more frequently."

Rather than traditional homework, students now had a variety of ways in which they might interact with their assignments and better prepare for tests. For instance, not only does OWLv2 offer mastery learning problems and dynamic end-of-chapter questions, but it also presses students to tunnel deeper into often complex chemistry topics by helping them visualize concepts with simulation exercises and visual experiences.

Challenges

- Instructors with large class sizes lack the time and resources necessary to craft interactive lessons that thoroughly prepare students for exams
- Students not performing well enough on exams to move on to higher level chemistry classes.

Solutions

- Cengage Learning's OWLv2

Results

- Instructors become more productive and create assignments that inspire increased student engagement
- Students complete and comprehend more of their homework assignments and improve their chemistry class grades.



“If you hold students accountable, they realize OWL will help them understand concepts and get a better grade.”

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To learn more about this and other digital solutions provided by Cengage Learning, visit: www.cengage.com/LearningSolutions

Increased Student Engagement Results in Improved Academic Performance

One reason student engagement increased exponentially, according to Margerum, was because of the way in which OWLv2 helped organize and prioritize assignments. With a cleaner and more intuitive interface than the first version of OWL, this new version includes multimedia tools, which the instructor encouraged students to use prior to attempting to answer mastery questions on a given topic.

“We wanted students to visually see the concepts first,” Margerum said. “Assigning the multimedia before the mastery questions enabled students to better understand the concepts first before they had to tackle the actual homework problems.”

To reinforce classroom lectures, the OWL homework assignments were to be completed one to four days later. OWL’s step-by-step approach to chemistry concepts increased the number of homework assignments students completed, and also increased the amount of time students spent on assignments. The result was a better understanding of the material as well as improved classroom performance. “We have a “C” or higher prerequisite to get into the next course, and we seem to have fewer grades below “C” since we adopted OWL,” Margerum said. “If you hold students accountable, they realize OWL will help them understand concepts and get a better grade.”

OWLV2 Bolsters Instructor Productivity and Saves Time

The instructors at University of San Francisco find that the system is also bolstering their productivity. “It makes it a lot easier to come up with assignments,” Margerum said. “The tutorials within OWL are so good it’s similar to the quality instruction a student might receive if he or she were to visit with an instructor during office hours.”

Now that students can get the help they need without having to visit personally with their professors, instructors have the time necessary to further improve the quality of homework assignments. “There are many ways to deliver OWL questions,” Margerum said. “You can ask different types of questions, which really enables students to get the practice they need to be better prepared for the exams.”

The extra time OWLv2 allows instructors also positioned Margerum to begin using the tool to offer specialized assignments designed to help students with particularly difficult concepts or those with which students are struggling. “The adaptive study modules are very helpful for students,” Margerum said. “They give students another opportunity to focus on concepts they don’t know as well and if we can get students to use them more often, it’ll be interesting to see how grades improve even more.”



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