



Fitchburg State University
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Redesigning Writing I –
Using Backward Design to Restructure and Improve
an Entry-Level, Interdisciplinary Course

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Background/Issues

My first year at Fitchburg State University, I taught ENGL 1100 – Writing I.

ENGL 1100 – Writing I is an entry-level, interdisciplinary course. Basically, it's the first writing class that nearly all freshmen take to prepare them for upper-level writing and research courses.

Background/Issues

My students liked the class, most of them did well, and my evaluations were strong.

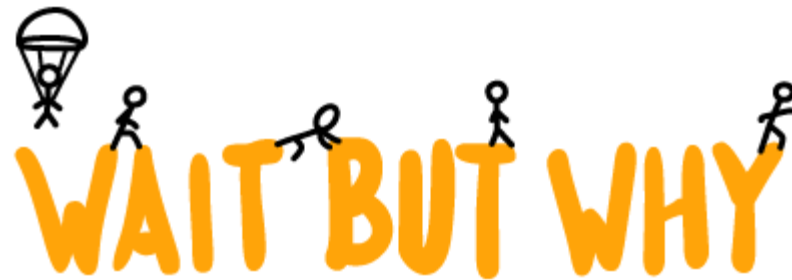


Background/Issues

BUT...then we got to ENGL 1200 – Writing II and the trouble started.

I quickly discovered that while I had *enjoyed* teaching Writing I and my students had *enjoyed* taking Writing I, the work we did together had not adequately prepared them for Writing II.

Background/Issues



Background/Issues

That was exactly the question that I asked myself...

WHY?

Why had Writing I not prepared my students for Writing II?

The Problem



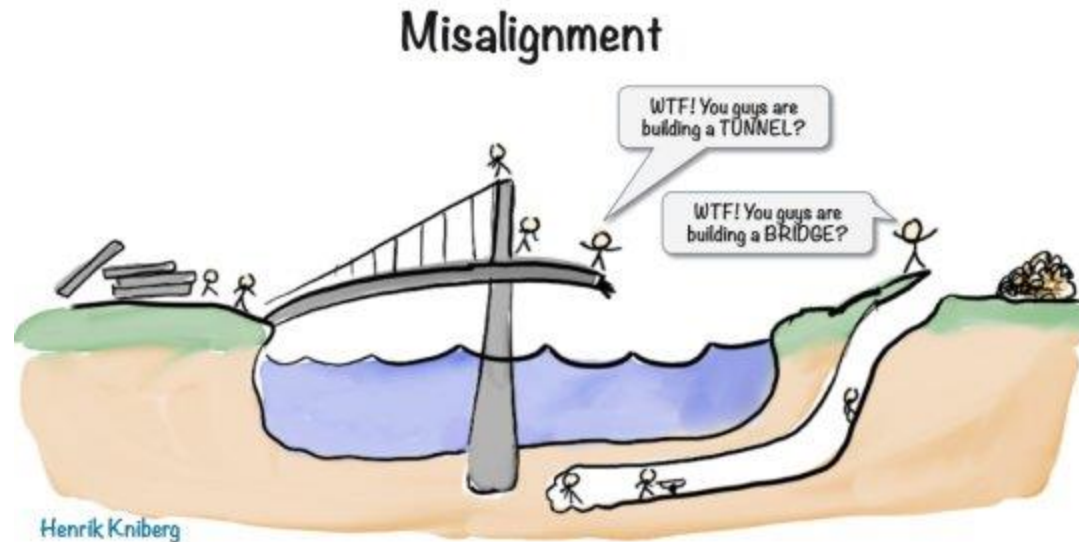
The Problem

A closer examination revealed a number of issues. Among the most pressing was the fact that the course objectives and assignments/assessments for Writing I did not align with the course objectives and assignments/assessments for Writing II.

The Problem

The next two slides outline the course objectives for Writing I and Writing II.

Note the lack of alignment...



The Problem

Course Objectives – Writing I STUDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO...

1. to participate actively in class discussions, activities, and presentations
2. to develop critical thinking skills and clear written communication skills
3. to demonstrate a developing understanding of the scholarly reading, researching, and writing processes
4. to formulate and defend thesis statements through the use of textual evidence
5. to integrate inquiry, interpretation, and application of knowledge from disparate fields

The Problem

Course Objectives – Writing II BY THE END OF OUR WORK TOGETHER, STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO...

1. **participate** actively and collaboratively in class activities and presentations
2. **identify** topics of interest for larger research projects, and hone those topics into engaging and answerable research questions
3. **obtain and document** reference materials, books, and articles through the library's search engines and databases
4. **display** a growing mastery of informational technology/informational literacy skills
5. **integrate** inquiry, interpretation, and application of knowledge from disparate fields
6. **engage** in the recursive writing process – researching, drafting, revising, and editing
7. **share** academic writing and research in a conference-like setting
8. **use** either APA or MLA citation formatting consistently and correctly

The Problem

First, only two objectives align. And one of those two doesn't even really make sense...

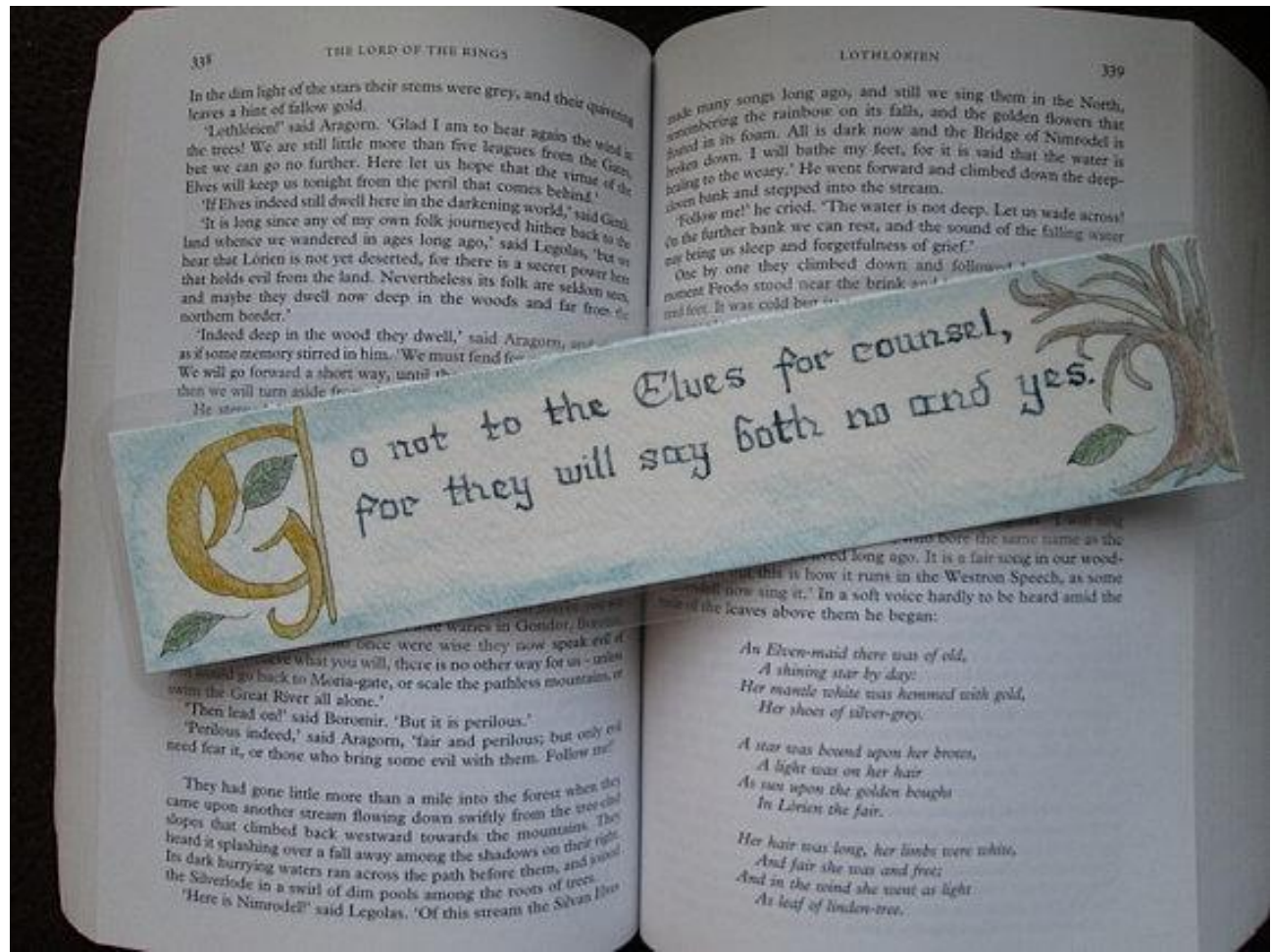


What does this even mean...?

“integrate inquiry, interpretation, and application of knowledge from disparate fields”

The Problem

SHOULDN'T COURSE OBJECTIVES BE DIFFERENT FOR DIFFERENT COURSES?



The Problem

Yes, objectives can be different for different classes. In fact, they should be...

BUT, course objectives for sequential courses should exist along a single continuum.

Such objectives should be purposefully designed to support **evolution, progress, and growth of a single, focused skill set.**

The Problem

In other words, it is not surprising that my Writing II students did not show significant progress and growth on something they never encountered in Writing I.

The Problem

Another problem, or point of misalignment, can be seen in the assignments/assessments for Writing I and Writing II.

The Problem

Writing I –

Major Assignments/Assessments

1. Attendance & Participation (class preparation, class discussion, and class activities - including Reflective Response Journals): 20%
2. Essay 1: 5%
3. Essays 2-4: 45% (15% per essay)
4. Essay 5: 20%
5. Oral Presentation: 10%

The Problem

Writing II –

Major Assignments/Assessments

1. Attendance & Participation (class preparation, class discussion, and class activities - including Reflective Response Journals): 20%
2. Exploratory Research Papers: 10%
3. Research Process: 40%
 1. Body Paragraph: 10%
 2. All Body Paragraphs: 10%
 3. Introductory Paragraph: 10%
 4. Rough Draft: 10%
 5. Essays 2-4: 45% (15% per essay)
4. Conference Presentation – Research Paper: 10%
5. Research Paper: 20%

The Problem

Clearly, the design and sequence of the assignments/assessments differs quite markedly in the two classes...

- Writing II is process-based, where Writing I is not
- Writing II includes both formative and summative assessment, where Writing I does not

The Problem

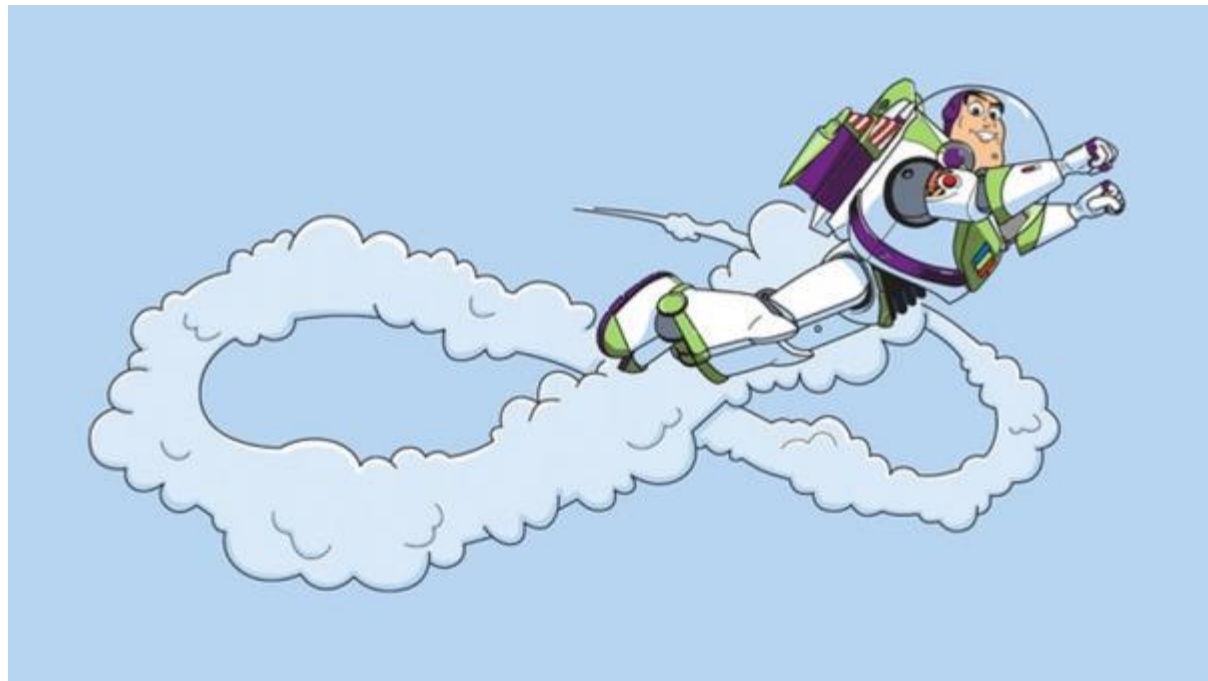
Finally, Writing I had only a subtle unifying theme, while the unifying theme of Writing II was clear.

The Solution...

Taken together, these factors prompted me to join the CTL Course Redesign Workshop over the summer **with the goal of using BACKWARD DESIGN to better align Writing I with Writing II.**

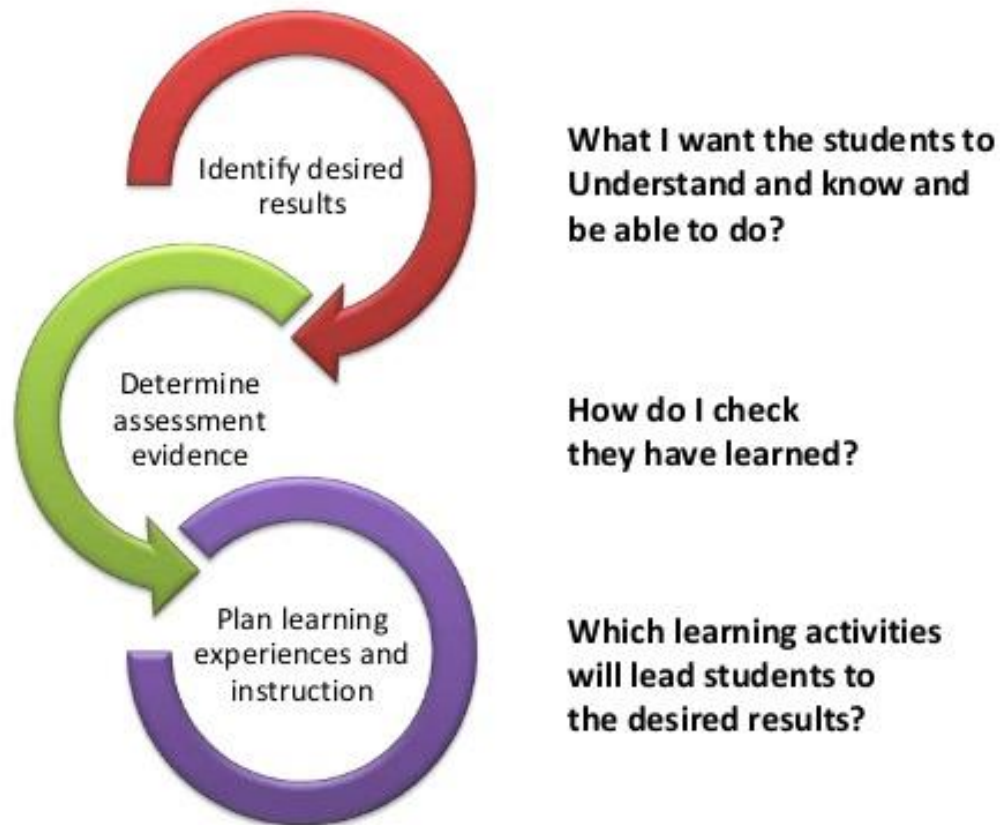
The Solution...

AND – MORE EXPLICITLY – TO BETTER SUPPORT MY STUDENTS AS WRITERS IN THE TRANSITION FROM WRITING I TO WRITING II AND BEYOND...



The Solution...

The Backward Design Process



The Solution...

So, I thought a lot about Writing II...

By establishing the course objectives of Writing II as an end point, I could then work backwards to ensure that students would encounter and engage with a specific set of skills they could practice and improve upon throughout the sequence of writing courses.

The Solution...

Course Objectives – Writing II BY THE END OF OUR WORK TOGETHER, STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO...

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2. **identify** topics of interest for larger research projects, and hone those topics into engaging and answerable research questions
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The Solution...

At the same time, I thought about what seemed hardest for my Writing II students.

What they found especially difficult identified important gaps for me - - areas of misalignment between the two classes that I could improve.

The Solution...

Writing II students seemed to struggle with...	So in redesigning Writing I, I decided to...
...reading scholarly materials.	...switch from fiction to non-fiction texts.
...formulating and defending argumentative thesis statements.	...shift the focus from different types of writing to argumentation and rhetoric.
...recognizing opposing views.	...add an entire course objective specifically referencing the need to identify and address potential counterarguments.
...using informational literacy skills.	...include multiple visits to the library's instructional lab.

The Solution...

Course Objectives – **Writing I REDESIGN**
BY THE END OF THIS COURSE, STUDENTS WILL
SHOW GROWTH IN THEIR ABILITIES TO:

1. **read** and **annotate** course texts and materials thoughtfully and critically
2. **participate** actively, thoughtfully, and respectfully in class discussions and activities
3. **analyze** and **synthesize** the thoughts, ideas, arguments, and opinions of others
4. **formulate** and **defend** argumentative thesis statements through the use of textual evidence
5. **assess** and **address** potential counterarguments in speech and writing
6. **engage** in the recursive process of **creating an effective argument** in both speech and writing – including researching, drafting, revising, editing, and presenting/sharing

The Solution?

Redesigning the course objectives helped me through the first stage of Backward Design.

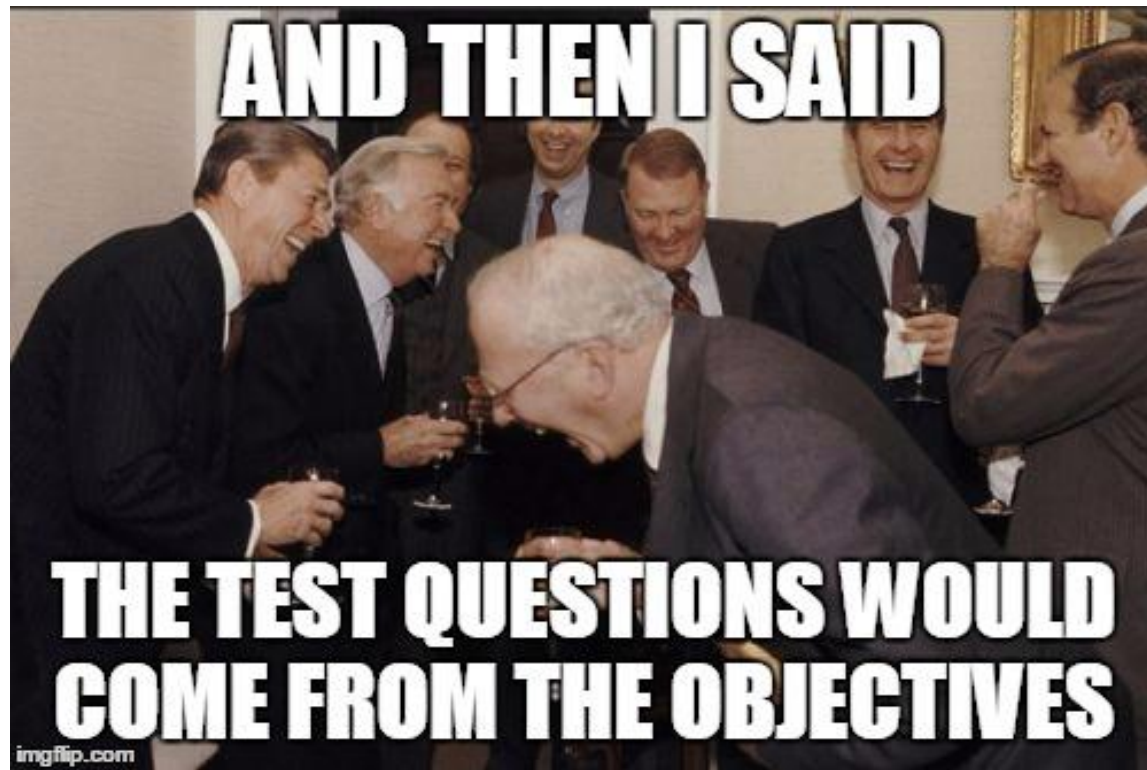
Specifically, I had identified the desired results, and articulated what I wanted the students to understand and be able to do...

The Solution?

Now, how would I know whether or not the students were making progress on these objectives...?

The Solution?

By designing activities, assignments, and assessments with those goals in mind.



The Solution?

No, but really...

I'll now pass out my descriptions of my assessments as well as the rubrics.

Please note how the **language of the objectives** appears in both **the description of the assignment** and **the rubric** used to assess it.

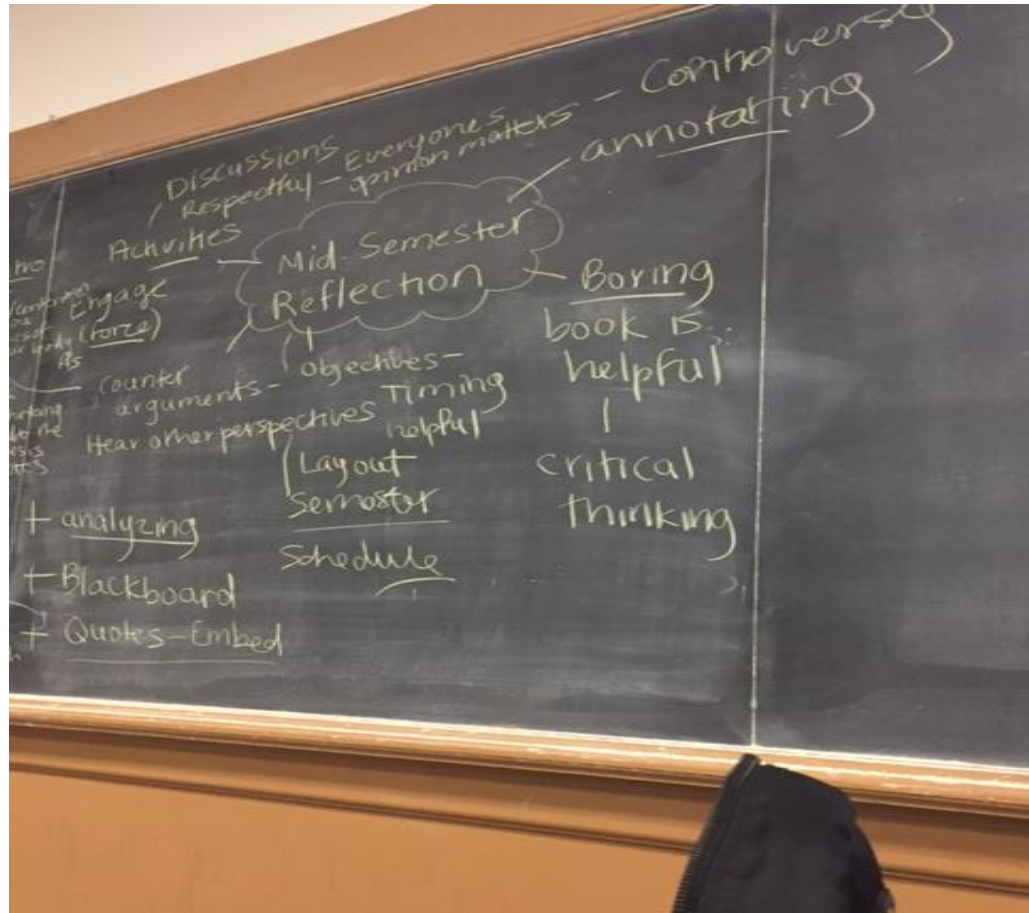
The Solution?

Finally, I was very upfront with my students. I told them they were guinea pigs from the first day of class.



The Solution?

Multiple times through out the semester, we engaged in reflective discussion about whether or not we were making progress on the course objectives.



The Solution?

I am hopeful that the redesign of this course will help students grow more competent and proficient in their ability to formulate and employ arguments independently and effectively in their thinking, speaking, and writing – in my courses and beyond.

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