Taking the Time to Plan

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Context: In-class; Engineering 100 – Careers in Engineering
Keywords: time management, academic planning
Student Activity Time: 1-2 hours

In an introduction to engineering course, students completed a time management activity to reflect on how they use their time as students.

Introducing the Reflection Activity

Mastering time management is key for engineering student success, and in the introductory engineering course one assignment is dedicated to this important skill. An educator gave students a time management assignment to complete over a week and in one class session. The purpose of this activity was to assist students in reflecting on the way they use their time and to identify priorities for being a successful engineering student.

To introduce the assignment, the educator gave students a 168-hour matrix to complete on how they spent their time for a full week. Students were asked to record general descriptions of how they used their time throughout the day, accounting for all 24 hours in a day. After keeping the log for a full week the educator convened the class to review the Covey Time Matrix and then separated the students into groups. Each of the team members took one of the following roles: team manager, recorder, reporter, reflector, or explorer. Each of the roles had a specific job description for the assignment. Each team then created a list of collective weekly activities, categorized on the matrix with one of four categories: important and urgent, important and not urgent, not important and urgent, or not important and not urgent. The educator then facilitated a class discussion about time management, the importance of the skill for engineering students, the importance of prioritizing activities, and tips for developing a successful plan.

After completing the activity and participating in the class discussion, students are prepared to better prioritize their time as students. The discussion also gives students a chance to reflect on their own time management decisions compared to other students in the class.

Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Assign the 168-hour matrix and give students a week to complete it.
2	Introduce the Covey Time Matrix at the beginning of class.
3	Separate students into small groups to complete the Covey Time Matrix activity with assigned roles.
4	Review the student survey responses in the next class and share themes with the class.
5	Offer students tips and information necessary to develop a successful time management plan.

In the Words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

Don't judge. When I give the assignment I explain that I don't want to know, or have any interest in the details of how they spend their time. When I grade the activity it is just for completion. My goal is not to invade their privacy in any way. The grade isn't for content; the purpose of the activity is for the student to see how they spend their time.

Give students a chance to brainstorm ahead of time and look back a few weeks later. In one session, I asked students to brainstorm a list of the kinds of activities they do in a typical week. After that, I explained and handed out the Covey Time Matrix and had them fill it in. That variation was interesting and didn't require a full week of keeping track of their time. Another helpful variation is to ask students to reflect on the activity a couple weeks later. This can be as simple as asking students in class if the activity helped them change how they use their time, or implementing a survey on the course management site to ask them about how they spent their time in the last week.

What was the inspiration for the reflection activity? This activity came from an old version of the engineering textbook, later we introduced the Covey Time Matrix component of the activity. We developed the activity because it was apparent that students needed help managing their time. I've done this as a student, but this is my first time doing it as an instructor. It's interesting to hear students' feedback. I'm encouraged about the comments I hear from students about the realization that time management is not a passive activity. In one class students said "I sleep a lot more than I thought" and "I sleep a lot less than I thought." Some students are unsurprised, and some are very surprised at how much or little they study. I'm mostly trying to reach the students who spend a lot of time playing video games or watching TV. When I was a student, I wasted a lot of time on things because I didn't match up how I used my time with what I said was important to me.