Imagine a class that has the following characteristics: Students are involved and are participating in discussions. The teacher and students know each other as individuals. The students don’t have to be repeatedly reminded to meet simple requirements such as attending class, handing in assignments on time, and completing readings. They continue to think about and apply course material outside of class, even when an exam is not imminent. The students take advantage of the resources available to them on campus (e.g., e-mail, Internet, and campus seminars), and they have the perception of being in control of their destiny in class.

For some, this imaginary class may seem unattainable. However, we have a tool that we believe can help you develop a class with these “utopian” characteristics, and without requiring a large time commitment. This tool can be applied to courses in any discipline and at any level. We call it the Academic Treasure Hunt. It seems simple: a take-home checklist that requires students to complete a number of extra, course-related activities. However, the items on this checklist are not extra credit (e.g., Norcross 1989; Burke 1991; Burns 1993). Like exams and papers, the checklist is a required part of the course; failure to complete it can hurt a student’s grade.

The take-home checklist consists of a series of items and activities that students must complete to gain credit (table 1). We view the list as a structured way to reward many traditionally noncredit items (e.g., attendance) and to allow the pursuit of topics and requirements that are difficult or impossible to cover in class (e.g., seminars). The difficulty of the items may range from simple to challenging, and we recommend using the whole range of difficulty within a single checklist. Each item is graded individually credit/no credit; to receive credit, students either state that they did the activity (using the honor system), are checked off by the teacher (by handing in an evaluation), or submit a brief write-up (for a seminar). One of the keys to the checklist is that you require only a subset of the items for full credit. For example, there might be twelve items on the list, with each worth ten points, but for a maximum of 100 total points possible; therefore, students can drop two items. Another possibility requires the student to complete ten of twelve for a “satisfactory” in the class; fewer result in an “unsatisfactory.” This latter credit scheme has been used successfully in graduate classes with a satisfactory/unsatisfactory final grading system.

Implementation of the checklist is straightforward at the beginning of the course. The teacher explains it and makes it clear that, as the instructor, he or she is there to help in any way possible. Students have the entire term to work on the checklist. Although the items are graded credit/no credit, the goal is obviously to have the student pass all of them. Therefore, we suggest that for checklists with activities requiring a write-up, you either require or make it optional that the student hand in the completed checklist before the end of the term. This allows you to hand back any items that have been unsatisfactorily completed and gives the student an opportunity to make corrections.

You can determine the length of the checklist and the amount of credit the list is worth. We suggest that the checklist fit onto a single page, and lists containing from ten to twelve items seem to work well. How much of a student’s total grade the checklist represents is also flexible. However, we feel that including the checklist as a significant percentage of the total class points (5–15%) is best because it gives the students the impression that the items on the checklist are important, and their effort will affect their grade. As with extra credit, some teachers may be concerned about the possibility of grade inflation when using the checklist (Norcross 1989; Burns 1993). But, since the total credit is flexible, the impact that these effort points can have is entirely up to you.

The format is extremely flexible; few courses exist for which the checklist would be inappropriate. It has been suc-
Table 1.—List of Possible Items for an Academic Treasure Hunt

- Get a computer account; e-mail the teacher a message*
- Go to a 5-minute meeting with instructor during office hours*
- Come to every lecture!
- Contribute to class discussion 10 times during term
- Participate 1 time on course's computer bulletin board
- Hand in all homework assignments on time!
- Locate a source of information relevant to the course on the Internet
- Explain a concept to someone who is not taking the course
- Read 5 of the recommended readings
- Submit an original exam question

*Must be done in the first 2 weeks of class to get credit
Needs a brief write-up detailing what you saw, thought, or discovered.
*Must be confirmed by instructor

Usefully used in introductory through graduate courses. Although our experience has been with the biological sciences, the format could be adapted to any discipline.

The checklist format can be used to accomplish a variety of objectives. Students' Personal Responsibility. One of the primary advantages of the checklist is that it places control directly on the students' shoulders, which increases their motivation and improves their attitude. The students have the checklist at the beginning of class; each item is worth an equal amount of individual credit, and the teacher requires only a subset of the items for full checklist credit. These characteristics encourage students to set priorities and budget their time, two skills that are beneficial in their own right.

Discussion Participation. You can use this method either independently or along with others for encouraging participation (Davis 1988; Ebie 1988; McKeachie, et al. 1994). Requiring an office hour visit will get the majority of the students into office hours early in the term, accelerating the getting acquainted process allowing the instructor to answer any initial questions about the course.

Applying Course Material/Group Work. Some checklist items, such as requiring students to apply the course material to a novel situation of their own choosing, challenge the students to think. If you want the students to work in groups, you can include a group project.

Simple, Unambiguous Grading. The credit/no credit style of the checklist eliminates the prejudices and uncertainty that many students feel when facing an upcoming exam (Shirom 1986; Mealy and Host 1992), encourages students to try write difficult applications of the material, and makes grading easy.

Requiring that students hand in mid-term evaluations by a certain date frees up class time and virtually guarantees a high evaluation return rate.

With a little forethought, you can design the checklist so that if the student wants to receive full credit, the course goals are accomplished no matter what the student chooses to do. For example, if a student chooses not to come to class, he will have to complete some of the more difficult outside-of-class activities, such as an individual project. This trade-off may be acceptable for the teacher: either way, the student is spending a considerable amount of time thinking about the class. Best of all, the student made the choice.

Students' responses to the checklist have been very favorable. They enjoy the novelty of an academic treasure hunt; they appreciate the control that the checklist gives them; and they realize that the checklist helps them learn the course material. Undoubtedly, though, some of their enthusiasm for the checklist stems from a feeling that they are getting points for "nothing." Indeed, a portion of the items are extremely easy to complete, and even the challenging items seem easier because of their credit/no credit nature.

However, far from being free points, the checklist requires that the students push themselves in the course, participate in class, apply the course material to novel situations, and become familiar with resources that they would probably neglect otherwise. We encourage teachers who value these characteristics to start their own academic treasure hunt.

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REFERENCES


