

Etools: Using Perusall in the Classroom

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Introduction

Whether we like it or not, most students do not look forward to the required reading in their courses. As professors, we have all handled this reality differently. Whether going over the reading section-by-section in class, assigning or enacting written or oral pop quizzes on the reading, or just silently accepting that students who fail to read cheat themselves, we all face the reading obstacle every semester. Perusall is one way to improve student reading while also gaining additional student and instructor benefits.

What is Perusall?

Perusall is an e-reader platform that allows students and faculty to annotate the assigned readings and engage the reading material in a style akin to social media posting. Students can write full comments, “like” comments, use hashtags, link URLs to their comments and even use emoticons. In these ways, students can adapt to Perusall relatively easily and, after reviewing the basic introduction and tutorials, students are able to work within Perusall without difficulty. Additionally, students collaborate with each other about the reading and thus the reading process becomes social versus solitary. This can be motivating for students that may not otherwise enjoy reading course material.

Instructors can upload their own content and/or they can adopt the course textbook through Perusall. Students must purchase the textbook through Perusall as the textbook is incorporated directly into the platform with publisher permission.

How can I get Perusall for use in the classroom

Access to Perusall is simple, but instructors should determine the best way to sign up based on their university. If the university already has the platform in use, the instructor can access it through a single sign-on through their learning management system (in my case, for instance, Canvas). If the university does not have the platform in use, instructors can still easily use Perusall for free. They just need to sign up at Perusall.com. The platform itself is free and textbooks must be purchased. If the instructor has rights to particular readings, they can upload them directly to the platform. If the instructor has questions about rights to a particular article or reading, they should contact their university librarian to ensure copyright permission is appropriately obtained.

How can I use Perusall in the classroom?

Perusall provides students an opportunity to seriously engage with and reflect on the course material in a collaborative and focused way. Additionally, it takes the instructor out of the position of actively “policing” reading in the classroom space, allowing for more in-depth discussion and lecture during limited classroom time.

More specifically, Perusall can be used as:

1. *a place for collective reading and engagement.* By making reading a social experience, students are more likely to engage with one another's thoughts, questions and reflections in a more sustained way than they are able to in the classroom setting.
2. *a method to better understand student questions and issues.* By housing all of the course reading in Perusall and actively using the platform, instructors will get a strong understanding of each of their student's engagement with course material, as well as areas in the course that are causing students significant confusion. The platform provides "confusion reports" to the instructor after a reading deadline has passed that highlights the top 3 or 4 topics of confusion or engagement from the reading. It also offers the top posts on each of these issues. These reports arm the instructor with clear information to discuss in class.
3. *method of improving "participation scores."* Instructors can incorporate Perusall's scoring system to promote deeper student engagement as well as lend weight to participation scores. After setting the value the instructor wants associated with comments/questions (e.g., 0 for fails to meet expectations, 1 for meets expectations, and 2 for exceeds expectations), the platform will automatically score the each written post by the student. Students are not in the dark about this process as Perusall has a rubric document, entitled "How Perusall Works," that instructors can give to students to ensure they understand how they will be

graded. Perusall computes grades every hour until the assignment deadline has passed to ensure all student work has been taken into account.

4. *identify engaged students who may not feel comfortable speaking in class.*

University classrooms are set up for certain types of students to thrive. In the U.S., students whose first language is English, who are comfortable in classrooms using Western norms of interacting, are part of a majority (whether in the classroom, campus, or society), or may just be extroverts tend to be those who participate regularly. This however, excludes the many that have the desire to engage in the material more actively but do not feel comfortable or able to do so. Perusall gives students an additional, but nonetheless collaborative way, to interact with other students and the instructor providing for a more diverse range of thoughts and ideas to be explored.

5. *take private notes.* Students do not want to “read twice”; in other words, they do not want to read once to post comments and questions and then read again to take their own private notes for the chapter to prepare for exams, papers, etc.

Perusall allows students to take their own private notes on the reading at the same time that they are commenting and asking questions. This feature gives students the richest and most efficient experience with the reading possible.

6. *a compliant and ethical way to assign readings and class interaction.* Perusall is FERPA compliant and does not share student identity or information with any

third parties. The platform works directly with publishers, often leading to lower costs for textbooks, and avoids IP infringement because it does not allow for resales. It allows for a single sign-on through most (if not all) university learning management systems.

Conclusion

Perusall is an effective collaborative e-reader platform that pushes students engage in the reading process through a style of communicating that is comfortable and commonplace for them. It is free, allows instructors to get a better handle on what their students are reading and understanding and acknowledge their engagement through a clear and efficient grading system. As instructors in the 21st century, Persuall is a cost-efficient and forward thinking way to hold students accountable to learning objectives so that rather than just skim, or worse avoid, the reading, students actively engage with it and with their peers in the process.