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Addressing DWFI Rate Through Backward and Aligned Course Design

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Addressing DFWI Rates Through Backward and Aligned Course Design

Introduction

The narrative below reflects the measures I undertook in my large (150+ students) History 201 course at CSUSB to improve student performance and learning. Utilizing the pedagogical concepts of Backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001) and Aligned curriculum design (Alfauzan & Tarachouna, 2017) I re-evaluated the course to ensure that course content, in class activities, student assessments, and teaching strategies were in line with student learning objectives (SLOs) and course aims. Designing in class activities with an explicit focus on SLOs and course aim made a significant difference in how students approached exams and developed higher order thinking skills (HOTS). This focus moved them from Bloom’s memorization/remember level, what students often think history is, to developing and employing critical thinking and communication skills that lead to factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledges (Anderson, et. al., 2014). Scaffolding in class discussion of course content (factual knowledge), with conceptual ideas developed through examination of primary sources using history methodology of analysis and interpretation led students to see the continuities, differences, and complexities of the past and present- thereby improving students’ overall learning, literacy, and life skills.

Implementation

To address the DFWI rate in the Hist 201 survey course I implemented a variety of changes ranging from class examining primary documents in class, I reminded students to come to next class meeting having read the sources. During the next meeting I allotted about 25 mins of class time to discussing the sources. We completed the usual historical analysis of who, what, where, when, why. Each of the docs represented different perspectives on a similar topic, during a specific time/era/theme. On screen I posed questions that assessed factual knowledge, as well as higher order thinking skills. This helped me guide students through the docs by showing them how to navigate through the different elements of the documents. The last part of the in-class exercise was to link the concepts covered to contemporary dynamics. In its entirety this exercise helped students see and practice the skills that would be assessed in the course exams. On exams, rather than simply asking about the primary documents by title, I provided excerpts from the docs I wished students to engage. Comparatively, student scores increased when provided the excerpt as opposed to simply referring to them by title. I take this to mean that they understand and can critically engage the sources, when the stress of recalling the specific documents was reduced. The modification described above was not difficult to implement. It was helpful to students because it helped by modeling the way I expected them to engage the work. Their answers, both in the class discussion and in exam, were more thorough and clearly illustrated factual knowledge and higher order thinking skills.

This modification in classroom approach speaks to larger reconceptualizing of what survey courses are. Studies show that survey courses in history as well as other disciplines, are often structured as the transfer of large bodies of content- covering an overwhelming and intimidating amount of information. Professors’ experiential knowledge in the
classroom shows that thematic or question-based approaches, rather than exclusively content driven survey courses help student better organize the information they receive in the course. I found that by emphasizing specific themes rather than a ‘content dump’ based on the transfer of information of a large body of historical content students found the information to be more manageable. Using these sources in class, modeling analysis for and with them, then providing excerpts on tests, helped students see the broader historical picture through the examination of specific case studies.

What follows are portions of the Syllabi and Tests for History 201 (syllabi – Fall 2017 and Fall 2018; Test 1- Fall 2017 and Fall 2018). They indicate the changes described in the project narrative. Mainly, the syllabi show how I changed the valuation of course assignments and the implanting of online journal responses. The tests show how I changed the written portions of the exam to better reflect the in-class discussion assignments described in the project narrative. Below are illustrations of relevant portions of course syllabi.

Hist 201 Syllabi

Fall 2017 Syllabus

As seen above, I changed the valuation for course evaluation. The fall 2018 syllabus shows that class participation counts for an equal percentage of other course assessments. This indicates to students that being in class (attendance), participating in class discussion of documents, contributing to lecture, and completion of on-line journals are crucial to success in the course. During the in-class review of the syllabus, I made sure to explain how these components built on each other and would be covered on the exams. In other words, I organized the assignments/activities that students engaged in/completed as a way of scaffolding knowledge and then having them implement in class through direct
review of the material. The exams below show how I changed the way I designed the written portion of the tests to better reflect my approach.

**History 201 – Test 1**

**Fall 2017**

**Fall 2018**

The Fall 2018 version of the exam asks similar questions to those on the Fall 2017 version but in a different way. For example, questions 27 and 28 on the fall 2017 exam are asked on the 2018 version in questions 1 and 2. The latter version provides paragraphs from primary documents discussed in class in great detail. Simply providing these short quotes helped students to think through the question- not simply provide memorized info- which often result in clear cut (correct/incorrect) answers- such as in the fall 2017 version. Posing the questions in this detailed way- allows student to engage higher level thinking skills and give more thorough analysis- something they practiced during in class discussion.
