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Humanizing Introductory Courses: Technology and Collaborative Learning

Project goal:

To reconceptualize World Civilizations II (HY 142) that fulfills a general education requirement. HY 142 covers the major world civilizations (Mediterranean world, the civilizations of China, Ancient India, the Byzantine Empire, Islamic, sub-Saharan Africa and Amerindian Empires along with Europe in the middle ages and the European Renaissance) and the interactions between them from 500 B.C.E. until 1500 C.E. Given the historical and spatial expanse, the course can only be a general survey. Not surprisingly, introductory university students have difficulty digesting such a vast survey of material. Often students get bogged down in the massive amount of historical data contained in the lectures and textbook. The tragedy is that many adult students, students of color and low-income students may feel overwhelmed and abandon their educational aspirations. The goal is to invigorate the course and reach-out to these students through the creation of a collaborative learning-centered environment built around a course website.

Implementation:

First, I collected a vast array of primary documents. The majority of primary historical documents in world history are in the public domain. Subsequently my student assistant and I scanned the documents and posted them on a blackboard site. Previously, I accessed documents from a course reader and also from a number of different web sites. This worked fairly well. Sometimes though, students had trouble accessing the sites. In addition, I often found the electronic readings posted on the web by others not exactly what I would have chosen. I eliminated these shortcomings and significantly expanded the possible documents by creating my own web site. Also, since I teach the course every quarter I can now keep the material fresh by rotating amongst a wide variety of source readings that we compiled.

Second, I used the blackboard site in a way that promotes collaborative learning. The key component is electronic journaling where students post a response to a discussion question that engages their peers. Since both the primary documents along with visual aids were also accessible on blackboard the electronic discussions were substantive

and lively. Initially, I thought I would focus the discussions around the conception that civilizations can be compared and analyzed as problem solvers. A key comparison addressed in lecture was to compare Greco-Roman civilization with Han and Qin China. I asked students to think about how climate and geography impact culture and political structure in the development of these civilizations. After they had comprehended why these civilizations succeeded, I wanted to ask them to compare how and why these civilizations fell? However I decided to ask them a series of different questions on the material that focused on world -views, self-development and why history matters. These discussions were quite successful and numerous students mentioned they were the highlight of the course. The first forums were the most successful while the latter was less so. My sense is that the discussion prompts need to be general and a challenge to make the students think critically, but not so general they resort to mere opinion and avoid historical analysis.

Results:

The results were excellent. My setes improved significantly, the first time I taught the course the scores were in the high 2's. In the fall the scores were all in the mid 3's. Numerous students expressed appreciation for the electronic sourcebook and the opportunity to engage with other students in the electronic discussions. Thanks TRC!