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Increasing Interactivity in Archaeology Courses at the Undergraduate and Graduate Levels

Guy Hepp
guy.hepp@csusb.edu

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NFLC project description 1/6/2020

Project title

Increasing Interactivity in Archaeology Courses at the Undergraduate and Graduate Levels

Abstract

This project included revisions to ANTH 140: World Civilizations I, the Rise of Civilization and ANTH 616: History and Theory of Archaeology. For ANTH 140, the required readings, lecture content, group activities, and assessment strategies were all significantly changed or completely replaced. For ANTH 616, subtle changes were made to reading response, group discussion, and online group discussion strategies. Both course revisions resulted in improved classroom atmospheres. This was especially the case for ANTH 140, where average and median grades improved and standard deviations in grades decreased. Improvements to ANTH 616, a small seminar course, were too affected by outliers for grade comparisons but resulted in more engaging classroom discussions.

Project description

For this project, I increased interactivity and student engagement with readings in two courses taught during the fall of 2019. Specifically, I redesigned **ANTH 140: World Civilizations I, the Rise of Civilization** to follow a more user-friendly textbook than I used previously. I reduced the emphasis on lecture content and instead instituted weekly interactive projects such as group discussions, “writing to learn” assignments, exam reviews, and films. I revised assessment policies by instituting open-note Blackboard exams instead of traditional paper exams. By reducing the emphasis on fact memorization, I encouraged students to discuss more with their peers how the course content relates to their lives and decreased testing anxiety. The result of this course redesign was that I did not have to curve exam or final grades, whereas I had curved them significantly in the past. The course had a remarkably conversational atmosphere despite having 213 students and became more about learning how ancient civilizations relate to our modern lives than about memorizing for exams. I had hoped to administer a mid-course evaluation but was not able to do so due to scheduling changes resulting from campus closure. Informal polling of the students indicated that they appreciated the open testing policy and conversational classroom atmosphere. Evidence for all these changes can be found in the attached documents, as well as in the grades for the course. Average grades increased from 76% to 82% compared with the previous years during which I taught this course. Median grades also increased from 77% in 2018 to 83% in 2019. Importantly, a decrease in the standard deviation of the grades from 17% to 11% suggests that these improvements are not a result of grade inflation. Rather, they suggest a more uniform and approachable class that engaged a broader student population.

For **ANTH 616: History and Theory of Archaeology**, a graduate seminar course, I increased the emphasis on reading and writing about archaeological theory by asking students to post questions to an online discussion board before class. I promoted classroom conversations by revising my in-class discussion questions, asking students to volunteer as weekly discussion leaders, and preparing an online forum when the university was shut down due to power

outages. Individual outliers in this small course render statistical comparisons obsolete, but conversations about readings were more lively and engaged than in past years.

Keywords

Issues-X, Q2S, In-class discussion, alternative testing, test review, seminar, group activity, “golden ticket” reading discussion questions, writing to learn