GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES— ENHANCING RESEARCH

A presentation at the 2008 League for Innovation Spring Conference in Denver, by Lauren Sabel, Front Range Community College, featuring her unique design to establish a global perspective concept into a research essay class, caught my attention.

The typical English research paper class, which focuses on MLA and APA styles, can become a grind for student and instructor. Th multiple style rules that students must learn in order to write an acceptable essay often overwhelm them. Instructors often become style, language, and plagiarism police.

What Lauren offered in her presentation was a new approach. She told us it would be fun for teachers and students. It is. She promised students would learn about the world. They do. Finally, she said her students intelligently research, debate, and discuss world issues with this course design. In using this approach, I have found that all of these promises ring true.

Here is how the Global Perspectives course works. First, students need to select a country that they will research for the entire semester. However, they are not to select the United States, Canada, or Mexico—we wish to expand their worldview. In addition, students are not to select the country in which they were born and reared (if not one of the three already mentioned).

The course is divided into six units. After the syllabus has been read, each student selects a different country. Then the students are placed into groups, based upon regions of the world in which their selected countries appear on the world map.

Then students start to work through the units that include these topics: stereotypes, current affairs, history, human rights, religion, and NGOs (non-governmental organizations). While exploring each of these units, students are required to learn MLA and APA format styles, and are introduced to the various rules of in-text citations, note cards, and other tools.

In the stereotype unit, students discuss a priori knowledge about their countries. They bring to the discussion things they know, or think they know, about the people they are researching. They explore how they came to this knowledge. They quickly identify that what they know is what they have gathered through television, music, and movies. They readily see the need for more information.

Students then conduct initial research about their countries. I send them to such websites as the CIA World Factbook and Country Watch. They set up Google Alerts so that news about their countries is delivered via the Internet each day. They are given checklists about facts to find, and they share what they have discovered.

In the current affairs unit, students must find three news stories about their countries, using media sources from the countries they are researching. They use the BBC news site, which includes a list of resources originating from their countries. Sometimes a student selects a country that does not have an English language media outlet. This problem is solved easily as there are web-translation devices available and the stories are translated into English.

In the history unit, students must find 10 events that they think are the most important to their country since 1500. (Not all countries have existed since that date, so be flexible.) It is key that students prepare their lists in both chronological order and ranking of most important dates. In their groups, they create a time chart that lists the dates and events. Next, they identify and discuss events on the time chart that had the most influence on countries all students are researching. This creates an awareness of how world events connect countries to each other.

In the human rights unit, the students learn about the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights Charter. Students read each of the 30 articles of human rights, identify examples of abuse, find three examples of human rights abuses in their countries, and identify the articles in the Declaration of Human Rights they violate. This unit is key to the overall course design. It gives students a context for discussing their research and helps them write their final research essays.

For the religion unit, students research the dominate religion in their countries. They learn about the basics of

these religions and discuss, in their groups, why (or why not) the religion is attractive to them. They weigh the merits of the religion and consider whether they could practice it.

For the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) unit, students learn how NGOs have either helped or hindered efforts at nation-building. Most students have not been introduced to the concept of NGOs, so it is useful to give them some background.

Conclusions

I enjoy teaching this course with the global perspective design and have a list of websites that are useful and available to others who request them. By the way, I teach the course without a textbook.

I recommend the Stanley Foundation—an organization that provides free materials for instructors at http://stanleyfoundation.org. The Foundation "is a nonpartisan, private operating foundation focusing primarily on peace and security issues and advocating principled multilateralism."

The essays that students write are not always submitted with every MLA or APA rule checked for possible errors. However, the content and the issues students address are interesting to read, and the students' presentations show passion.

The course design allows instructors to apply their own unique tweaks. For example, I supply the students with readings that they must summarize, outline, and discuss; and students work in discussion groups. They must use some form of media when they make their presentations, helping them move from presenting information reports to critical thinking. They are challenged further to explain why the articles are important and how the materials connect to previous course content.

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