

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Online Forums Make Individual Research Projects a Group Effort

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

In this semester-long, individual research project, students engage in a process of discovery to develop a creative presentation about a historical topic. This multi-step process helps students develop research skills, learn to communicate with others, and tap into their creativity while teaching each other about history.

Step 1

Early in the semester, the instructor introduces the project and discusses important parameters for choosing a topic. In the first step of this process, students share a few of their topic ideas with their peers in an online discussion forum and provide each other with feedback. This discussion affords students an opportunity to ask questions and prompts them to think more deeply about their potential topics. The instructor monitors the discussion to gauge areas of interest and to mitigate duplicate topics. Students receive participation points for posting their topic ideas and for providing feedback to other students.

After students have an opportunity to obtain feedback from their classmates about their topics, they have a week to consider how they will approach their chosen topic. Students must think beyond broad topics. For example, instead of writing a report on communism, a student may choose to focus on Lenin's approach to communism. Students are also encouraged to push

themselves by gaining a different perspective on a common topic. For example, instead of focusing on the suffrage movement in the United States, students may research how this movement manifested in Mexico. Final projects may include short stories, art installations, collages, podcasts, or short movies. If students do opt for a slideshow presentation, the instructor encourages them to be more creative and use something like Prezi or create narrated presentations.

Step 2

Once students finalize their topics, the instructor teaches a brief lesson about primary and secondary sources and how to access them. In the second step of this process, students have approximately two weeks to conduct preliminary research on their topic and prepare a research report. Students are required to have at least four sources, two of which must be primary sources. Unlike a typical research report, however, this assignment is more of an outline in which students define their topic, demonstrate its importance, describe the sources used, and propose their final presentation. As with the first assignment, students post their research report in an online discussion to obtain and offer feedback. This helps students identify things they may have missed in their initial research and think through any changes. The research report is worth 10% of the overall course grade, and students earn participation points for engaging in the feedback process.

Steps 3 and 4

Toward the end of the semester, students work on the final two steps of the process. In the third step, students must post their completed projects online and exchange feedback. After students obtain feedback, view the other projects, and make any adjustments to their project, they work on the fourth step in the process—a final report. The final report is submitted alongside the final project and should include a narrative about what they learned through the research process. The report should also describe what they learned about their own topic and from other students. Notably, students do not present their projects in class because of the large class size. For students who create an art installation or some other type of visual display, the instructor makes an exception and permits those students to bring their projects to class. The final project and report combined account for another 10% of the course grade.