Center for Community College Student Engagement

Ensure Students Are Learning:
Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Online Tool Incites Engagement and Collaboration on Annotations

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

Annotating primary sources is a very important aspect of a history course, and the ability to annotate sources is an essential skill for aspiring historians. Using an online tool called Perusall, this instructor implemented a system for annotating primary sources that creates an asynchronous, collaborative space where students can share thoughts, ideas, comments, and questions about the primary sources they are reviewing. Perusall makes available many primary sources, including electronic textbooks; however, the instructor can upload any type of source directly into the platform. Once the document is uploaded, students interact directly with the document by making annotations and viewing what other students posted. The instructor requires each student to ask two questions, answer two questions, and make two comments on each document. The instructor also implemented a rule that the questions and comments must be spread throughout the document and cannot concentrate on one section or paragraph. Students must also attach supporting materials such as other primary sources or academic journal articles to support their answers. The instructor often offers to students the option of making their contributions anonymous, which helps students feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts, especially if they are unsure. When the contributions are anonymous, the students cannot see the name of the person who posted, but the instructor can. This interactive annotation tool essentially replaces discussion boards often used in courses while still allowing students to interact and learn from each other.

For each document students annotate through the online platform, students are required to write a short reflection essay about what they learned. Essays are typically at least three pages and students must discuss the importance of the piece they reviewed. They must also describe what they learned about the source and what questions they still have.

The particular platform the instructor currently uses integrates with Canvas, the college's current learning management system. This allows the instructor to track activity and record grades. The annotation tool has an automatic grading system based on parameters set up by the instructor, and those grades feed into Canvas. The instructor will often reassess the grade to ensure it is accurate, but it provides a starting point. The annotation tool also works with the assessment tool the department uses to measure their departmental student learning outcomes.

Importantly, this practice was developed by faculty as part of a collaborative effort to find a better way to help students engage with their readings. As such, an English faculty member started a discussion board on Canvas and invited other faculty to join. The discussions centered on finding innovative ways of engaging students, and one history professor discussed using online annotation software in other

classes. After doing research about various types of annotation tools, the faculty conducted training via Zoom. Since then, they have hosted several training sessions to share the information with other faculty interested in using this tool.

Notes From the Instructor:

The instructor is currently using Perusall and will evaluate a competitor called Hypothesis. Even though this platform was implemented to create more interaction in an online course environment, the instructor will be adapting this in a face-to-face class using a flipped class format.