

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Creative and Contextualized Learning Through Open-Ended Course Projects

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

The goal of this project is to engage students and enhance learning by encouraging students to become historians through exploration. The “open-ended course project” is an updated and creative take on a traditional final project or research paper in that students are permitted to choose among several project formats and have the latitude to determine the type of final product they want to submit. Students are required to complete a project, and outside of a few basic parameters (no weapons, no racial slurs, no violence, and no drug paraphernalia), they have the opportunity to choose what they want to do. Examples of final projects have included theatrical representations of historical figures, poems within a historical context, replicas of historical sites, historical websites, replicas of historical tools or machinery, and much more. There are very few limitations on what students can choose as their topic and how they choose to carry out the project, as long as the topic pertains to the course.

The open-ended project is semester-long and is often completed on an individual basis, but students may choose to work with a partner. Students may choose among several of the topics covered throughout the semester. Although the project is open-ended, students are required to follow specific steps and they must submit a final paper that provides context for the project, describing how it relates to their specific historical topic.

During the first phase of the project, students meet with the instructor one-on-one to discuss their desired topic and share their project ideas. The second phase of the project involves sharing their chosen topic in an online discussion forum, which the instructor checks for completion; students also receive feedback from classmates. If students notice that others in the class have chosen a similar topic as their own, they can decide to work as a team. The next step is called “Stage 1,” which consists of a short written synopsis of the project and a preliminary bibliography that includes a minimum of four sources. Students working in pairs are required to submit a single shared synopsis. “Stage 2” is the delivery of the final product and submission of the accompanying paper, which usually takes place during the last few weeks of class. The instructor does not check to ensure that each student has done an equal amount of work on the project; however, students are asked to take this into consideration when deciding if they want to work with a partner.

Instead of choosing an open-ended creative project, students may choose from two other more structured options. The first option is reading a historical novel, which involves two steps: 1) submitting a biography of the author and 2) writing a final paper about the historical significance of the book. Students will also share a summary of the book and their thoughts with the class. The second option is to participate in “race talks.” Race talks are discussion forums hosted by the college and several student organizations. The goal of the forums is to discuss current issues around racism

and explore possible solutions. If students choose this option, there are also two corresponding assignments. Before attending one of the talks, students must provide a written response to a prompt about racism within a historical context. After attending one of the talks, students must submit a final paper that discusses their experience engaging in the dialogue and that addresses racism from a historical perspective. Students also share their experiences with the class.

At the beginning of the semester, the instructor takes the entire class to visit the library to learn about research techniques and available resources. Throughout the semester, the instructor shares resources with students and helps them develop their research skills.

How to Ensure Participation in This Innovative Teaching Practice:

Allowing students the latitude to choose their topic and the type of project they do has resulted in more engagement from students. As students are engaging in research about topics that interest them, they become more involved in class discussions, especially when their chosen topic is covered. Furthermore, allowing students to leverage their inherent talents and strengths has encouraged them to share more openly in class.

Notes from the Instructor About This Innovative Teaching Practice:

“This project developed organically. Originally, the project for this class was a traditional research paper, but after receiving student feedback about the need to make the project more interesting, I began to develop this method.”