

**Title:** Using Blogging to Promote Student Engagement in a First-Year Seminar

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**Summary:** A History professor incorporates weekly blog posts to increase student engagement and preparedness in a First-Year Seminar course on Latin American film and literature.

### **Background:**

The goal of First-Year Seminars (FYS) is to familiarize freshmen students with the rigors of university life, and particularly with the academic research process. All FYS courses are capped at 19 to give students the opportunity to work closely with faculty and their classmates. Students are not required to enroll in an FYS course, although many choose to do so because the small class sizes and specialized course topics offer a unique educational experience that many first-year general education lectures don't offer. In fall 2014, my class, History and Latin American Studies 177: Myth vs. History in Latin American Film and Literature, initially enrolled 16 students, with a final enrollment of 13. The course attracted a diverse range of majors, though the fact that students chose this seminar out of a list of many seminar topics indicates that most shared some interest in the subject.

In my course, I wanted students to learn a number of things. Broadly speaking, I wanted them to know about academic life and to become cognizant that a university environment is more than just about teaching. I hoped to introduce them to the process of conducting new and interesting research. More specifically, I wanted to foster deep reading and comprehension as I taught them good strategies for reading and for thinking about the reading.

My course focused on examining how Latin American cultures have used mythology and history to record and construct narratives of their conceptions of the past. Using a variety of materials including films, novels, and historical documents, students explored the process of making myths and writing history. Specific learning objectives for the course included prompting students to:

- Conduct basic historical inquiry,
- Analyze and critique literary and cinematic texts,
- Explain how myth and history are related,
- Conduct research using resources available at KU, and
- Express themselves in writing and in person.

Students' understanding of course content was assessed through various methods, including regular essay assignments, occasional pop quizzes, a final research paper and presentation, and weekly blog posts (discussed in this portfolio).

The format of LAA/HIST 177 focused on class discussion, with occasional lecturing. Students were required to complete preparatory work, which typically involved reading a portion of a book or watching a film outside of class. Required films included *Camila*, *Road to El Dorado*,

*La Otra Conquista*, and *Like Water for Chocolate*. All of these films (with the exception of *Road to El Dorado*) were in Spanish and shot in Latin America. Students were also asked to read Matthew Restall's *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Torn from the Nest*, Carlos Fuentes's *Aura*, and Carlos Gamerro's *An Open Secret*.

The problem that I had noted in other classes (with both first-year and non-first-year students) was that over the course of the semester, students did not always keep up with their reading load. Even if they were reading everything at the beginning of the semester, some of them were merely skimming while others had stopped reading entirely by the end of the semester. I wanted to design a course with an assignment that would encourage students to keep up with the coursework while maintaining a high degree of critical thinking in their writing. I utilized the blog feature of Blackboard for this purpose, requiring students to respond to the course texts through weekly posts. Even though I had noticed a trend of ever-degrading reading comprehension and reading effort in classes, I thought that an introductory class based on a relatively high reading load for freshmen would be a good place to implement this new assignment and be a good way to track how well it kept students reading over time.

## **Implementation:**

In order to maintain students' engagement with the course material throughout the semester, I created a series of blog post assignments. Each week, students would engage with the course readings by responding to a specific question. This allowed for a low-stakes incentive for students to do the reading, but it was also useful to encourage critical thinking and writing. Through these posts, I could ask students something a bit more technical in terms of analysis, interpretation, or comparison. For example, I would ask students to identify an author's thesis, draw connections between course readings and comparable myths in American history, or comment about what a particular novel tells us about the social structure of the time period. These questions would often lead directly into major writing assignments.

To make the assignment consistent and manageable for students, I divided the class into groups of three or four students who would be accountable for reading each other's posts. I did this for two reasons:

1. I did not want the assignment to be daunting by requiring that students read 14-15 other posts, and
2. I wanted them to have a degree of collective motivation by knowing that their posts would be read by peers and not just by me.

It is possible to require students to comment on their classmates' posts, but I chose not to do that, at least in this iteration, because I did not want to make people feel uncomfortable if they did not find it necessary to add anything or if the post did not resonate with them. I also wanted to avoid a scenario in which students used the blogs' comment sections as a way to opt out of in-class discussion.

The blogs served several functions in the class. First, they allowed me to gauge my students' understanding of the reading. I read their posts right before class so that I could see what ideas/questions they had brought up that I may not have thought about, which allowed me to adapt my discussion according to their interests. Also, if there was a series of misinterpretations in the blog responses, I could provide more information or redirect students' thinking in class. For instance, if they did not quite understand the argument in a historical monograph, they might need more background into the history of the period or the setting. It was a great tool for preparing and seeing where students were before even getting into the classroom.

The blogs were also useful in having students practice the analysis and comparison that the course emphasizes by getting them to think about particular issues in the readings. Several of the blog prompts asked students to practice skills they would have to demonstrate in the final project, including comparing and contrasting sources, putting their opinion into dialogue with the course readings, and using sources to inform their thinking about major historical myths and events. Finally, the blogs ensured the students continued to keep up with the reading and practice writing throughout the semester. This also helped them to prepare for their final project, which asked them to compare two artistic works (books, movies, etc.) of their choice. The blog proved to be helpful in allowing students to build their comparison, writing, and argumentation skills.

## Student Work:

I believe that these student examples represent the range of performance I observed during the semester and demonstrate how the course blog facilitated student achievement of course goals.

I created a rubric based on what I thought would be reasonable to expect in a blog that was not meant to be longer than a couple hundred words. I also created a three-point grading scale: check plus, check, check minus. I then converted it to a numerical scale so I could use the gradebook application in Blackboard: a “check plus” got a full 10/10 points; a “check” got 8.5/10, which is a solid B grade; and a “check minus” received 7/10 points, which is a C. If students did not complete the assignment, they received a 0. A “check plus” responded to the questions directly, engaged with the questions and material being covered, integrated critical understanding, and used clear language and proper grammar. At the other end of the scale, a “check minus” post would be off-topic and/or would indicate that the student had not read the material. Most people used proper grammar, but occasionally the online format inspired some text-speak or online shorthand. I wasn’t too rigid about penalizing this, as the primary motivation for the blog assignment was to allow students to demonstrate their engagement with the material.

For the most part, the questions I asked students to respond to were directly related to the films or reading assignments. For instance, in the second blog post, I asked students to respond to the following prompt:

*Read the Spanish and Indigenous Contact Accounts, then answer the following question: How do the two accounts differ in what they relate? In other words, does the Spanish author focus on different aspects of the event than the indigenous authors?*

On this post, eight students earned a check plus, three earned a check, one earned a check minus, and one did not write a post. Student A received a check, while Students B and C received check pluses.

Several times, I used a prompt as a way of assigning a slightly different task or presenting another example of a text that illustrated (or contradicted) what students had been reading. For instance, the post discussed below related to a book they had been reading, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. This book discusses the indigenous contribution to the Spanish soldiers during the Conquest, so I posted two indigenous pictorial texts (*Lienzo de Quauhquechollan* and *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*) that I wanted students to look at and interpret. The specific prompt asked them:

*After reading Seven Myths Chs. 2 & 3, take a look at the two indigenous pictorial accounts of the conquest (Lienzo de Tlaxcala and the Lienzo de Quauhquechollan), then answer the following question: What are the people of Tlaxcala and Quauhquechollan saying in these documents? How does that challenge what you knew about the Spanish conquest?*

On this post, seven students received a check plus, four received a check, and two did not complete the post. Students A and B earned a check, and Student C earned a check plus.

For the final blog post, I asked students to practice their comparison skills by responding to the following prompt:

*After watching La Historia Oficial and reading The Reader, answer the following question: How do the film and short story differ in the way that they convey a sense of the terror people felt living under military rule?*

On this post, six students received a check plus, three earned a check, and four (including Student A) did not complete the assignment. Students B and C each received a check plus.

In general, I was pleased with student work on the blog posts. As can be seen in the grades throughout the semester, most posts earned a grade of check plus, indicating that students were engaging in the higher-level thinking and reflection the blog posts were designed to encourage. During the course of the semester, only two blog posts ever received a grade of check minus.

Most students performed well in the course. The final course grade distribution reflects my impression that most students found the course engaging and were motivated to succeed. Although this was my first time teaching a First-Year Seminar, I do not think this breakdown is surprising. I hope that the blog assignments and the staged development of their research paper helped guide students through the material and allowed them to develop the skills they needed to be successful.

**Reflections:**

Overall, I was very pleased with the blog assignment. I felt that it succeeded in providing low-stakes opportunities for writing and critical thinking. By tying it to the readings, it further encouraged students to keep up with their assigned readings. On several occasions, as I entered the classroom, students were talking about how they had answered the blog posts. Moments like those demonstrate to me that, although short, the blog posts do a good job of promoting critical thinking and help better connect out-of-class reading with our in-class discussions. Moreover, the blogs have proven very useful to my ability to facilitate discussion. I like knowing how students have reacted to the reading material. Since teaching this class, I have worked to integrate blog posts into my other courses and have seen similar effects.

If I get the opportunity to teach this course again, I intend to reframe some of the blog post prompts so they lead more directly to the final paper. Though students did use the blogs as an opportunity to develop opinions and test out ideas about the course readings, I think it would have been helpful for students to use the blogs as an opportunity to work on developing thesis statements and putting their ideas in order. I believe I can better scaffold the prompts to encourage this kind of response.