

Building Writing Skills, Critical Thinking, and Teamwork through Technology and Revision

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American Studies

Summary:

Using technology, revision as part of the writing process, and group work, American Studies students learn to question dominant beliefs concerning American identities.

BACKGROUND

American Identities (AMS 110) is an interdisciplinary introduction to the interplay between individual and group identities in American society between World War II and the present. Throughout the semester, we read, view, listen to, and discuss materials that explore different ways of understanding American identities (ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, region, class, and age) and contemplate the degree to which our identities are socially constructed. Using visual culture, memoir, fiction, ethnography, music, television, and film, we pay special attention to how issues of popular representation and histories of social movements for individual and group rights intersect with identity formation.

Although this was my fifth semester teaching a version of AMS 110: American Identities, it was my first experience teaching during a summer session. Typically offered during the fall and spring semesters as a large lecture course enrolling approximately 300 undergraduates of diverse backgrounds, ages, and majors, my Summer 2008 section of AMS 110 consisted of seven students: two American studies majors, one prospective major, and four students seeking to fulfill the university-wide Society and Culture (SC) requirement.

Teaching goals

My main goal is to teach students to think like a beginning American Studies scholar by:

- Creating assignments that help students develop critical speaking, viewing, reading, thinking, note-taking, library research, and teamwork skills that are applicable to life both within and outside of the university; and
- Asking students to question “common sense” or dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, class, history, the United States, and popular culture.

For additional information on course goals, check [here](#).

Ultimately, I hope that my students will use the knowledge and skills gained in my American Studies classroom to become partners in creating what scholar Michael Cowan

describes as, “a just, creative, and humane ‘America’” that, in the words of bell hooks, “celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth.”¹

Teaching questions

1. How might a teacher use technology (in particular the discussion board forums and wikis available through Blackboard) and out-of-class time to teach students skills critical for thinking like an American Studies scholar?
2. How do opportunities for revision after written feedback and optional one-on-one writing consultations alter students’ understanding of the writing process? Does having the opportunity to revise and resubmit their work after a review process help shift students’ notions of writing from a one-time demonstration of knowledge to a process of revision and argument development, much like that used by American Studies scholars?
3. How does a group-based, cumulative wiki project contribute to students’ working together to make connections between texts in order to answer essential course questions (listed on the syllabus and discussed throughout the semester)?

IMPLEMENTATION

Using Blackboard posts outside the classroom to build reading, writing, and thinking skills

Six times throughout the semester, I required students to post on Blackboard. Each post consisted of 25-word summaries of the main argument, theme, or thesis of the assigned reading(s) and discussion questions which were used to provoke student discussion in class (see [Bb post instructions](#)). The students were divided into groups, and each group posted on the same dates throughout the semester. Students were required to post their summaries and questions to the discussion board under the correct forum on Blackboard by 11:59 pm on the night before class; every member of the class was required to read her or his peers' summaries and questions prior to class.

My hope was that these short summaries of readings, paired with student-developed discussion questions, would promote student questioning and encourage students to cultivate important reading and writing skills that are crucial to thinking like an American Studies scholar, such as reading for a purpose, identifying arguments, and writing succinctly. On a practical level, they would also require students to read and think about the course texts prior to coming to class and generate questions for class discussion that originate from them and their peers. Students were provided with [grading criteria and examples](#) authored by prior students.

Using project revisions and individual consultations to build writing skills

Throughout the course of the semester, each student was responsible for completing two individual writing projects designed to develop and refine research, writing, and

¹ Michael Cowan, “American Studies: An Overview,” online via *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, The Johns Hopkins University Press (2005), <http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=524&format=print> (accessed August 21, 2006); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 33.

analytical skills crucial to “doing” American studies and meant to prepare them for upper level American studies classes. There were five possible projects and corresponding rubrics ([Document Analysis Assignment / Document Analysis Rubric](#); [Library Database Assignment / Library Database Rubric](#); [Oral History Assignment / Oral History Rubric](#); [Annotated Bibliography Project and Grading Standards](#); and [Four Freedoms Assignment and Rubric](#)). Each student was required to complete two of these projects.

In prior semesters, I have not allowed students to revise their projects for a better grade. This semester, I decided to encourage students to revise their projects using the completed rubrics and my additional comments. If students were unsatisfied with their project grades, I suggested that they meet with me during my office hours for an optional one-on-one consultation to discuss the grading rubric, my notes, and possible revisions; students were able to revise without this consultation if they felt comfortable with implementing my suggestions. Students were given one week to make revisions to their project, incorporating and responding to my feedback and rubric comments as well as our discussion, for a new grade. The two out seven students who opted to revise their projects were able to significantly improve their grades while learning important writing strategies.

Often, undergraduates are given an assignment and it is returned to them with instructor feedback without the option of incorporating instructor feedback into a revised paper. Revising an essay or manuscript to incorporate peer feedback is a crucial step in the writing process of American Studies scholars. My hope was that students would come to view writing as a process with several drafts where one hones and defends an argument based on peer or instructor critique, rather than a onetime demonstration of knowledge.

Using a group-based, cumulative wiki project to build teamwork, thinking, and writing skills

In past offerings of this course, I had never required students to demonstrate their ability to make connections across the semesters’ topics or to attempt to answer the course’s essential questions in a cumulative way. Believing that making connections across texts in order to answer “meta” or essential questions is one of the most important aspects of thinking like an American Studies scholar, I decided to try a new final assignment, a group-based, reflection essay on a course wiki.

In groups of two to three, students were required to write a joint essay that made meticulous, well-cited use of course texts to answer one or more of the essential course questions outlined in the [syllabus](#) (See [Group Wiki Assignment](#) and [Rubric](#)).

By working together in groups, I expected my students would gain an important skill applicable to their lives regardless of their chosen major/minor fields—that of discussing culturally sensitive issues and negotiating differing opinions in order to craft a joint project. I also hoped that this project would help students to make connections in groups that they might not arrive at alone.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Overall Student Performance

The average grade in the course was B. Grade distribution was as follows:

- A—4
- B —1
- C—0
- D—2

Examples of Blackboard posts

Example of high-level work (Student A):

50/50 points (advanced)—Summaries accurately reflect the reading(s) main thesis, theme, or argument and do not exceed 25 words each; questions invite discussion and conversation and are grounded in specific readings (and provide citation):

“Bind I: The Discipline” discusses the importance of maintaining the mask of Bargainer, Challenger or Iconic Black to uphold the contract of Black redemption and White absolution.

Q: On page 111, what does Steele say is the “third rail” of American race relations? How does this third rail change the redemption/absolution equation?

“Bind II: Is He Black Enough?” proposes that Obama as a Bargainer may alienate Black Voters, and Obama as a challenger may alienate White voters.

Q: On page 126, what aspirations does Steele refer to when he says that “Obama is a bound man because he cannot serve the aspirations of one race without betraying those of the other?”

Nelson indicates that we learn more about Steele’s life and motivation than Obama’s in Steele’s book, labeling his ideas about race relations old-fashioned and irrelevant.

Q: On page 2, Nelson argues that “Black Americans’ slow embrace of Obama’s candidacy was strategic and pragmatic.” What does she say is the reason for this?

Student A’s work met all of the requirements for the assignment. She succinctly highlighted the main argument of the assigned chapters and created thoughtful, textually-based questions.

Example of lower-level work (Student B):

45/50 points (good)—Either the summaries accurately reflect the reading(s) main thesis, theme, or argument; the summaries exceed 25 words each; or the questions invite discussion and conversation but are not all grounded in specific readings (does not include citations).

“Bind I: The Discipline” talks about the discipline which is the muscle that enables the masks of both bargaining and challenging to work, bargainers, and iconic negroes.

Q: Why did Shelby Steel [sic] say “And yet, black responsibility is the third rail of American race relations.”? (page 111) What does that mean?

“Bind II: Is He Black Enough?” talks about Obama, the first black to bargain his way to national political importance, works entirely within the current configuration of race relations.

Q: What does it mean that “he is bound by the same racial configuration that he has exploited.”? (page 127)

“Identity Politics” argues that to comprehend the phenomenon, people have to understand precisely what an identity is. Moreover, Nelson points [sic] out people can know more about this writer than in Shelby Steel’s [sic] book.

Q: Why and how can some of Kennedy’s interpretations be deeply disturbing?

Student B’s work earned a 45/50 because, although two of his summaries and questions met the requirements, his final summary and question did not.

Overall, students performed very well in this component of the course. Students consistently raised thoughtful questions that we then used to direct our in-class discussions. The student-generated questions were used in the classroom in a variety of ways. In some instances, I chose particular questions posed by students online and combined them with questions that I crafted. Many times, students would think about and discuss several questions in pairs before we would discuss them as a whole group. I found that giving students time in pairs to contemplate the questions and then giving them the opportunity to share their initial discussions with the larger group provided a useful springboard for discussion. By requiring students to generate summaries and questions before class, I was able to gauge student understanding and interest. Additionally, the student-generated posts assured that each student’s ideas, interests, and questions were addressed over the course of the semester.

Examples of Individual Projects and Revisions

Example of high-level work (Student A, *Mini Oral History Project*):

Student A’s original project had an interesting and clearly stated thesis, but did not adequately sustain the argument and lacked clear connections between her analysis of oral interviews and use of supporting quotes from the required texts, resulting in a grade of B+. I provided Student A, an American Studies major, with a typed summary of my feedback as well as written comments on the paper and a completed grading rubric. I offered Student A the opportunity to meet with me to discuss possible revisions. She felt that my feedback was clear and that she was capable of incorporating my critique in a revised paper without a one-on-one consultation. She was given one week to revise her essay. Her revised project earned an A.

Example of lower-level work (Student B, *Double Victory Project*):

Student B’s original project lacked a strong thesis, adequate support, and organization. I returned the paper to him with extensive comments and questions, as well as a completed grading rubric. I offered Student B a writing consultation during my office hours and the option to revise his paper. Student B, a foreign student majoring in the sciences, had admittedly little experience crafting an essay and gladly accepted the opportunity. Using

a visual writing tool—a template—we discussed the structure of a well-argued essay and, by asking him questions and using existing ideas from the original paper, we filled out this template together. Student B was given one week to revise his paper. His revised paper earned a B, a full two letter grades higher than his original paper.

Both Student A's and Student B's writing improved with the opportunity to revise their projects. Responding to my written suggestions and critiques, Student A retained her thesis but better sustained her argument throughout the paper, integrating supporting quotes with her analysis of primary and secondary sources. Student B's work improved significantly following our one-on-one consultation. In his revised essay, he offered a clear thesis and support for his argument—both lacking in his initial draft—and demonstrated increased competency. Unlike those students who opted out of revising their projects, Student A and Student B seem to have left the course with the understanding that revisions are an essential part of the writing process. Grouped together with another student in Group 2 for the cumulative wiki essay, Student A and Student B each asked me (of her/his own volition) to look over drafts of the final wiki essay prior to its due date. They each incorporated my suggestions in their final draft, and their group essay represented high-level work.

Examples of wiki essays with the graded rubric associated with this work

Example of high-level work (Group 2: Students A, B, and X):

Overall, I was very impressed with Group 2's level of cooperation and their overall final product. Throughout the process, they collectively wrote a cogent project proposal, made productive use of scheduled in-class time to work together on their project, constructed several drafts, and brought a completed draft for peer feedback (using the grading rubric) to a class session set aside for this purpose. Their final paper was a pleasure to read – it presented a clear thesis with consistent and persuasive support, incorporating the required number of texts and making connections across different course units. It earned a 200/200.

Example of lower-level work (Group 3: Students C and D):

In general, I was disappointed with Group 3's level of work, particularly on the part of Student D, throughout the course of the project. Group 3's project proposal did not meet the assigned requirements. In my typed feedback, I offered suggested sources and pushed them to clarify their thesis. Although Student C made productive use of scheduled in-class time, working on her portion of the essay, Student D neglected to attend this class session. Student C approached me and told me that Student D was not responding to her emails regarding the project and had not been contributing his share. I told Student C to continue to contact her partner and to work on her portion of the project. Student D also neglected to attend the in-class grading workshop or provide his portion of the essay, resulting in a largely unproductive workshop for Student C, although her portion of the essay was critiqued, using the grading rubric, by me and her peers. In the end, Student C submitted her portion of the project, which followed the assignment and her group's outlined proposal, on time. Student D created his own separate wiki, which he turned in late, and which did not meet the requirements or follow his group's project proposal. Ultimately, I graded Student C's contributions to Group 3's unfinished essay

individually, judging her portion as A- work. Whereas Student C attempted to craft her portion of an essay—which included a clear thesis statement and two, well-written, supporting paragraphs using half of the sources required for the entire project—Student D did not meet the requirements laid out in the syllabus, project description, and grading rubric, earning a failing grade on the project.

REFLECTIONS

Overall, I was satisfied with many of the course outcomes; I believe that the majority of my students left the classroom with tools for improving their critical speaking, viewing, reading, thinking, note-taking, and research skills, as well as a new appreciation for questioning the status quo and an increased sensitivity to issues of multiculturalism in American society.

Still, there are several ways that I might alter the course to further clarify the connections between my goals and student performance:

- The next time I teach this course I plan to continue to use discussion board posts as a way to teach students important writing and questioning skills, but I might add a virtual response component as well where each student is also required to respond on Blackboard to at least one of their peers' questions before class. I feel that this added element would oblige students to think about the discussion questions before coming to class and could possibly lead to further student-generated questions and discussion topics.
- I would also *require* students to revise their projects. I believe that this requirement would further emphasize the importance of critical writing as a process.
- At this point, I am still considering what to do about the group-based, cumulative wiki project. Whereas one of the three groups, Group 2, was able to work together to craft an excellent essay that made important connections across a variety of texts from multiple disciplines, the other two groups failed to complete the assignment. In both Group 1 and Group 3, one of the students was essentially abandoned by their partner; while they crafted their portion of the essay, their partners did not comply with the assignment. This made grading difficult. Ultimately, I decided to grade each partner individually. Perhaps constructing larger groups and allowing each group to “vote off” a student who is not contributing her or his share, resulting in a failing grade for that student, would encourage students to take the assignment seriously.