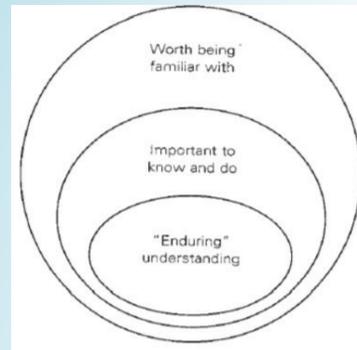


# Backwards Design for Long-Term Outcomes

## Background

Work by Wiggins and McTigue suggests that effective backwards design of a course considers the most significant long-term course goals—the “enduring questions”—rather than just what is “important to know.”

In thinking through my course Introduction to US Latino/a Literature, I realized that my assignment structure assessed a mid-range level of outcomes (familiarity with specific literary texts) rather than the higher-level understanding and skills I really wanted students to retain *long term*. For instance, mid-terms and exams assessed student retention of details about our analysis of particular texts and the ways we had applied key concepts in class. But a more important higher-level outcome, I realized, is skills based; I want students to be able to analyze new cultural texts they may encounter in the future (literature but also visual images, speeches, advertisements, news stories, songs, etc.) by applying an understanding of key concepts they have learned about in class.



## Challenges

**Challenge #1: Backward Design:** Reconsider the course assignment structure so I would be asking students to develop independent critical and analytical skills over a more sustained period rather than assessing primarily short-term content retention.

**Challenge #2: Scaffolding:** I felt that course assignments could be better scaffolded to build skills. Assignments, modeled on traditional assignment structures in an English class, generally included two short answer / essay exams (midterm and final) and two longer papers. There was no discernable scaffolding that allowed students to build skills from one kind of assignment to another.

## Marta Caminero-Santangelo English

## Redesign Steps

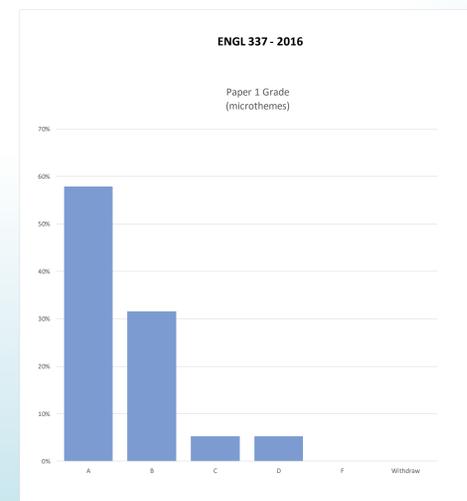
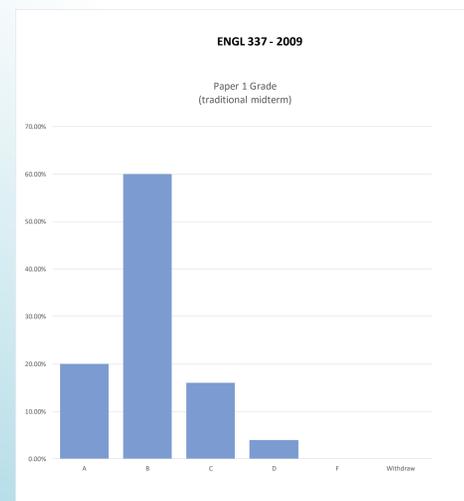
1. My major innovation was that I replaced midterms and finals with “microthemes”—short essays on each individual text. These were the equivalent of essay questions on the exams, and asked students to apply key concepts, but also gave students greater opportunities to independently process class discussion towards a specific end and to formulate and organize their ideas.

2. I focused on deliberately scaffolding classroom activities and out-of-class assignments, including group close-reading activities during class-time to build towards longer papers.

3. I made the longer paper assignments more synthetic and comparative so that students could use their microtheme essays as potential building blocks toward the longer essays.

## Outcomes

**Hypothesis:** Students would perform better on their first longer papers if they had been processing texts and getting feedback on their writing with microthemes first. Preliminary data suggests that this occurred, with students moving up into higher range grades (many more students getting As, and fewer getting Cs and Ds).



## Reflections

- Students have found microthemes to be both less stressful and better for their learning than exams.
- Because students are asked to review, process, and apply course material immediately, this learning is immediately reinforced (as opposed to a periodic “cram” situation).
- Because students receive my feedback on each individual microtheme, students also learn over the course of several microthemes how to more effectively construct and support an analytical argument.

## Student Feedback

- “I honestly think microthemes as a replacement for midterms and finals is an incredible idea. They're a great way to see how we're processing the information and to see what our personal takes on certain materials are. I feel like finals and midterms wouldn't give you that perspective on the way your students think.”
- “Microthemes are much more effective for my learning than midterms/tests/finals. I think they actually help me discuss what I think were the most interesting and important things about each text. I think that because we have microthemes instead of tests, I am more focused on understanding patterns and themes and critically thinking about the text because I'm not focused on remembering small details to prepare for an exam.”
- “Microthemes are a great alternative to a midterm or final! Small writing assignments that I can get feedback on and have a chance to improve before the next one is due are better in my opinion than an in-class essay/exam you have to cram for.”
- “This whole microthemes as replacement for standard memorization tests is brilliant. Short essays that I get a day or two to think over make me actually engage with what I learned on a personal level (as opposed to panicked, caffeine-fueled in-class tests).”