

Project Summary: Title III Stipend

Project Title: Development of new Learning Community incorporating English 101A and History 117A

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On the whole, this project was successful and we accomplished most of our Student Learning Outcomes. Our primary goal was for our students to recognize and appreciate the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge, specifically, the connection between critically analyzing primary source documents (critical reading skills) and forming historical interpretation based on this analysis (critical writing skills). We described this outcome in our proposal as follows: “The student will learn to organize, write, and edit college level essays of various lengths;” and “The student will learn to do library research, evaluate sources, and write a documented research paper.”

Shirin was primarily responsible for developing or “teaching” these skills, and she did this effectively but we both had the opportunity to assess outcomes and see how these outcomes integrated the content of both of our courses. For example, students researched and composed papers on topics, events, or people only briefly covered in my large section history course. As a result, they scored much better on chapter tests and the midterm and final exams as they had a more detailed and nuanced understanding of historical cause/effect relationships. This was particularly evident on their final exam in-class essay. I asked a question about the causes of the U.S. Civil War and the successes and failures of Reconstruction. Our learning community students went into far more historical detail (facts) and provided better in-depth analysis (interpretation) of causes and effects. They also provided better historical context and awareness of broader historical trends affecting U.S. history and governmental decision-making leading up to the turbulent events of the 1860s.

The student evaluations confirmed the success of our efforts. Almost all the students said that they learned more history and more English by taking these two classes as a learning community and that exploring historical topics in-depth in the English class enhanced their understanding of history.

There were a few challenges as well. Approximately 10% of the class failed the history class mainly for lack of participation or engagement with the LC. This number is significantly low when compared with my [Darren’s] large section but does indicate that learning communities do not solve all problems associated with student motivation. Absenteeism, tardiness, and missing work were problems in the English class as well and resulted in at least six students getting D’s. Hopefully, these students learned that they cannot breeze through college without putting in the required effort.

A few students did not properly cite their research and plagiarized on their final research paper. It is hard to gauge whether this was the result of a simple breakdown of individual integrity or a miscommunication on the part of the instructors. There were only 3 students affected by this problem so we remain optimistic that it was anomalous. However, even in the earlier papers in the English class, it was difficult to establish the rule that all information must be cited. I [Shirin] wonder if this could be because of the nature of the content. When students wrote papers on historical topics, the information

they provided was often a composite of facts gleaned from lecture notes, video notes, the text-book, and additional reading material. It was easy for them to assume that this was “general knowledge” that did not need citation. Almost half the class had to rewrite the third and fourth papers to add appropriate citation. I do believe, however, that by the end of the semester they understood the importance of documentation.

Suggestions:

1. Planned Assignments: Shirin and I have worked together before so we had a set number of assignments with very specific (and complimentary) subjects and themes. This is key to a successful LC and instructors simply will not have the time to put this together on the fly so this must be in place before the semester begins.

2. Regular Communications: Shirin and I met twice a month as needed throughout the term. This allowed us to flag problems early and to continually synchronize our lessons, assignments, and lectures. Faculty taking part in these LCs in the future must plan on regular meetings either virtually or in person.

3. I [Shirin] could not attend Darren’s class because I had another class scheduled at the same time. In the future, it would be helpful to schedule classes so that the instructors can visit one another’s classes at least once in a while.

4. It would be truly wonderful if the students taking these classes had a special interest in the subject of the content course (history, in this instance). We had a few students who met this description and they did remarkably well and improved their skills in both writing and historical interpretation. However, many of our students came in from another learning community that did not have a content course. Others were from my [Shirin’s] previous class who simply wanted to follow me as an instructor and some took the class because it was the only available English 101A that fit their schedule. If we could advertise the class sufficiently and attract more students who are interested in history and writing, we would have better results.

Sincerely,
Darren L. Bardell
Shirin Maskatia