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## STUDENTS AS TEACHERS TRANSFORMING A HISTORY COURSE

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### **Background to My Collaboration with a Writing Fellow (Alejandro)**

Like most history professors, I love history and I am constantly trying to find the way to polish my syllabi and my teaching methods. Many of my freshmen students are surprised to find out that my history courses are not mainly about memorizing significant names and dates. Although I do make sure students learn this information, I believe that the purpose of history in college education should not be memorization but that we should emphasize teaching students to develop the intellectual abilities required by the discipline. These abilities are an important contribution to a sound liberal arts education that helps our students develop their own intellectual and communication skills, which are essential for their lives as future professionals.

For years I have been exploring the best way to teach these abilities. Starting as an assistant professor at St. John's University in 2008, I focused particularly on teaching students how historians construct their arguments and use research to find their supporting evidence. This approach was shaped by my experience as a graduate student during my Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) fellowship at CUNY's Graduate Center between 2003 and 2005. During these three years I collaborated as a graduate student with various professors in the CUNY system to apply WAC pedagogy in their courses.

Not surprisingly, WAC pedagogy defined my teaching style as soon as I became a college professor. I assigned reading assignments with low-stakes writing exercises that helped my students analyze monographs and journal articles in order to learn how scholars use argumentation, an ability they applied later on a research project. Thus, my students used history to learn research methodology, analysis of evidence, as well as argumentation; the latter, of course, also promotes the development of oral and writing skills. Then, through a series of informal and formal writing assignments, my students had the opportunity to write their own argument-guided essays, applying their new knowledge while deepening their understanding of history. For four years I expanded and developed this methodology. I was very happy with it and received encouraging approval from student evaluations.

In addition, since 2012 I have been one of a five-member committee in St. John's History Department. We were entrusted with tuning the curriculum and defining competency and learning outcomes for the department's core course. Then we built similar goals for the B.A. and M.A. degrees in history. The goal was to encourage and help all history professors to emphasize in their courses the enhancement of communication skills, information literacy, critical thinking, global and diverse perspectives, historical knowledge, and historical thinking. These markers indicate different aspects of students' understanding of history and utilization of the material in a dynamic, ethical, and holistic fashion. In this committee I promoted my own teaching practices and, at the same time, I was influenced by my colleagues' teaching styles. Not only the members

of our department welcomed our initiative but also other departments in our college are taking steps to follow our lead.

I was confident about the soundness of my syllabi and courses requirements and I did not have any intention to make any major changes. However, I was awarded a 2012-13 WAC fellowship guided by Anne Geller from the Institute for Writing Studies at St. John's University. This time I was the faculty fellow, with Morgan Zajkowski as my student fellow. I was excited about the possibilities of revisiting WAC pedagogical theories and exploring the new developments in this movement. But, honestly, I was also reluctant to accept suggestions from my writing fellow to change the syllabus and assignments for my History of Latin America II (the national period). Still, I was excited to have Morgan as my writing fellow. She is a dynamic, positive and very smart student with significant initiative. Those attributes are of course great, but I expected at some point to be forced to say no to any major suggestion to change my teaching practices.

To my great surprise this never happened; our collaboration was progressive and smooth. Before I realized it, we were making significant changes to my teaching methodology. I learned so much from Morgan and my teaching practices were reshaped for the better. Today, a year after our collaboration, I have incorporated into all my current courses all the activities and assignments she helped me develop during the spring semester of 2013. Far from disrupting my syllabi and teaching practices, Morgan helped me take them to a much-improved level.

### **A Writing Fellow's Perspective (Morgan)**

For me, too, the collaboration with Dr. Quintana was challenging but rewarding. When I first applied for the Student Writing Fellows program, I expected that it would entail a simple transfer of my role as a writing consultant at the Writing Center to a more exclusive group of students. When I was assigned to collaborate with Dr. Quintana, I tried to familiarize myself with the material for the course and his expectations for the assignments to best help the students form their ideas and express and execute those ideas in their writing assignments.

I felt an initial discomfort sitting in Dr. Quintana's class partially due to my first reaction to how strikingly different the history class setting and dynamic were from my own discipline. My experience as an English student often necessitates that I am a responsible contributor of material and analysis months before formal writing starts. Classes are not only an important place to interact with the professor's ideas, but important to the development of future essay topics as a safe space to tease out complicated relationships in and between texts. Though it takes place primarily off paper, my own writing process is heavily dependent upon the ways in which both my classmates and my professors shape my ideas through conversation.

By contrast, I was surprised that in Dr. Quintana's class the professor held the dominant voice. I could not tell how students were processing the information he presented unless he called on them to offer it. In the early days of the semester, with a due date for the first paper a few weeks away, it was difficult to see my purpose in the classroom. I struggled to interact with students during class time, but would coax students to come visit me at the Writing Center where I felt more comfortable.

### **Identifying a Focus for Collaboration (Morgan)**

Dr. Quintana and I began meeting before each class without any particular agenda, just being each other's sounding board. In order to emphasize WAC practices, I gave Dr. Quintana some reading material from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas* that we used at times during our conversations to propose potential assignments. In addition, during our first meeting we agreed that an important function I could play in his class was that of a bridge between him and his students. This way, we could assess how the students understood and engaged the assignments and also assess how these assignments fulfill the skills that Dr. Quintana expects his students to develop in his courses.

So, I began talking with students. In early conversations, it became clear to me that Dr. Quintana's classes were enjoyable because his class dynamic was engaging and his goals relevant to students' expectations. However, I identified an area where we could improve: most students had limited or no active participation in the discussions of the reading materials. This was not for lack of opportunity. Dr. Quintana's class spends considerable time discussing the readings and he often asked engaging questions to the students. As is often the case, however, mainly the most outspoken students (four or five of them) were part of this conversation while the rest (some fifteen students) would remain passive listeners of the exchange.

So, in our pre-class meetings I brought the issue of class participation to Dr. Quintana's attention. This was no surprise to him. He expressed his interest in finding a way to promote active participation for *all* his students. He had tried calling on random students to answer the questions, but this only made the class dynamic awkward as shy students felt put on the spot, making it even more difficult for them to speak. So, Dr. Quintana and I, back to our sounding board, began exploring possible activities that could encourage active participation. We considered all aspects of class work: reading material, writing to organize ideas, and ultimately, verbally presenting and defending their ideas.

### **Where Our Perspectives Met (Alejandro)**

During our biweekly meetings, Morgan and I began discussing possible assignments. Early in the semester, Morgan brought up many things she likes about her experience as a student. Particularly, she mentioned how much she enjoys teamwork activities in her English classes. I let her make the case for it, hiding my hesitation, since as a student I never really liked teamwork in the classroom, but I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, the possibility of implementing new pedagogical activities is precisely the reason I applied for this fellowship.

As our discussion about teamwork progressed it occurred to me that one of the many aspects I really enjoy about teaching is the great opportunity that there is for me to learn. I mentioned that to Morgan and we began making suggestions and discussing possible assignments and activities playing with the idea that students should take the role of the teacher in order to enhance their learning experience. Although the way we came up with our assignments varied, in general, we discussed an activity in our meeting and immediately implemented it in class. Afterwards, we reconvened to discuss what worked and what didn't and proposed possible ways to improve it or try something else. By the end of the semester we had developed a number of activities that we

felt confident helped students assume the role of teacher in the classroom; activities that are ever since an integral part of my teaching practice. Below is the result of our collaboration. Morgan describes a variety of strategies that promote active student engagement, and I discuss how I began to scaffold students' formal writing.

### **Developing Strategies that Promote Active Student Engagement (Morgan)**

#### *Informal Writing Exercises*

The writing exercises that Dr. Quintana and I came up with provided opportunities to disrupt the traditional roles of active-teacher and passive-student, and began giving students an increasingly active role in the classroom. Partly due to our discussion on Bean's idea regarding exploratory writing, I suggested to Dr. Quintana to engage students in a brief brainstorming exercise at the beginning of each class, reflecting on paper about the reading assigned for the day. The idea was that informal, or non-gradable, writing exercises could help students organize their ideas without the pressure of a formal assignment. The goal was to help students get their ideas out of their heads and onto their paper. Then, Dr. Quintana would randomly ask some students to read what they wrote down and use that as a springboard to discuss some topics that stuck in their heads after reading. As students had to rely on their writing rather than on an idea in their heads, this simple exercise facilitated a more confident response to Dr. Quintana's questions.

However, it became apparent to Dr. Quintana and me that the act of exploratory writing was unfamiliar to most students and they fell back into formal practices. Instead of writing whatever came from their heads while thinking on the reading assignment, many students turned to their books looking for specific information, data, that could make their writing appear more sophisticated. It appears that students unfamiliar with brainstorming, in particular, and informal writing, in general, regard assignments as some sort of quiz and are nervous to share in class or to commit to a wrong or an incomplete "answer" on paper.

In order to remedy this mentality, Dr. Quintana explained the purpose and goals of brainstorming, clarifying that incompleteness was expected. Students hesitated but practice allowed them to see the point of the exercise: that discussing their ideas based on these incomplete thoughts lead, after discussion, to a more complete understanding of the material. With practice students felt free to write incomplete or a compilation of ideas without paying much attention to form or content. The purpose was solely to get the most significant ideas that students got from their readings and use those to stimulate a conversation.

#### *Focal Questions for Reading and Discussion*

Dr. Quintana and I also discussed possible ways to teach students not only to generate content for the class itself, but also to analyze that information on their own and shape a conclusion, another step towards students assuming the role of teachers. We knew that, while brainstorming helped to promote active participation, students also needed some guidance to get deeper into the core significance of the reading. Dr. Quintana and I decided that class discussions should be focused on the reading's main argument. So, we used our pre-class meetings to craft a question that was both broad enough for students to insert their own ideas, but also narrow enough to

make sure that students focused on the reading's central argument. The goal was to help students identify the central argument in order to enhance their understanding of the reading material. After our brainstorming sessions at the beginning of class, Dr. Quintana wrote down the question on the blackboard and the students were asked to discuss possible answers to the question based on their understanding of the material.

Students voiced their interest in the question as they saw how it helped them understand the material better. In our meetings we saw a problem, though; the question was not helping with the reading itself. We decided to give the question to the students the class before the reading was due, so they could engage the reading with the question in mind, guiding their focus on the reading. While the exercise might seem a little leading at first, it allowed students to engage actively with the reading and know what to expect during our class discussion. This approach encouraged them to read actively and think critically by focusing on the central question while reading. They were able to distinguish the main idea from the details and side arguments, often the source of student confusion and misunderstanding while engaging in scholarly writings. We were very happy with the results. Not only did we get students to participate actively in the class but they were clearly enhancing their active reading and critical thinking abilities.

Guiding questions were well received by students, as one of them reported in a class evaluation: "I found the questions very helpful because I can be able to structure my argument clearly and use that to elaborate on my opinion of the subject."

### *Small-Group Discussions*

Dr. Quintana and I were happy with our brainstorming and central question exercises, but Dr. Quintana expressed his feeling that students were not quite yet where we needed them to be. I pointed out to Dr. Quintana that he was still the leading voice in the classroom, so we tried harder, searching for a mechanism to give students the leading voice. I readdressed the teamwork activities that I had brought up earlier in the semester to Dr. Quintana in order to consider possible group dynamics that place students at the center of the discussion.

After some consideration Dr. Quintana hesitantly agreed to create small-group discussions as a complement to the brainstorming and guiding questions activities so that the students would compare and discuss their answers amongst themselves before jumping into the larger class discussion. Initially, Dr. Quintana voiced anxiety about group work because of the negative experiences he had had with it as a student, as well as the suspicion that students could utilize their group-discussion time for chatting. His initial resistance to this was also in response to his fear that he would lose his control of what was being discussed in class, turning the class into a cacophony of ideas. To his credit, he was willing to give my recommendation a try since it seemed to him a possible way to put students in the role of teachers.

I was able to convince Dr. Quintana when I explained to him my own experience as a student. During that same semester, I was enrolled in an African American Women's Rhetoric course, which relied heavily on small-group discussions, as opposed to one which involved the entire class. I explained to him that rather than situating ourselves in a large circle like the majority of English classes I have taken, this class moved from an introduction by the professor to the entire

class to small groups, and then back to a larger group reflection when the professor could make sure that the students understood the main issues at hand. Sometimes each group discussed the same topic and at other times the groups had differing tasks. The professor made a point to check in with each group and offer her perspective or ask questions to push the discussion further. From my own personal experience, I could testify to the richness of conversation that happens in smaller groups.

The final results were astounding: not only the more timid students began participating in the larger discussion, but overall understanding of the readings evolved from a very superficial understanding to complex debates about authors' arguments and their use of evidence. Class time also seemed to go by faster as student discussions became more animated. And, for Dr. Quintana, the role of moderator in an engaged discussion was precisely what he was looking for. Far from losing control of the discussions he became a sort of orchestra conductor in which he only had to guide the course of the discussion while the students "played all the instruments." Dr. Quintana and I were happy with the results of our collaboration as students now truly engaging in the role of the teacher.

### *A Glimpse of the Revised Classroom*

Classes began to look very different towards the middle of the semester. Instead of Dr. Quintana introducing the reading and asking questions to random students, classes now would begin with a brainstorming session to allow students to collect their thoughts, then they would randomly be split up into groups of five or six to discuss the guided reading question and their independent answers to it. Then, students in each group would exchange their opinions and eventually agreed on a group answer to the question. Each group would present and elaborate their collective answer to the entire class and later the groups would compare and contrast their respective answers. The students were now acting as teachers!

Additionally, because students could now discern a specific outcome for their brainstorming exercises, as they used them for their small group dynamics, it began to function as a tool rather than as an apparently random in-class assignment. By continuing to use the brainstorming time in conjunction with the small group discussions, conversations were able to start more quickly because students already had time to think about the topic. As a result, the efficiency of group discussions allowed more time for the large group discussion towards the end of class.

One interesting moment was watching a particular student encourage participation from every member in his group. Instead of picking a point person to present what the group had discussed, this student wanted to make sure that everyone in his group participated. The student confessed that this strategy was meant to avoid that one (this student in particular) would end up doing all of the work for the group. This demonstrated that small groups are also perfect spaces for leadership opportunities.

### *Scaffolding Formal Writing (Alejandro)*

Beyond class participation, Morgan and I also tackled ways to help students teach themselves while working on their research paper. Again, following WAC principles, we developed a scaffolding assignment for the final writing project.

The bulk of early-stage formal writing assigned to students was three short role-playing assignments that would help create sections in their final formal essay. For the second week of the semester I asked my students to pick one of three Latin American presidents given the first day of class as research topic and provide a bibliography for their research. The next three papers, distributed throughout the semester, consisted of role-playing assignments in which students wrote first from the perspective of a conspirator against the president, the president's secretary of state, and finally the contemporary United States ambassador to the president. These different perspectives required that each student both condemn, applaud, and analyze critically their chosen president.

All writing activities were reviewed and discussed by students using self-evaluation and then peer-evaluation activities. Morgan and I came up with these activities during one of our meetings as Morgan mentioned how, for her, these activities help shape her writing, plus it felt perfectly into our goal to give our students the role of teachers.

The final assignment was a traditional 10-page essay in which students joined the three earlier papers and develop a personal argument regarding their president. The combination of the role-playing and the traditional academic essay was designed to remove the fear of a formal essay while enhancing students' perspectives of the subject matter as well as challenging their ideas regarding argument construction and execution. The shorter role-playing assignments ensured that students engaged in their research and critical writing without the fear of being actually writing a formal paper. By the time they have to write their formal essay they had enough material and analysis done that the final task was much easier to accomplish. All these activities were further facilitated by encouraging students to meet with Morgan at the Writing Center to discuss and improve their papers.

Student reflections on the writing assignments demonstrated how changing the classroom dynamic also helped them with their writing process. One student offered in a reflection after using the peer review model:

I am extremely self-reflective so writing it down on paper didn't really benefit me positively or negatively. However the class discussions and getting feedback from other peers was very helpful because they saw my papers differently than I had. So peer reviews were helpful but the self-evaluations were not as beneficial.

Another student noted:

During this discussion, I realized that I had a lot of details I needed to cover. Talking to my partner made me realize that I could do tons better in terms of organizational structure



as well. We bounced ideas back and forth and I got a better idea of where I want to take my paper.

The guiding questions used for the reading assignments also helped students see the connection between the reading's central questions and their own writing. A student recognized:

This class I decided to look at my argument from a different perspective. I now intend to take more into account when writing, including the perspectives of a different time. This class has benefited my writing and my final paper was more thorough and exclusive as a result.

Morgan and I received similar comments testifying to the complete change in class dynamic that took place over the course of that semester. While most of my students were very quiet at the beginning of the semester, and some had trouble adjusting to the group dynamics implemented during class time, these activities effectively changed how they viewed themselves as active members in the classroom and learned to rely on each other to improve their ideas and their writing. Not only did this group dynamic change the nature of their activities in class, but they were now engaging in the role of the teacher whether they knew it or not.

### **Conclusion (Alejandro)**

As a professor I was very pleased with the results. I realized at the end of the semester that my initial resistance to Morgan's suggestions to change my syllabus and teaching style was unfounded. She taught me that no matter how satisfied I was with my courses and how positive student evaluations were there is always room for improvement. What was meant to be a pedagogical experiment for my History of Latin America II class turned out to be an experience that has defined the way I now teach all my courses. As a result my students not only enjoy a more dynamic class, centered around their participation, but also, more importantly to me, these exercises enhanced the students' communication skills, information literacy, critical thinking, historical knowledge, and historical thinking.

My collaboration with Morgan not only resulted in facilitating students to teach themselves. Another valuable lesson from this experience is that it pays off to be humble as a professor and welcome ideas from students, especially your writing fellow. After all, students see each day the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of teaching styles. We, professors, can only benefit from their input.