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Beyond the “Flip”: Blended Learning in the Literature Classroom

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“Beyond the ‘Flip’: Blended Learning in the Literature Classroom”
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1. “Self(ie) and Community” Assignment Description from Course Syllabus:

One of the goals of the IMW neighborhood is to examine how identity is informed by the often complex relationship between the self (or perhaps more accurately, selves) and community(ies). For example, how do we construct, assert, perform, etc. selfhood, and how do the communities of which we are a part influence that process? Furthermore, our class seeks to understand how the literature we read is not just a static collection of words bound to a page but a living, breathing entity that speaks to our own lives in meaningful ways. In order to achieve these goals, each week you will take and post (details below) a “selfie” that in some way illustrates the following:

a. Your relationship to a particular community
b. The “American Dream/Nightmare” as represented in our class readings and discussion.

Your “selfie” for each week should appear on your class Instagram account no later than 11:59pm on Friday evenings. Your caption should include the week you are posting (WEEK 2, for example), and it should succinctly express the relationship you are capturing between self, community, and our course reading(s)/themes. Please do not post anything illegal or anything that breaks the Rollins College Honor Code. Though I encourage you to take advantage of the “selfie” format, you are not required to include your face in your picture.

At two points in our semester (once near the middle and again near the end), you will choose your favorite “selfie” from your growing IMW 100 album and write a short essay (500 words, separate grading rubric will be provided) explaining how this image captures a significant relationship between you, a particular community, and our course reading(s). You will present your “selfie” and its accompanying essay to the class.

In order to take part in this assignment, you will need an Instagram account. If you already have an account, please create a separate one for this class. Once you have an account, you need to “follow” me (llittlerimw100) and your classmates, and vice versa. You are welcome to make your account private beyond our classroom community.

If you do not have a smart phone, you are welcome to email me your weekly image with your desired caption. I will then post it to Instagram for you. Digital cameras are available for checkout from Olin Library. You can log into Instagram and view the class’s images on a laptop/computer.

2. Self(ie) and Community Essay Assignment:

In these short essays, you will explain how your favorite “selfie” from your growing IMW collection on Instagram illustrates/problematizes/analyzes some aspect of the “American Dream/Nightmare” as illustrated by our course readings and your own life experiences. Remember, the goal of “Self(ie) and Community” is to help us see the connections between these works of fiction, the American Dream/Nightmare, and our own lives.

Your Self(ie) and Community Essays should be:
1. Thesis-driven. They should make clear what you were trying to capture in the image and how that relates to:
   a. The American Dream/Nightmare as we’ve discussed it in class
   b. Our course reading(s)
2. Grounded in relevant, cited textual evidence (from your image and our course readings) and your own analysis of that evidence
3. Clearly organized into cohesive, well-developed paragraphs that progress logically with clear transitions.
4. Edited for grammatical correctness, clarity, and concision. A note about concision:
   a. Don’t worry about wasting time/space on drawn out, formal introductions or wordy set up. Intro your image quickly and clearly, state your thesis, and then get to the body of the essay (where you will support/prove your thesis via textual evidence and analysis).
5. 500-750 words
6. Formatted in MLA style
7. Submitted to the Turnitin link on our Blackboard homepage by the due dates listed below:
   a. Essay 1: 9am on Wednesday, February 25
   b. Essay 2: 9am on Monday, April 13

In addition to submitting a copy of your essay to Turnitin (link on Blackboard) by the due date, you will present your ideas (along with your chosen image) to the class. Please don’t plan to read your essay aloud—instead, talk us through your image and the main points in your essay an engaging way that makes clear the connections you see between your “selfie”, the “American Dream/Nightmare,” and our class reading(s).

3. Sample Student “Selfies”—Some with explanations taken from student essays (1st three examples), some with captions from original post (next four examples):

"Out of the six Self(ie) and Community posts I have submitted throughout this past half of the semester, my favorite is my post for week five: the eye looking through a key hole. The theme I portrayed through this picture is the predominant idea exemplified throughout the novel Revolutionary Road, that we hide all of our problems to keep the image that we live perfect and non-problematic lives, which is often not the case. Americans [living the “Dream”] are in the habit of putting up fronts and facades so that people on the outside cannot detect the truth of what is really happening “behind closed doors.”
“What is the American dream, and what does it mean to me? How is it embodied in the works I’ve read? Those are the questions I’ve attempted to answer with my selfies. My favorite image was of a blooming camellia that I chose for week one. To me, this flower represented hope, and I claimed that hope was integral to the American Dream... I chose the flower to represent hope because it was just at the beginning of its life. It was blooming, a stage of life full of promise, for it would soon be a complete being – a full-fledged person, just like Sara [of Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*] becomes. Their journeys are analogous: they are closed and secret at first, but then they bloom and flower, showing off what and who they have become. Unlike Sara, the flower has a biological imperative to bloom – its hope is ingrained in it. However, that simply makes [Sara’s] journey – and all those that hope towards their dream – more poignant.”

“My favorite Instagram post in our class endeavor to develop the growing definition of the American dream and nightmare is my grandfather, Alejandro Lopez. In the photo, he is celebrating his eightieth birthday that turned out to be his last. My parents and I are singing to him and in his moment of utter joy, I snapped the image on my phone before he blew out the candles to make a wish. This image is a celebration of a lifelong milestone. If there was anyone I knew in my life that personified the American dream, it would have been him. He accomplished many notable things while he was alive that pertain to the characters we read. The importance of heritage and the deep roots of racism are themes in just a few of the various novels we read that not only affected my grandfather, but the many citizens that inhabit the United States in their quest for the American dream.”
Week 8: GENERATIONS. Here is a photo of three generations of women in my family: my grandmother, mother and I. Though we may look similar we each grew up in very different times of American life and butt heads when it comes to ideology, preferences etc. Celia, Lourdes and Pilar share similar generational gap issues gang push them away from each other due to the severity of the times from the country from which they hail. The social change that comes with each generation, however, molds the American dream. So, no one’s opinion of what it is os truly correct because it is different for everyone. For Celia the dream is Cuba. For Lourdes the dream is control and her entrepreneurship, and Pilar is still figuring what her dream is. They must all learn that the dream is unique to each of them and learn to coexist or risk losing touch completely of each other.

Week 6: conformity. This book, to me, symbolizes the standard cookie cutter lives Frank and April [Revolutionary Road] love to belittle - but have fallen into nonetheless, the lives of servings for four, Mommy and Daddy plus two, with a recipe for every occasion.
Week 2: Working. My job at the bookstore does not simply provide a paycheck, but also provides a sense of security and independence. As Sara struggles for a few cents just to buy food or pay rent, she clings onto her back-breaking work as an ironer, because to her, work is a lifeline.

Week 11: Fear. I think all of the novels we’ve read for class have included the fear that the America Dream will be a disappointment or will not be what it has been expected to be, some more than others like Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas. Dr. Gonzo experienced this fear when he was at the "vortex" of the dream, which was Las Vegas for him. However, we all experience the fear of failure in the future, staying strong and positive can make us overcome this boundary and finally allow us to find happiness and satisfaction in the dream like Sara from Bread Givers. Taking care of her father and allowing him to stay at her house was the last thing that Sara would’ve wanted for her American Dream, but she made the sacrifices and finally found happiness and satisfaction in the dream.
4. Student Feedback:

These responses were taken from an in-class, anonymous survey given in the final week of class meetings. The class consisted of 16 second-semester freshman.

**Did this assignment help you connect the books we read to your own life in some way?**

“This assignment helped not only relate novels that we read in class to my own life, but also enabled me to share those connections with my classmates while gaining insight into their lives as well.”

“Absolutely. If I were reading these books by myself I would never have made the connections to my own life. By posting the selfies every week I was forced to think of some way that my life connected to those of the characters in the novels we read, which turned out to be much easier than expected.”

“Yes, it helped me relate to the novels and really think about my connection to them. By feeling as if I have a connection to it, it made me more interested in what I was reading. Plus, I liked that the assignment was modern and represents the technological culture we grew up in.”

“Using social media is already a part of my life so using Instagram to relate the books to my life has definitely helped me connect with the books more.”

“Yes, it was a good way to answer, “so what, who cares?” in literature written in a time much too old for initial understanding.”

“The assignment above all else helped me connect the novels to my life personally, probably because Instagram is a place I (and others) typically post personal things. It is a platform we use to express ourselves.”

“Yes—it made me consider how some of the themes are applicable/relevant in my own life and some of the advantages I may have had that have gotten me where I am today.”

**Did Instagram provide a helpful platform for participating in this assignment, or would you have preferred another social media system like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc?**

“I believe Instagram was the best platform it was quick and easy to upload a picture it is something I use/check daily and did not limit characters (Twitter)”

“Yes, because we are able to view others Instagram which helps us connect to others and also to help inspire ideas. It would have been cool to do Pinterest and have “American Dream” boards.”

“Yes because it was a fun way to turn in the assignment, rather than boring blackboard screens.”

“Personally, Instagram is my favorite social media network simply because it was/is easy to use! Also, I have a lot of experience with it, so I loved that this was used.”

“…Instagram [is] best because you can make [posts] private and write more.”

**Rather than a social media platform like those mentioned in #2 above, would you have preferred a more traditional academic platform like a Blackboard discussion forum?**

“No, the connection to social media enabled the course to bridge the gap between generations and retain student interest in the project.”

“No, I like social media because it was a great way to learn about classmates, make things personal with pictures and really get an idea of how others relate to the books and the American Dream, and [it’s] more fun and accessible.”
“No, I don’t like Blackboard. It is not as fun and modern as Instagram.”

“...Personally, discussion forums stress me out and I do not enjoy them. This was fun and involved pictures.”

“I liked the Instagram aspect of the assignment. It made me think outside the box and engaged me in the assignment because of its new format.”

**Did this assignment help you connect to your classmates (their ideas, lives, interests, values, etc) in any way?**

“Yes! Especially on a more personal level.”

“Yes, I was able to notice a lot of interesting points that also helped me in my thinking. It also helped me connect to my classmates emotionally through their posts.

“It was interesting to see people reflect on their lives and families.”

“I enjoyed seeing other classmates’ photos and it helped sort out my own thoughts.”

“This made us able to see what [classmates] do in their lives. It’s cool that only like the 18 of us know that information.”

“Yes, it was fun getting to know them through Instagram and having an insight on their thoughts.”

“Yes! I learned a lot about everyone and who I related to and their ideas helped me relate more to the books—helped share ideas.”

**Though the clear majority of responses from this survey were positive...** a few students did have some complaints/constructive criticism. The main concerns were (and again, this is a minority—1-3 students out of 16 mentioned 1 of the items below):

- 1 student said: Instagram felt “less academic” (which was a positive for most students, as is made clear above)
- 1 student said: Maintaining 2 Instagram accounts (1 for class and 1 for personal use) was “annoying”
- 3 students said: The assignment did not help students connect with others—they reported merely submitted their posts and never looking at anyone else’s.

5. Based on this experience, I am considering the following revisions to this assignment:

Post 1x per novel rather than 1x per week?
Allow students to use personal Instagram account?
Integrate posts into class time even more?
Final text of the semester—Rather than reading another novel, have students “read” and analyze our Instagram collection? Perhaps a group project? Paper, presentation?