Learning Through Intradepartmental Scholarship In The History 251 Milestone

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The History Department established HIST 251 in 1996 to supply students with the opportunity to acquire and develop the methodological skills and habits of critical thinking and analysis considered essential for student success. Though introductory textbooks can be useful for helping students meet the challenges of HIST 251 and the UULOs, they can be costly, are often dull, and fall short of meeting our students’ needs. Instead of textbooks, students in my HIST 251 classes read and discuss journal articles produced by History Department faculty.

I selected articles based on how well each represented a particular field and methodological or analytical approach. The articles were staged to support students developing their own historiographical projects and to take advantage of their increased understandings as the term progressed. In an introductory lecture I provide students with an explanation for the article’s inclusion in the course and its historiographical significance. I also provide students, who have downloaded and printed the article, with a reading/discussion guide to help them develop active and critical reading habits. This also helps them prepare for a classroom discussion where, together, we will critically analyze the argument and reverse-engineer the article, considering the scholar’s motivations and methodological and organizational decisions.

**Goals and method**

The practice and the need it addresses

**Results and benefits**

Selected student responses to journal articles:
- “I learned a lot more about the historical resources UNLV has to offer…quite a bit about the various ways one can examine history.”
- “Students never feel too stressed even in light of the relatively heavy workload.”
- “Provides a great understanding that history is dynamic and debated. Insight on what history scholars actually do.”
- “A wide understanding of the many fields and themes of history.”
- “Great explanations, helpful with the course material and the way everything is taught to students.”

General observed benefits:
- Improved engagement and learning. (Variety of topics and methodologies hold students’ interest throughout the term.)
- Improved reading and critical thinking ability. (Sophistication of journal articles together with reading guides and discussion encourage the development of higher order thinking.)
- Improved oral and written communication. (Students use articles as models, aspiring in their own writing to professional argumentative structure and support, vocabulary, and style. Class discussion helps students become familiar with academic discussion and debate.)
- Improved research skills. (Searching for and retrieving articles helps students become familiar with Lied Library resources.)
- Inexpensive. (Students pay only for printing articles.)
- Versatile. (Based on student needs, articles can easily be removed/replaced without re-working the entire course.)

**Finding resources**

Among the benefits of an approach that relies on intradepartmental scholarship is the variety and availability of resources.

All articles were published in journals available through one or more of the Library’s databases. Depending on the field and an instructor’s needs, book chapters could be used instead. In that instance, an instructor would, with permission of the author, digitize the chapter and place it in a WebCampus file. And, though it requires more effort for both the instructor and the student, the selected articles (or book chapters) could be deposited in physical reserves at Lied Library or at one of the other libraries on campus.

**Interdisciplinary applicability**

This is a malleable and versatile strategy that could be adopted for Milestone courses in departments across UNLV. The most important considerations are selection, staging, and developing content to help students grasp the significance of, and become comfortable with learning from, professional scholarship. As a first step, investigate the articles or book chapters produced by department faculty. From that body of scholarship, select a suitable number of articles or chapters. Ideally, each article or chapter will not only introduce students to a facet of the discipline but also reflect a particularly significant methodological or analytical approach.

Articles or book chapters can then be staged as required reading to suit an instructor’s goals. Allow suitable time before students read each article (or chapter) to introduce students to the scholar and to the themes of the article or book, explaining the purpose for its inclusion in the course and what students are expected to get out of the reading. Reading guides, along with any specialized vocabulary, help students learn to read actively and give them a way to organize their thinking in preparation for class discussion. I poll students for their opinion about the utility of each article after discussion and again at the end of term to help me decide about content for subsequent terms.