

Amy Sumpter—GC2Y 2000: Global Connections

- **A brief description of the original assignment, activity, or course material.**

This course is an Area B interdisciplinary course focused on the ways we are connected with people around the world. The course mostly focuses on commodity chains, the spread of biota like disease and invasive species, cultural diffusion, pollution exporting, and human migration. In the past, I've mostly assigned readings, and then provided a lecture "summary" of the readings. This course also has a "learning beyond the classroom" component, and we take field trips to various places. This year, I split the class in half and one class went to the Habitat for Humanity Global Villages in Americus and the Andersonville National Historic Site and POW Museum. The other class went to the Agricultural Museum at ABAC in Tifton, GA.

- **The purpose of the assignment, activity, or course material.**

I always struggle with motivating students to complete (or attempt) readings for my courses. I wanted to build activities into the course where they were required to use the assigned texts to complete an in-class activity.

- **A description of the change or innovation you have made to the assignment, activity, or course material.**

Over the course of the semester, I used in-class activities where students had to use their texts to build models (I created a couple of worksheets for this), use Padlets to create "chronologies," or demonstrate principles of spatial interaction by presenting physical interpretations that the groups decided upon themselves. For instance, we looked at US military actions overseas decade by decade in the 20th century, and each group of 3 students in class had to build a list of actions, the goals of the military action, and what was accomplished. They could imbed photos or short videos along with each "blurb" on the military action.

Since we've been looking at brain-based learning in my FLC, I understand that repetition of various sorts (using different types of activities for the purpose of repeating) really helps with understanding.

- **What you hoped to accomplish with this change or innovation (i.e. your goal).**

I hoped that students would engage with the readings more—they could refer to them while they were doing the in-class activity. I also hoped that the increased repetition would allow the students greater understanding of the course materials. The idea was that the students who had done the reading would clearly see that their engagement had made the activity easier and more straightforward. Those who hadn't done the reading would get some exposure or time with the material. And then the students would create study guides or materials they could bring with them to the essay exams.

- **Did this change or innovation meet your expectations?**

In part these changes met my expectations. I think the students enjoyed not having lectures all the time (in fact, I only lectured maybe 25 percent of the time). The students definitely had to engage with the materials more to do the in-class activities. Some students reported to me

after class that they were frustrated because it was clear that the classmates in their groups hadn't done the reading.

Something else totally unexpected came up. The first day I used Padlet, I spent about 30 minutes demonstrating to the students how to use it, explaining the assignment, and dividing everybody into groups. After I divided the students into groups, I looked up at the screen in the front of the classroom where I had a Padlet up for demonstration purposes, and one of the students had posted a racial slur and other inappropriate comments! I had not turned on the profanity filter and never assumed I would need to for an in-class exercise. I was so upset and had a really difficult time figuring out what to do. I did leave the room for a minute, and then came back and basically gave my students an angry "parent" talk about right and wrong in the classroom. But I went on and gave a short lecture on the class material to try to keep control of the situation.

This event changed the whole trajectory of the course. I had four students drop the class shortly after that, I had one student who was afraid to come to class, and I had two students who came to me and told me they didn't think my response was harsh enough. At least four other students in the class told me they didn't think it was that "big of a deal" because we did not have any minority students in the class. We spent at least two class periods after that event talking about the implications of it and checking in with how people were feeling. I invited our Peer Diversity Educators into the classroom for some programming, which I think was helpful. But I feel like the whole dynamic of the course was derailed....and then derailed again when we went online. To be honest, I was happy to go online with this course because of the stress of trying to manage the aftermath of this situation.

- **What was the outcome for your students?**

It's not easy to tell what the outcome was because we had two exams. The first exam is always kind of a learning experience because they are essay. And the students can bring in whatever they want to use on the exam because it's open note, but it usually takes one test for the students to understand that "open-book" doesn't mean they don't have to study. The final exam was administered online, and I purposely wrote "easier" questions because of the online format. The students did very well on the final, and they used the texts effectively. I'm not quite sure how to interpret the results, but I feel like the student's early engagement with the texts and the very direct exam questions (with hints about which texts to refer to) made a difference in the essay exams.

- **What will you do differently next time?**

I would use all of these in-class methods of repetition and engagement with the texts again. I would definitely turn on the profanity filter before showing the students how to use Padlet. I would give the students a practice exam essay (or just an example question) with each activity so they can see how their work will help them on the test.

- **What effect did your participation in this FLC have on your teaching?**

I am doing many things more purposefully. Instead of just feeling frustrated that the students aren't putting in the effort, I think about ways to make it happen in the classroom or demonstrating why the reading is important. And I look for ways to work repetition into class lectures, activities and assessments (and indicate to the students that they should use what they know).

I also feel like discussing the "Padlet incident" with my colleagues in the FLC this year was extremely helpful. Meeting regularly with really engaged people who want to know their colleagues and have an interest in others' work is one of the most important "perks" of having a job in academia.

Sandra Godwin: SOCI 3450: "Historical and Contemporary Social Thought"

As a result of my participation in this FLC, I revamped my course "Historical and Contemporary Social Thought." I used *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*, one of the texts we read in the FLC, to redesign my course as an inquiry-based learning experience. The original course description and assignments were meandering and had a weak structure. I had hoped to create a course that put students at the center (hence the "mouth shut" appeal). The move to a more student-centered (inquiry-based) course met my expectations, but it also allowed for a more structured experience for students and myself which was unexpected. The next time I teach the course I will explain the structure of the course in the syllabus. When I reviewed my syllabus for this report, I noticed that this explanation was lacking. For example, the course is structured around "conceptual workshop days" and "seminar days" that are designed to help students write four essays. This structure should be more central in the syllabus. Also, I will spend more time giving students essay feedback myself and less time on peer feedback, although I believe the peer feedback was somewhat helpful for students. After redesigning the course along the lines of independent inquiry-based learning, the description, assignments and course overall became more concise, clear, and structured.

My participation in this FLC has had a positive impact on my teaching. My colleagues' support gives me the boost I need to take the plunge, so to speak. At the same time, my colleagues' support also protects me from plunging into a change that is too much for one semester. My colleagues and their support are invaluable.

Original course description:

This course addresses the question of how social theory was/is created, by whom, and why; that is, we take a sociology of knowledge approach to social theory by considering the construction of the sociological canon itself. Why were social thinkers in the global north included while social thinkers in the global south were not? As a result, our efforts are two-fold. One, we study the theoretical perspectives and theories themselves, and, two, we consider their place within and outside the canon. Most of the theorists we read attempt to explain persistent social problems such as poverty, racism, sexism and other forms of social injustice. Yet, the foundations of sociology in the United States, as well as other social science disciplines, have a western European bias. We will study this bias and its historical relationship to colonization. This is sometimes expressed by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, as "northern theory" (as in the global north) or the social science of the "metropole."

We will consider the work of both historical and contemporary social theorists who seek to explain social events and the human behavior that brings them about. Some examples of questions social

theorists have asked are: “What is exploitation?” “What is the basis of everyday reality?” “What do human beings take for granted about their social worlds and how do they come to do so?” “How was inequality created and how is it reproduced?” Theories are how sociologists and other social thinkers make sense of the data they collect. Theories are what allow researchers to tell stories about their data (e.g., inequities in wealth stem from the contradictions of capitalism). But studying theory is not only an academic activity. Studying theory can help you make sense of the social world and your relationship to it, even if you never collect data for a research project; studying theory can help you figure out your own position on “how the world works.”

New course description:

This course addresses big questions such as “What is democracy?” and “What is freedom?” Students will develop their own answers to these big questions with the help of social theory and consider what kind of society they want to live in. Social theorists have much to say about freedom and democracy, but sociology as it was developed in the global north has excluded social theorists of the global south and as such was not a democratic process. Studying this means we take a sociology of knowledge approach to social theory by considering the construction of the sociological canon itself taking into account its historical relationship to colonization.

Jim Schiffman

“Amy: Our discussions helped me refine and improve my ‘meets, doesn’t meet, exceeds’ grading system and led to a spin off small group with the idea of taking it a step further and moving assessment beyond numerical or letter grading to some kind of feedback system that might be translated back into letter grading or pass/fail grading.”

Jim Schiffman has been experimenting with non-numerical grades in his journalism courses. Two issues he has faced are 1) that the students don’t yet understand professional behavior and 2) they are so focused on grades, they miss opportunities to follow their own intellectual curiosity. Jim has developed a three-part, ordinal level scale that can be converted to a numerical grade at the end of the semester. Students can decide which topics/assignments they like and want to invest in to get that “exceeds expectations” mark. He has found that the students (for the most part) really like the grading system, although they have reservations at first. And the type of feedback that he gives the students is good training for the type of feedback that students will receive in the workplace after they graduate. He feels it is a good compromise between his desire to not give grades at all (only feedback) and the requirement that the students have a numerical grade at the end of the semester. He started a research project with Sandra Godwin and Linda Bradley, two members of this FLC, experimenting with non-numerical grades.

Laura Whitlock

“I actually used the brain research info in creating a new lab for the astronomy manual. It is much more discovery based, open ended cycling back to reinforce, etc.”

I'm sorry that I don't have more information on Laura's work in the classroom, because she was the spearhead of the brain-based learning topic in our FLC. She teaches astronomy and wrote the lab manual her department uses for the course. She is the person who first taught our group about repetition building neural networks and actually altering the physical structures of the brain.

I don't want to speak for her, but I can tell you that as a lecturer she had some unique issues that those of us with tenure do not face. We spent a good bit of time discussing some of her difficulties in her department and providing support to her. We encouraged her to seek help from the administration, and to my knowledge some progress has been made.