



Course-Level Assessment Project Final Report

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Division/Department: Arts & Humanities
Course to be Assessed: History of the U.S. since 1876 (HIST 106)

Step 1. Define

PURPOSE/RATIONALE

When we received notice that one of our Gen Ed history courses was slated for assessment this coming year, HIST 106, History of the U.S. since 1876, was the obvious choice. Our American history classes generally have higher enrollment than our Western Civilization classes, and we've long believed that 106 is the most valuable of the Gen Ed history classes for our students since many of the topics and issues covered in the course are virtually the same ones we're dealing with today. We've also noticed that in general, student interest in the material increases the closer we get to the present. Assessing 106 should allow us to capture the largest number of history students and learn more about what makes them successful across multiple sections.

OBJECTIVES TO BE ASSESSED

The five course objectives listed below are the most important ones (out of seven) that truly reflect whether or not a student has learned skills that actual historians need, but also ones that would benefit each of them, going forward, regardless of what career path they end up taking.

1. Summarize and explain the major events of the years from 1877 to the present, in order to show clear, concise understanding of how they changed America. (Aligns with General Education goals 1, 3, and 4)
2. Demonstrate informational literacy; i.e. know when there is a need for information, and to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand. (Aligns with General Education goals 1, 3, 4 and 5)
3. Express themselves in formal writing, by authoring papers such as essays, analyses, book reviews, or bibliographies that offer a clear and supported position on a complex historical subject or event. (Aligns with General Education goals 1, 3, and 4)
4. Think critically, from analyzing the successes and failures of the past and explaining and predicting how people with values and mindsets different from our own handle similar circumstances. (Aligns with General Education goals 1, 3, 4, and 6)

5. Make historical connections by recognizing contemporary behaviors, actions, and policies that demonstrate how people fail to learn lessons from those past successes and failures. (Aligns with General Education goals 1 and 4)

Step 2. Design

We concluded that the signature assignment would be the best way to assess student learning in HIST 106 across all the sections. Our benchmark is 80% of the students demonstrating success for each of the five skills in the above objectives in their completed paper.

SIGNATURE ASSIGNMENT/HISTORICAL NEWSPAPER ANALYSIS

In the 21st Century, with so many new sources of up-to-the-minute information, traditional daily newspapers find themselves with fewer and fewer readers. Yet not so long ago, they were THE source of news, crucial in keeping the general public current on what happened in the wide world around us. But how accurate are such “snapshots” of events when compared with what historians uncover through research in the years that follow?

Select a specific historical event, topic, or person from 1877-2017. Go to the Library’s homepage and from the column on the left, click on “Databases by Subject,” and then click on “News.” From there, you will be able to access “ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*,” a searchable database of more than 17 million pages of that newspaper, dating back to 1851. (We also have “ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Baltimore Sun*.” You can use either database or both).

From there, conduct an “advanced search” of a few months or so, enough to sufficiently cover your topic. (For example: to examine the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which occurred on December 7, 1941, you should look for items at least through March 31, 1942). Read through at least five articles, editorials, letters, etc.

Write a three page paper that describes and analyzes what you found. In your first paragraph, state what event you chose and explain why. Then you should go on to summarize how *The New York Times* or *The Baltimore Sun* depicted your event for their readers. Be sure to include the following as you reflect upon and relate to your reader what you found:

1. The tone of the articles. Are they positive or negative, sensationalized or informational?
2. The accuracy of the articles. Did the story change as the months passed? Were the first reports and impressions correct ones?
3. The values and mindsets shown in the articles. Were there obvious biases and prejudices? How do they differ from attitudes today? How are they the same?
4. A comparison of the articles with the present-day verdict of history. Did what you read in these newspapers agree with what you know about the event from historians?

5. Knowledge and perspective gained by reading the articles. Did anything in these newspapers surprise you? How did doing this assignment affect your own personal views on your chosen subject?
6. A works cited section at the end that lists the titles and the dates of the articles you looked at.

The completed assignments were submitted at both the end of the fall semester and the end of the spring semester. That way, we captured as many student papers as possible.

Step 3. Implement

All HIST 106 teachers had experience in using this particular assignment in their classes. Initial results from the first Signature Assignment scoring session were encouraging. But we wanted to look at a much wider and deeper pool of students, so we waited for a final report until we had two solid years of results to analyze.

Step 4. Analyze

The three faculty who taught 106 were joined by Kate Fanning, our other full-time history professor, in analyzing the early results and determining what, if any, changes or adjustments should be made going forward. And the scoring sessions in January and May included others outside the discipline, and most helpful was Jeremy Green regarding library resources and citations.

The signature assignment was scored according to the following rubric:

Course objective 1: Students will be able to summarize and explain the major events of the years from 1877 to the present, in order to show clear, concise understanding of how they changed America.			
	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards
Relating the Information	The student's summarizing of the articles exceeded the stated requirements. All relevant information was elaborated upon.	The student met the stated requirements and relevant information was included.	The student did not meet the stated requirement and only related some of the relevant information.
Explanation of Historical Events	The student demonstrated an excellent ability to explain historical events in terms of their causation.	The student demonstrated an ability to explain historical events in terms of their causation.	The student did not demonstrate an ability to explain historical events in terms of their causation.
Consequences	The student demonstrated an excellent ability to draw	The student demonstrated ability to draw conclusions	The student did not demonstrate an ability to draw conclusions

	conclusions regarding the consequences of historical events.	regarding the consequences of historical events.	regarding the consequences of historical events.
Overall evaluation	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards

Course objective 3: Students will be able to demonstrate informational literacy; i.e. know when there is a need for information, and to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand.			
	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards
Access Resources	Student selects and accesses a variety of relevant sources directly focused on the field or research topic that are all of appropriate depth or breadth.	Student selects and accesses general resources appropriate for the field or research topic. Most, but not all sources are relevant and of appropriate depth or breadth.	Student selects and accesses resources, but sources gathered lack relevance, quality, and appropriate depth or breadth of information for the field or research topic.
Evaluate and Analyze Sources	Student effectively and consistently evaluates multiple and diverse sources for authority, reliability, accuracy, and currency of information.	Student evaluates general sources for authority, reliability, accuracy, and currency of information.	Student makes some attempt to evaluate information, but is unaware of the criteria that should be used to evaluate sources.
Ethical Uses of Information	Student consistently demonstrates an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and copyright violations, accurately gives credit for quoted and paraphrased work, and cites without error.	Student understands what constitutes plagiarism and copyright violations, gives credit for quoted and paraphrased work, and cites sources with few errors.	Student has knowledge of plagiarism and copyright laws, but makes errors in citing sources and paraphrasing.
Overall evaluation	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards

Course objective 4: Students will be able to express themselves in formal writing, by authoring papers such as essays, analyses, book reviews, or bibliographies that offer a clear and supported position on a complex historical subject or event.			
	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards
Purpose and Audience	Student demonstrates a clear understanding of purpose, context and audience and meets the	Student demonstrates a general understanding of purpose, context and audience and attempts to meet the goals of the	Student demonstrates a limited understanding of purpose, context and audience. Specific purpose is unclear or

	goals of the assignment.	assignment, but some gaps are evident.	misses the point. Student inconsistently meets the goals of the assignment.
Thesis	Student's central message is compelling, well-formed and precisely stated.	Student's subject is evident and central message is clear.	Student's central message is vague or unclear making the text difficult to follow.
Structure and Style	Student has a clear organizational pattern with purposeful sequencing evident to the reader. No or very few errors in sentence construction, grammar, and spelling. Writing is clear and fluid with smooth transitions from sentence to sentence. Word choice is exact, pleasing, and appropriate.	Student is generally clear, employs an organizational pattern, but may be inconsistent. Some errors in sentence construction, grammar, and spelling, but not enough to distract from meaning. Sentences and transitions are generally clear. Word choice is appropriate but undistinguished.	Student's writing is poorly structured with little evidence of an organizational pattern. Numerous errors in sentence construction, grammar, and spelling. Sentences are confusing or awkward with little evidence of transitions. Some inappropriate word choices.
Overall evaluation	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards

Course objective 5: Students will be able to think critically, from analyzing the successes and failures of the past and explaining and predicting how people with values and mindsets different from our own handle similar circumstances.

	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards
Critical Evaluation	The student demonstrates an excellent ability to critically analyze and evaluate what they find in the articles.	The student demonstrates ability to critically analyze and evaluate what they find in the articles.	The student does not demonstrate ability to critically analyze and evaluate what they find in the articles.
Changing Values and Interpretations	The student demonstrates an excellent ability to recognize and explain how our values and the interpretation of history change over time.	The student demonstrates ability to recognize and explain how our values and the interpretation of history change over time.	The student does not demonstrate an ability to recognize and explain how our values and the interpretation of history change over time.
Opinions vs. Facts	The student demonstrates an excellent ability to recognize biases and	The student demonstrates ability to recognize biases and	The student fails to demonstrate an ability to recognize biases and

	differentiate between opinions and facts.	differentiate between opinions and facts.	differentiate between opinions and facts.
Overall evaluation	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards

Course objective 6: Students will be able to make historical connections by recognizing contemporary behaviors, actions, and policies that demonstrate how people fail to learn lessons from those past successes and failures.			
	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards
Historical Connections to Today	The student demonstrates an excellent ability to find and relate historical connections between past and contemporary behaviors and actions.	The student demonstrates ability to find and relate historical connections between past and contemporary behaviors and actions.	The student does not demonstrate an ability to find and relate historical connections between past and contemporary behaviors and actions.
Significance for Today	The student demonstrated an excellent ability to draw conclusions regarding the significance of historical events.	The student demonstrated ability to draw conclusions regarding the significance of historical events.	The student did not demonstrate an ability to draw conclusions regarding the significance of historical events.
Reflection and Personal Conclusions	The student's reflection and personal conclusions are in depth with excellent links to the articles.	The student's reflection and personal conclusions are reasonable and make links to the articles.	The student's reflection and personal conclusions are either missing or a simple restating of the articles.
Overall evaluation	Exceptional	Acceptable	Does not meet standards

Step 5. Modify/Maintain

In Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, we offered seven online sections of HIST-106. Four of the sections were conducted remotely and synchronously, and three of the sections were conducted asynchronously.

Seventy-four percent of student artifacts were scored at acceptable or exceptional. Twenty-six percent did not meet the standard, with nine students failing to turn in the assignment, receiving a zero.

With enrollment declining, in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, we only offered three online sections of HIST-106. One of the sections was conducted remotely and synchronously, and the other two of the sections were conducted asynchronously.

Only seventy percent of student artifacts were scored at acceptable or exceptional for Fall 2021. But for Spring 2022, that number rose to eighty-four percent, exceeding the standard we had hoped for! Also, only three students failed to turn in the assignment.

There was some variation with how well students demonstrated a mastery of the individual course objectives. Students do extremely well with Objectives One and Four. Of those who turned in the assignment, virtually all of them communicated their thoughts well. Next, in terms of student success, were Objectives Six and Seven. A strong majority of them made the historical connections and did reflect on what they had learned and exhibited critical thinking.

The weak spot continues to be Objective Three, the information literacy one. However, the numbers have improved, particularly after placing more focus on explaining and demonstrating how to do research and citations properly in the Spring 2022 semester.

Final Results and Recommendations

The main thing we learned is that individual instructors of HIST 106 need to be sure to place focus upon the importance of meeting the research standards in terms of sources used and citing them properly both within the paper and at the end in their bibliography. I'm optimistic here because until enrollments start going up again, it's likely that I'll be the only professor teaching HIST 106, just as I was in Spring 2022. The adjuncts who had taught this have either retired or moved on to other schools. Also, we will have our first face-to-face on campus section running this fall. So building on the improvement I saw in Spring, I should be able to maintain that higher standard of excellence going forward.

That improvement and changes of circumstances also means we don't need any more data or resources. As I wrote last May or June, "right now, we don't think we need any more data or resources. This was the first Academic year where almost all of the History classes were not face-to-face, and all of the 106 sections were online. Making sure students understood the importance of how to do proper research tended to become announcements on CANVAS and emails rather than an in-person explanation."

As we continue to "return to normal," I also hope to get our students to be bolder and draw on other disciplines and experiences in their work. They generally all enjoy doing this assignment, but I think they'd get even more out of it if they took some more "risks." Genuine "interdisciplinary" projects are hard to do. But if students push their thinking more outside of a natural comfort zone in American History, then this assignment will be what we intended; not just another paper; but a truly "signature" assignment.

Supervisor Signature Robert W. Young Date 6/14/22

Please forward a copy of the signed report to the Associate Provost of Assessment and Institutional Research.