

Engaging Students and Improving Writing Skills in HIS 346 (online)

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I used twice-weekly, low-stakes writing assignments to keep students engaged in an online synchronous class, hold them accountable for their work, and improve their writing skills.



The Challenge

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BACKGROUND



How could I keep students engaged and help them improve their writing in a General Education class I taught online for the first time?

HIS 346 (Immigration, Ethnicity and Race in American History) attracts a wonderfully diverse and interdisciplinary group of students who tend to be very interested in the topic but (as many live in households where English is not their first or primary language) sometimes struggle with English-language writing skills.

The Solution

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COURSE CHANGE



I shifted from a once weekly in-class writing exercise used in the past, to two low-stakes weekly online writing assignments (a two-part discussion forum posting and two-paragraph writing prompt).

I alternated between more traditional academic writing prompts (in which students demonstrated reading comprehension and critical thinking skills) and personal prompts (in which students connected the reading to current events or their own lives).

The Impact: Evidence of Student Engagement

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IMPACT

Students were better prepared and had more robust discussions because they had to submit written work before every class.

Students were more engaged because they integrated personal experience or opinions into discussions and written work.

Most students submitted every assignment every week.

Their writing demonstrated a lot of “aha” moments and sincere interest in the topic.

Discussions were enthusiastic, well-informed and involved a broader than usual cross-section of the class.

Students commented in IDEAs that they loved the class, found the discussions stimulating, and felt the frequent assignments held them accountable and kept them engaged.

What's next?

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DISCUSSION

Improvements to writing skills were harder to detect.

Although I noticed an improvement in student engagement, I did not see substantial improvement in writing skills.

Next time I will incorporate peer editing and multiple drafts into the one longer assignment (a 7-10 page paper) so that students can steadily improve one piece of writing.

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Thank you!

