From Consumers to Creators:

An Experiment with Students as Evaluators, Editors and Creators

of a new Spanish Civilization Textbook.

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In the summer of 2007, somewhat disappointed with the often dry nature of one of my core offerings, I decided to completely rework my course on Modern Spanish Culture & Civilization (SPAN 322) to be offered the following Fall. The new course design included two radical changes, a shift away from a text-lecture-discussion format and a dramatic increase in weight given to a term-long group project.

Having taught this course since the mid-1990’s, I had become disheartened by several of the standard texts on the subject, each of which covered Spanish history in a dry, often stilted manner, and often with very different perspectives one text to the next. I decided that rather than rely on one as the primary source for information on the past 300 years of Spanish history and culture, I would use a variety of texts, each of which had its own strengths and its own severe drawbacks. I envisioned a model wherein the student role would change from one of absorption of a single perspective to one of analysis and synthesis of multiple perspectives.

For the course, I selected three of the best texts available, but informed students that each would be required to purchase only one of the three. I divided the course into 5 primary historical periods: 1) the 18th Century, 2) the 19th Century, 3) The early 20th Century leading to the Spanish Civil War (1898-1936), 4) The Franco Regime (1936-1975) and 5) Contemporary Democratic Spain (1975-2007). The course was then divided into units of 4 class meetings (roughly 1.5 weeks each) in which students worked in groups based either on their specific textbook or organized to ensure represen-tatives of each textbook in each group.

On the first day of a unit students would attempt to glean the central events, ideas, cultural dynamics or social changes which were presented in each text. They compared the three texts and debated the different perspectives and emphases, attempting to arrive at consensus understandings of the most salient features of the period. The second day was dedicated to filling in the gaps, often with short lectures which I prepared in response to student questions in the earlier class. The third day emphasized synthesis of information and included student presentations on key ideas, figures or events in greater detail than our text provided. On the fourth day of each unit there was a unit quiz, based on the shared understanding reached by the class in earlier meetings. This was followed by a final cultural component, a topic which I presented to the class, usually examining a particular example of artistic expression relevant to the period (Goya, Gaudí, Picasso, Propaganda posters from the Civil War, Pedro Almodóvar’s films, etc.)

This structure was, for me, a radical departure from the design which originated in overdependence on a single central textbook. By expanding the course to include a constant comparison, evaluation and synthesis of various texts, the central dynamic of the course changed from one of imparting knowledge to one of creating understanding through dialogue. Were this the only major shift I would have been very happy with the outcomes, but it was in the group project where I saw the greatest evidence of active learning and student buy-in to the course.

In past years I had usually reserved the final week of the class for group presentations in which teams of 3-5 students would give a 20 minute lesson on a topic otherwise not covered in class. These were often discussions of regional cultures within Spain (Basque, Catalan, Galician, etc.) or a particular festival, social or cultural phenomenon (San Fermin, Holy Week, Autonomist Movements, etc.). With some inspiration from our Faculty Retreat workshops on group dynamics and group projects, I devised a very different core project, off of which other aspects of the course evolved. Expanding on the idea of perspectives created by the use of three very different textbooks, students worked in groups to create their own “textbook” for the course. Each group of 5-7 students was responsible for the material discussed in one of our five units and would have to create a “chapter” for the textbook. This chapter was to include all of the key features of the period, along with a required number of non-narrative or co-narrative components, such as tables, charts, maps, timelines, glossaries, or short mini-articles separate from the central text of the chapter. The students were charged with the creation of a more effective, more interesting text than the three which they had used as base.

For the project students had to meet regularly outside of class, turning in meeting reports throughout the term which highlighted their progress, concerns, group dynamics and plans for the weeks to come. Each group engaged in independent research on topics covered in their course texts, expanding the materials we had seen or would see in class discussions, leading to a broader bibliography for the chapter. They would also, as a group, have to decide on the topics to be included in the text as well as its look and feel. Students were encouraged to include some of the materials presented during the individual class presentations which accompanied each chapter discussion, as well as new materials to insert in their textbook chapter. The central goal was to create a text which would be practical and engaging so that they themselves could make use of it. The five chapters were collected at the beginning of the final week of the term. During that last week each historical period was reintroduced to the class through student-led chapter review presentations, and print copies of each chapter were redistributed to all students. The following week, the students completed a final exam which was based entirely on material found in the student-generated textbooks.

By having student success on the final tied directly to student-group success in synthesizing information and creating a new text for study, the class buy-in was phenomenal. There was great enthusiasm about the formatting of the chapter as well as its content. Students were engaged in debates about learning styles, connecting ideas coherently, presenting varying perspectives, and interpreting history with both clarity and precision. The final projects were of varying quality, though certainly stronger than I anticipated for a first attempt at a new project. It was also clear that the groups which worked well together and which focused on producing a coherent document were far more successful than those who subdivided the topic into 6 individual projects hastily pasted together in one document. This was clear to the students as well, reinforcing the learning goals of the course’s group work component.

In the end, the course was far more engaging to students, far more thought-provoking, and from my perspective, more enjoyable to lead as the instructor. I was able to tie all of the pieces together, from the unit quizzes to the individual presentations, through the central dynamic of textual evaluation and creation. The students, while not particularly pleased with the varying quality, bias or coverage of the different textbooks, were able to see the value of the overall structure and the fulfillment of the goals of the course. The course was transformed from what I had always seen as a pretty successful lecture-discussion presentation of culture to a much more dynamic, project-based, open-ended synthesis and expansion of information, ideas and connections.