Designing “Problem Sets” and Flipping Humanities Courses

Innovation Description

What do you do if the science of learning persuades you that students benefit hugely from project-based learning, but you teach a humanities subject that lacks the problem sets around which lectures can so productively be flipped in disciplines like engineering or dentistry? And how do you scale a newly flipped course to serve 60-70 students after pilot runs with 30-40?

HISTORY 335 „Immigration Law” created space for new activities by first adopting a familiar technique: clicker quizzes at the beginning of class encourage students to actually do the readings beforehand. This change freed time for students to work in small groups. Requiring the groups to sit together during lecture was a “eureka” moment because projects started in lecture can wrap up with report-outs during discussion section. The flexibility to plan group work spanning lecture and section was key to scaling up the model.

Like problem sets, carefully crafted activities ask students to put their readings into practice through engagement with new material in authentic tasks. For example, research tools like the Shepardizing function in Lexis Nexis let students identify all subsequent cases that cite a given case so they can trace changes in immigration policies. In about the same amount of time required for a real intake interview, students role play meetings between visa seekers and legal practitioners, including hunting online for appropriate forms.

Colleagues have noticed the “stimulating, collaborative, and inspiring” atmosphere in HISTORY 335, and other history faculty are adopting similar project-based strategies and practices.

Examples of Teaching Innovation

Legal Research Workshop I – The Constitution Challenge to Chinese Exclusion

The purpose of this activity is to introduce students to key concepts in legal studies (judicial reviews, opinions, dissenting positions, citations, Shepardizing) and to give students training and experience with an important legal research tool (LexisNexis) that they will be expected to use for their group presentations, and to teach them how to map Supreme Court decisions that will be examined in class. Students will complete a “Decision Tree” for a case that will be part of our “Shepardizing” tool playing exercise next Wednesday.

Part One

Find your assigned case on LexisNexis, and print this one out alongside the one you will be working on in class.

Part Two

Full class demonstration of usefulness and definition of key terms.

Handout

You will be working in your regular groups of four. Over the rest of the lecture period your assignment is to:

1) Find your assigned case on LexisNexis.
2) Read the case.
3) Discuss it with your group and produce:
   a. Find a case that recently cited your case. What was at stake in this
      case? How does Wong Wing relate to the case?
   b. A two-minute synopsis to be presented in sections. What was the
      case about? What was the conclusion of the court (or of the
      dissenters)? What was their primarily legal argument? If you are
      in a group charged with tracking subsequent court interpretation of
      the ruling, what are the central patterns and key (or at all) of the
      case? How do they change over time?
   c. Full Chicago Manual of Style citation for your case, as if it were
      published in your textbook.

Part Three (In sections)

a. A two-minute synopsis to be presented in sections. What was the
   case about? What was the conclusion of the court (or of the
   dissenters)? What was their primarily legal argument? If you are
   in a group charged with tracking subsequent court interpretation of
   the ruling, what are the central patterns and key (or at all) of the
   case? How do they change over time?

b. Full Chicago Manual of Style citation for your case, as if it were
   published in your textbook.

This activity is designed so that each discussion section has exactly one research team working on each of the following topics. How do you know which your team was assigned? Use a color code for your handout.

Lawyers - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Defense - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Gang - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Dissent - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Jades - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Bandy - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Dissent - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Banana - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Emerald - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Lavender - Wong Yee Ting Decision

Aqua - Wong Yee Ting Decision

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Designing activities as interlocking “jigsaw” pieces keeps tasks for each group manageable and provides incentive for students to pay attention to other groups’ report-outs.

Student Comments

“Each class generally begins with our i-clicker questions, followed by a short lecture, and ends with a memorable and relevant activity. This allows us to talk about the material, ask questions, and get to know our classmates.”

“Activities give us real tools for future assignments.”

“We are given a reasonable amount of readings for each week. Each reading is extremely relevant to that week’s topic.”

“Memorable and relevant activities have ranged from research workshops, where we have learned the needed tools to complete our own legal research, to activities where we take the role of immigration officer and decide who is admissible and who is not.”

“The lecture activities helped me to draw connections between the course material and real-life applications and helped demonstrate the reality of the laws for the people subject to them.”

“This model has made our class rousing and dynamic; it is more inclusive and impactful to our learning.”

“Rather than memorizing dates and laws before an exam, which we will forget once we are out of the exam room, we are walking away from his course with unforgettable lessons that we can continue to apply in our lives.”