

WAC Pilot Group Report

From: Dana Morales, Professor of Government
Class: GOVT 2301, Spring 2008 semester (online class)
Number of students: 25

Background/Description of Project:

I decided to add an extra writing component to my GOVT 2301 online class in the form of three papers concerning the upcoming presidential election. Students were asked to write these papers on specific topics (listed below), and to share their papers with the rest of the class in the “Discussion” area.

Each writing assignment was to be approximately 600 words in length. The topics were as follows:

- a. Select a presidential campaign issue of particular interest to you. It can involve foreign policy (i.e., the war in Iraq), or domestic policy (i.e., tax relief, or the skyrocketing cost of health care). Investigate how, in terms of factual and opinion statements, one candidate discusses this issue, and write a 600 word report of your findings.
- b. Religion has been an important topic throughout the first months of this election year. In a recent study conducted by the First Amendment Center, sixty-five percent of Americans said that the founders of the U.S. intended that it be a Christian nation. (9/11/07, www.firstamendmentcenter.org). Is this majority view correct? Write a 600 word report on this topic--be sure to use quotes from significant historical figures and/or documents to support your answer.
- c. A poll by the Harvard University Institute of Politics in 2006 (www.iop.harvard.edu/pdfs/newsroom/fall_2006_release.pdf) showed that by a 3-1 margin young voters said the country was on the "wrong track." In that same year, 61% of voters in the 18-29 year old age bracket voted for Democratic party candidates in the midterm election.

Why do you think so many young people are pessimistic about the direction of the country? Do you believe that support for the Democratic party among young voters will be an important aspect of the 2008 election? Write a 600 word essay addressing these questions.

Implementation:

Students seemed to have a hard time wrapping their heads around some of the topics listed. Many had questions for me concerning content. I sent the students examples of what I considered to be exemplary student writing in this genre. This proved helpful to some, but not all. I also forwarded the links that Ron and others had recommended on college writing.

I was somewhat lenient in terms of form, since these papers were meant to be “thought” papers, as opposed to formal research papers. However, I did make it clear to the students that proper citations were required.

I would say that 75% of the class completed all three papers. There were some who only completed the first one or two, but these students tended to have trouble with the entire class structure, not just the writing assignments. Correlation between those not submitting all three papers and those not successfully completing the class was (not surprisingly) very high.

Successes and Challenges:

Some of the challenges I encountered were as follows. Some of these were anticipated, but some came as a surprise:

1. The majority of students let their opinions guide them, oftentimes casting scholarly objectivity and critical thinking concerns aside. A smaller, but still significant number of students had little confidence in their own opinions and analysis, and merely parroted the beliefs of others. I have certainly encountered

- this problem before, but I was hoping to see some real improvement by the third paper. Although some improvement was seen, there were still many who never brought their papers up to an acceptable level.
2. One problem that I take full blame for was asking the students to post these papers in the Discussion area. Many seem to believe that writing shared with their peers can and should be more informal, less rigorous, and more offhand. Spelling, grammar, citations, and form were all atrocious on the first go-round. They did improve by the third paper, but in the future, I will not be asking students to post in the Discussion area.
 3. Essay number two, which addressed the role of religion in the election, was a topic that I now see as too volatile for students at this level. In terms of content, and evidence of critical thinking, these papers were by far the worst of the three. I'm not sure if it was the demographics of the class, the unique aspects of this particular election, or the anonymity of the computer screen, but things got a little hairy. I won't go into detail, but suffice it to say that I got some of the craziest, most off-the-wall, and downright scary commentary that I've seen in my 13 years of teaching! In a live class, I may have been able to talk some of these students off the ledge, but the online environment makes that more challenging.

I don't want to dwell on the negative, and I did see some significant improvement in the following areas:

1. As stated above, for most students, the mechanics of writing showed considerable improvement by the third go-around.
2. A small segment of the class showed a real affinity for this type of writing, and I was surprised by their insight and analysis. I've got one or two papers that I feel are appropriate for the WAC journal.
3. I did see a small but noticeable improvement on test scores (at least on the essay portion of the final exam). Through sheer volume, I think the students became more comfortable with the process of writing, and were better able to demonstrate their knowledge by the time the final exam rolled around.

4. In terms of my own professional development, I feel more confident about incorporating additional writing assignments in my classes. In many cases, I learned what NOT to do, but the endeavor as a whole was a valuable first step.