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Themes and Topics in American Culture (AMST 200) City as Classroom Project Report

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City as Classroom Project: American Studies 200

Course Description

American Studies 200 is a topics course focusing on one American theme or topic, and examining it from the perspectives of multiple academic disciplines. Students in this section were exposed to a combination of lecture, discussion, guest lectures, field trips, writing, and presentation assignments to help them improve their reading, thinking, and writing on food and sustainability issues at a college level.

Project Description

In order to be exposed to real-life applications of food sustainability concepts explored in class, students were given 10 different options for trips into the city at various points in the semester, and required to choose any 3 that fit their schedules.

In setting the course up, I arranged for guided tours of the local Fresh Grocer, the Weaver's Way Farm, and La Salle's own Blue and Gold Dining Commons. Other options on the syllabus included attending the Bartram's Garden Honey Festival in Philadelphia, the Street Fare Food Festival in Mt. Airy, the Food Trust Night Market event in Chinatown, the Slow Food Farm Day Event at Reading Terminal Market, and a lecture on the Sex Life of Corn in Germantown. Additionally, students had the option of meeting deadlines for taking "self-tours" of the Reading Terminal Market, and the Chestnut Hill Farmer's Market. Students had access to this list of trips at the beginning of the semester, so they might plan their schedules accordingly. Through CAC, students received subway tokens for free travel when necessary.

Before each tour the class generated a series of questions based on our readings and discussion, for students to ask people working at the site they visited. Within 24 hours of each visit, students were required to post a "field trip log" to Blackboard detailing who they spoke with at the site, and how that person answered 3 of the class-generated questions. Students were also required to attach photos of themselves at the site.

Three times during the course of the semester, we dedicated class time to a discussion of trips students had been on, how the students felt about the trips, and how those trips related to our readings and discussions thus far.

Outcomes

For the most part, this structure worked very well. All 22 students made 3 field trips, and in total, students visited 8 of the 10 sites. They consistently demonstrated an adventuresome willingness to ask questions of people they met, and an ability to make connections between readings and tours. Several students based their final research projects on ideas they first encountered on trips.

Student Feedback

Most students reacted positively to these trips. One student called them “an interesting way to reinforce what is taught,” another called them “a fun way to learn new things,” and several noted that they are “a great way to engage with the things we are studying in real life.” In particular, one student mentioned that “being that I am not from Philly, these field trips are a chance for me to branch out and as a bonus learn some pretty cool stuff. And of course, eat some great food.” A few students, however, wrote that the trips were difficult to fit in their schedules, and one student (whom I agree with) noted that “some are [more useful] than others.”

Lessons Learned

Before becoming a member of this cohort, I’d incorporated 3 field trips into an AMST 200 course taught in 2012. Both the 2012 students and I were often frustrated at how difficult it was to arrange a time that everyone could meet off campus, and I ended up creating several “make up” assignments for students who were unable to attend. Arranging for multiple field trips in this course was the result of what I learned in 2012.

If I were to teach this course again, I would use the same structure as I did this year, with the exception of requiring 1 trip before midterm to discourage students from waiting until the end of the semester to visit sites.