

Course Portfolio

Course Title: Western History (American History)

Semester: Spring 2015

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Introduction

This course was instructed by me for the first time in the Spring semester of 2015. The majority of students were first grade, although several second grade students did attend the class.

The course was one that was new to me in terms of American history, although the political aspects that were covered in class were areas that I am well-versed in. Therefore this course was both challenging and very interesting.

This course is more interactive than other courses and requires that the students take a more active role in class time. I always encourage the students to participate actively, as this shows they are focusing on the class but also allows myself to gauge whether the students fully understand the material.

This portfolio is useful in helping me to analyse the course design, enactment and results. Where possible improvements are made and the comments given by the students are always readily received.

Schedule

Week	Topic
1	Course introduction
2	Native Americans and pre-colonial America
3	Early explorations
4	The British Colonies
5	Roots of the American Revolution
6	American Revolution
7	Building a Nation
8	Mid-term
9	Jeffersonian Period
10	Era of Good feelings
11	Westward expansion & slavery
12	American Civil War
13	Reconstruction
14	Review
15	-
16	Final exam (in-class exam)

Syllabus

Week 1: Introduction

This involves informing the students about the schedule for the semester and what will be taught each week, as well as the grading for the course. Since students change courses during the first week, I keep week 1 simple.

Week 2: Native Americans and pre-colonial America

A brief look at the early natives who occupied the American (North and South) continents and how they inhabited the land. The class discusses some of the differences between the groups.

Week 3: Early explorations

The course mainly focuses on the history of America from the time when the Western Europeans began exploring and colonising various parts of the Americas. Week 3 looks at the Spanish discovery of the continent and how they were able to impose their authority.

Week 4: The British Colonies

This week starts to focus more on North America and how the British began to colonise different parts of the Eastern coast of North America for differing reasons of trade and religion.

Week 5: Roots of the American Revolution

This week we focus on the growing demand for autonomy from the British empire. The causes of the war of independence are analysed.

Week 6: American Revolution

The War of independence is studied in more detail, focusing on how the relatively weak Americans were able to defeat the might of the British empire.

Week 7: Building a Nation

The aftermath of the War of Independence is analysed. The creation of the confederal system and its strengths and weaknesses are looked at.

Week 8: Mid-term exam

The students are given a report to write on one of the topics from the first six weeks of the course.

Week 9: Jeffersonian Period

This class focuses on the Presidential term in office of Jefferson. We look at the major events and decisions that occurred during his time in office, for example the Louisiana Purchase.

Week 10: Era of Good feelings

This period looks at the growth of politics in the USA and how political bargaining started to affect the direction of political and social life.

Week 11: Westward expansion & slavery

A focus on how the number of states started to increase through expansion to the West, namely with the addition of states such as New Mexico and California. This class also looks at the growing divide between the North and South, both in terms of economic strength as well as the issue of slavery. The class is intended to show the background to the lead-up to the civil war.

Week 12: American Civil War

A class that focuses on the Civil War and the differences between the two sides and what was happening politically. The class details the secession of various Southern states to form the Confederacy and how President Lincoln was able to win the war and reunite all states.

Week 13: Reconstruction

This week looks at what happened after the Civil War. We start to analyse how the issue of slavery and discrimination remained dominant.

Week 14: Review week

A class to review some of the major topics of the course. Since this course is quite intensive I wanted the students to be able to fully understand all of the topic areas.

Week 15: Option for extra class.

This week is used to make up for any classes missed during the semester due to events. If there have been no missed classes I offer the students the opportunity to have an extra review class of the course.

Week 16: Final Exam

This accounts for 30% of the total grade. The final exam is a written exam in short essay/answer format. I give five questions covering topics studying in the second half of the course.

Course Description

This course covers the history of America from the period of the first explorers through to the period of Reconstruction after the American Civil War (1490s ~ 1870s). The course is an introductory course and students are not expected to have any prior knowledge. There are no prerequisite classes that the students must take. However, this course is compulsory for those wishing to study in the USA as part of the study-abroad programme.

The course looks at the main events, ideas, and people that have helped to shape and transform America into the country that we know it as today. Whilst the main areas are looked at in detail, the course is limited in time and so basic ideas and explanations are the foundation of this course.

Goals

The course will go through the period of American history in which a great many changes occurred, creating what is the United States of today. By the end of the course the students should be able to understand who the major political figures were, what they did, and the main events that took place in the early years of the US's history.

Since the US is one of the world's most influential and dominant political actors the students should have a good understanding of how the US was first established by European colonials, but then how the citizens fought for their own democracy and independence. This understanding of the history of the US will be beneficial to those studying politics, as well as history.

Materials

The main materials used for the course are powerpoint presentations each week. These are emailed to the students. The powerpoints summarise the main points, although students are also expected to take notes as further explanation is given in class.

Videos downloaded from the internet are used in several classes, for example during week two a video documentary about the Incas and Aztecs is viewed.

The main textbooks for the course are recommended. They are:

‘The Penguin History of the USA’ Hugh Brogan. (England, 1999) Penguin Books. Second Edition.

‘American Colonies: The Settling of North America’ Alan Taylor. (USA, 2001) Penguin Books.

Grading/examining techniques

The grading for this course is divided into five areas:

1. 20% is awarded for a 2-page summary
 1. The topic is given to the students in week 11. They have four weeks to hand in the summary.
2. 30% is awarded for the mid-term paper.
 1. This is a written, research paper.
 2. I give the students four questions covering the topics discussed in the first six weeks of the course. Students then choose one topic area.
 3. They have 2 weeks to complete the paper, often questions are handed out in week 6.
3. 30% is awarded for the final exam
 1. This is an in-class written exam.
 2. The students must answer five questions covering topics discussed after the mid-term paper.
4. 10% is awarded for attendance
5. 10% is awarded for participation in class

Learning Outcomes

Students:

The feedback from the students was overall positive. For the most part the students felt like they had learned a lot about American history. Their grades were also quite high and several students were in the A/A+ range. However, other students also received lower grades and so the class was possible difficult for some and not so difficult for others.

Comments from the students suggested that the classes could include more videos, or more anecdotes/stories that are not so well known. The students seemed to feel like the class was too focused on the main events and this was slightly boring.

On a positive note, the students enjoyed my style of having a short review at the start of each class.

Professor:

For the first time teaching this class, I was pleased overall. The design of the course seemed to work well and within the course time-frame I was able to cover all of the topics. However, in future there are a few areas that I want to make some changes to:

1. More focus on the American political system as it stands today. This will be very useful for the students who want to know more about modern politics, of which the US plays a vital role. It will also help them understand the system of checks-and-balances more. Even though this was discussed in the class, I feel like spending more time discussing this would be valuable.
2. The semester only really covered the history from the late fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. I would like to give a more detailed look at pre-colonial America at the start of the course. At the end of the course I think the review class in Week 14 could be replaced with a class looking more at how the USA rose to become one of the world's superpowers, surpassing the European powers.
3. To make the classes less factual, I would like to include more trivia and videos so that the students learn in a more stimulating environment.