

Integrating Student Research into Course Content

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Author Biography

Dr. Glenda Swan is an Associate Professor of Art History at Valdosta State University. Dr. Swan received her bachelor's degree in Classical Art and Archaeology at the University of Texas at Austin and her master's degree and doctorate at Princeton University in the Program in the Ancient World. In addition to her discipline specific research into the use of visual narratives of mythology at Pompeii, she is actively engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Dr. Swan is also dedicated to promoting student research, having served on the Undergraduate Research Council at VSU for the past eight years.

Research is crucial to advanced study and there is ample evidence of its effectiveness as a high impact practice. Rather than simply assign undergraduates a stand-alone research paper read only by the professor, I sought approaches to get students educated and invested in the process of academic discovery and dissemination.

When students' own research is incorporated into both the content and ongoing activities of a course, more students engage meaningfully and effectively in research preparation. This not only improves their skills in research methods, but also leads to more success in the analysis and communication of that research, both within as well as beyond the walls of our classroom.

Paradigms for undertaking and presenting research are integrated into course activities of all my upper-division art history courses. Student progress is periodically assessed over the course of the semester, which provides me with multiple opportunities to supply targeted formative feedback. Students also help improve the research of others as peer-reviewers and respondents, creating a community of researchers.

I integrate student research into the content by testing selected examples of student research on each course's final exam. This holds the entire class responsible for the content presented by their peers, which makes them stakeholders in the clear presentation of research and motivates their engagement.

Here is an outline of this approach, along with some examples:

- Identify a significant aspect of the course content that can be effectively researched by students and designate substantial time in the schedule for the students to present it. Students can address material normally presented in the course or expand on existing course content. I prefer the latter, asking students to discover novel relationships between our ancient course content and modern art.
- Decide on the percentage value of the assessments associated with the research outcomes you want to employ. My own typical assessments and grade values are as follows: paper 15%; presentation 10%; final exam 20%; and 20% for participation activities. These participation activities typically involve submissions about every three weeks, although all deadlines are clearly listed in the syllabus so that students can see how their research is expected to progress over the semester.
- Determine what presentations, preparatory materials, and peer activities related to research activities will be incorporated and how each will be assessed.
 - Models can be provided for students over the course of the semester. I often assign myself a topic to research and then regularly provide quick reports in class about my progress,

- which I then post to our learning management system as exempla for the students' own upcoming submissions.
- Short lessons can be delivered to align with the project activities currently being undertaken by students. This includes mini presentations, such as how to construct a useful outline, as well as “quick tips” on targeted issues, such as how to craft an engrossing first sentence. I do not typically assess any of these activities. However, when I had library staff run a session in a computer lab about using online databases to find academic sources, I had students upload their sources at the end of the session as a participation activity.
 - Students can be required to submit a variety of preparatory materials, such as topic proposals, sources, annotated bibliographies, thesis statements, outlines, and rough drafts. I prefer formative to summative feedback on these activities and will simply assess a penalty to the participation grade of students who do not meet the essential requirements of a particular submission. For example, if the activity is to submit five academic sources related to their topic, I reduce the participation grade by five points of any student who does not submit by the deadline or whose submitted sources do not meet the number, quality, or content required. Ultimately, it remains critical to evaluate the impact of the assessment method carefully to make sure that these developmental activities do not exert an undue influence on students' grades.
 - Practice on project skills – such as proper citation, article analysis, peer review, short presentations, etc. – can sometimes be incorporated into previously planned course activities, so the assessment of that skill can simply be added to the existing rubric.
 - Peer activities help the students learn from one another and, for some students, provide additional motivation. For example, I make submitting and reviewing rough drafts part of a single participation activity on a discussion board and, to help guide effective feedback, provide templates for evaluators. I have also found that assigning students as respondents to student research presentations has not only led to more student participation, but also to more compelling questions, especially since I started awarding extra points for posing exceptionally effective questions.

When I first instituted this approach, not only did average paper and presentation grades increase, but those activities were more substantial and effectively supported. Average scores on the participation grade decreased, mainly because some students accrued some significant penalties for not submitting evidence of their progress consistently. However, the average score on the final exam improved. Altogether, this led to an overall increase in course averages, although the percentage value and manner of assessment of these activities remains a very important aspect to consider.

Student opinions of instruction have frequently mentioned not only how useful the provided research and presentation materials were, but also how those materials helped them connect more meaningfully with the course. My focus on involving students in the material presented in the course was also regularly noted as a strength. In the words of one student, *“I have never had another professor involve their students so deeply into their course and I truly believe this is one of the best ways to help students grow.”*

The most rewarding aspect of this undertaking has been having more students produce work that has been outstanding enough to be recommended for inclusion in an undergraduate research symposium. Indeed, sharing well-supported analysis with other interested parties outside of our classroom represents a natural extension of the motivation behind this course design.