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Student Agency and the Teaching for Understanding Framework: A Course Redesign

In an effort to increase deep learning and student engagement in Spanish 350: Hispanic Culture and Civilization, two students and I have recently completed a redesign of the course. Our anchor points for this redesign were Teaching for Understanding, edited by Martha Stone Wiske, and "Focus on Learning, Transform Teaching," by Maryellen Weimer.

The Teaching for Understanding framework offers powerful tools for focusing instructional time and student attention on deep learning. The four elements of the framework are (1) Generative Topics, (2) Understanding Goals, (3) Performances of Understanding, and (4) Ongoing Assessment.

Our understanding goal—How has Hispanic identity and culture been shaped by syncretism?—is the key to this redesign. Every element of the course has been prepared to lead to progressively richer and deeper responses to this essential question. Students will work toward that understanding through a set of required performances of understanding and through another set of assessments from which they will choose the two that interest them most.

Our second anchor, the importance of honoring student agency in the classroom, led several years ago to experimentation with student choice and options. This redesigned version of Spanish 350 enhances the range of options available to students in an effort to better address Weimer's simple challenge: "Teaching should support student agency."

My question is if this redesign will lead to significantly improved learning outcomes. For benchmarking purposes, I will gather data this semester from across the Spanish curriculum using two assessments. The first assessment is a survey based on Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Effective Practice in Undergraduate Education" (1987). The second is also a survey, this one based on Biggs, Kember and Leung's "Revised Two-Factor Study Process Questionnaire: R-SPQ-2F" (2001). The third assessment is an exit survey that students currently enrolled in the redesigned course complete at the end of the semester. I will use these assessments again during the summer and fall in an attempt to identify improvements.

I will present an overview of the redesign project and explore assessment results from the summer and fall semesters of 2007.

References:

Weimer, Maryellen. "Focus on Learning, Transform Teaching." *Change* 35.5 (2003): 48-54.

Wiske, Martha Stone, ed. *Teaching for Understanding: Linking Research with Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

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