Writing Development Initiative
GGR111: Human Geography

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**Final Report**

 ***Course Description***

GGR111: Human Geography is the first year, introductory course for human geography. It has a cap of around 300 students and is comprised of predominately first year students, the majority of whom are taking the course as an elective. About a quarter of the class are upper-year students who are taking the course to fulfill requirements after transferring into a Geography major or minor. This year the course was taught predominately asynchronously, with students moving through modules and assignments mostly on their own.

***WDI Activities and Learning Outcomes***

This was the fourth year we implemented a series of four writing assignments in GGR111 based on a 'writing to learn' model of writing development. Students were asked to write discussion board posts that connected examples from the media and/or their own lives to course content. They were then asked to respond to two other students' posts. They were assigned to groups of 6-10 students for this assignment so that they could develop relationships with a small group of students throughout the course.

To fulfill the assignment, the discussion post most:1) identify and define the concept from class being discussed, 2) briefly describe the example being discussed, and 3) show how the concept connects to the example. During the tutorial following the original discussion board post, the TAs led discussions on the discussion board topics. Following these discussions, students were asked to respond to at least 2 other student responses in their designated group. To fulfill this aspect of the assignment, students had to discuss what aspect of the original post they found interesting/challenging and why.

The student learning outcomes for this assignment were:

1. Critically analyze real world examples of interest to the student using geographic tools and concepts;
2. Develop small communities of practice with other students in the course.

These learning outcomes supported the following learning outcomes for the course:

1. Demonstrate how the use of core geographic concepts such as place, scale, and landscape can help in identifying and analyzing spatial patterns and processes;
2. Connect the study of human geography to other fields to appraise the interdisciplinary potential of socio-spatial analysis;
3. Develop research and communication skills applicable beyond this course, including critical reading, effective writing, and interpersonal communication.

In summary, this writing assignment was designed to allow students to explore points of connection between their own experiences and the examples and concepts discussed in class. It will also provide a space for conversation with others to expose students to additional examples and analyses.

***Logistics***

To obtain full marks, students had to complete three of the four discussion board assignments. If they completed all four, only the top three were counted. The discussion board writing assignments were introduced during online lecturettes and in student hour discussions (open office hours). Detailed instructions were posted on Quercus for student reference. During each of the four lectures that provided the foundation for the discussion board posts, I discussed possible concepts and suggested examples of how to approach the topic. Although there was not extensive discussion in class (due to the asynchronous nature of the course), I believe there was enough to introduce the idea and provide some direction.

Teaching Assistants were responsible for monitoring the discussion boards, marking posts, and contributing to active conversations. I provided them with a 1-hour training the week of the first discussion post. We did some moderated marking and discussed ways to contribute to discussion post conversations within each on-line group in order to encourage critical thinking and engagement. Towards this end, they used a rubric for quick individual marking and then provided general feedback to the entire discussion board group (unless there was a particular concern regarding a student’s entry).

***WDI Evaluation Summary***

For the past few years, we have seen a trend where the writing for the first assignment was stronger than for the second submission. Two years ago, I thought this was because of a lack of clarity regarding the concepts for the second submission. I adjusted that last year, but we still saw a reduction in writing clarity for the second submission. This year we tried to address this by adjusted when we did the assessment. While previously we had assessed the first and last discussion post, this year we assessed the first and third – as the fourth discussion post was often done in a rushed fashion by students who were behind in their assignments. The assessment shows that this adjustment allowed the impact of the intervention to become more evident:

The assessment results for the GGR111 pre samples indicate that student writing started off strong in several areas of the rubric. Many of the pre samples show students organizing their writing into paragraphs with topic sentences, and the writing itself is generally clear, accessible to a general audience, and academic in tone. The main example or event is usually described in the initial paragraph and the course concept defined in a separate paragraph or at the beginning of an analytical paragraph. There are very few instances of pre samples simply repeating the material from the descriptive paragraph in the analytical paragraph. Even if the analysis itself could be improved, most pre samples show students attempting to use the course concept to analyze and expand on the example or event. For these reasons many of the pre samples received high scores in these areas.

At the same time, the results for the post samples show clear improvements in the same and other areas of the rubric. For example, in different post samples, especially in the C-D range, topic sentences are more focused and better reflect the paragraph’s content, and issues with academic tone, like verb contractions and colloquialisms, appear less frequently. Even more notable are cases where the example or event is more relevant to the course concept and/or there are clearer connections between the descriptive and analytical paragraphs.

Based on this assessment, I feel confident moving forward with this discussion post assignment.

***Lessons Learned***

The following changes from last year all proved successful and will continue to be implemented:

1. Changing concept options for analysis.
2. Increase weight for the assignments.
3. Increased writing instruction.
4. Increased writing support.

The one major concern that was raised this year was the amount of time allocated to the Teaching Assistants to meaningfully engage with the discussion posts. This is something I would like to address in the future.

***Future Directions***

If funded again, I would like to continue to run this project in its current manifestation but with increased hours for Teaching Assistants.

The original **budget** was:

* Training with Instructor: 1 hour x 6 TAs = 6 hours
* Discussion post marking: 3min x 3 assignments\* x 285 students = 42.75 hours
* Discussion board feedback: 3.75min x 3 assignments\* x 285 students = 53.44 hours
* Total Hours Requested: 102.19

\* The marking load is equivalent to 3 assignments even though there are 4 offered because many students opt out of completing the fourth discussion board.

The revised **budget** would be:

* Training with Instructor: 1 hour x 6 TAs = 6 hours
* Discussion post marking: 4min x 3 assignments\* x 285 students = 57 hours
* Discussion board feedback: 4min x 3 assignments\* x 285 students = 57 hours
* Total Hours Requested: 114

\* The marking load is equivalent to 3 assignments even though there are 4 offered because many students opt out of completing the fourth discussion board.