

American History to 1877 (HIST 2111) Course Redesign at Georgia Highlands College

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For many instructors, the idea of using course redesign to improve student success may sound both appealing and intimidating. In many cases, it is difficult to know where to start or what to expect. This article explores how a team of historians at Georgia Highlands College (GHC) used a multifaceted approach to course redesign that included the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and a variety of course activities to noticeably reduce DFWI rates in American History survey courses. This article suggests that instructors who take an all-around student-centered approach to course redesign can make a real difference.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Prior to the implementation of the course redesign at Georgia Highlands College (GHC) for HIST 2111 in the Fall semester of 2017, the course had DFWI rates that ranged between 27%-33%. State law in Georgia mandates that students who attend a public institution successfully complete one American History survey course in order to graduate.

Typically, students take either HIST 2111 [American History to 1877] or HIST 2112 [American History since 1877] to fulfill this requirement. During the 2015-2016 academic year alone, a total of 2,040 students across 68 sections of classes took one of these American History courses at GHC, with slightly more students taking HIST 2111 over HIST 2112. However, the high DFWI rates for HIST 2111 effectively made it a drag on efforts to improve retention and graduation rates. Since GHC is an access institution that predominantly serves more vulnerable populations such as students who are the first in their family to attend college, non-traditional students, lower income students, and minoritized students, retention and graduation is crucial to the college's mission to provide a low-cost, quality college education to as many people as possible in the northwest Georgia region.

Moreover, because of budget constraints, GHC relies heavily on adjunct instructors. As adjunct instructors are often hired shortly before the beginning of each semester, they are forced to scramble to secure a copy of the textbook and put together materials for the class. Finally, the textbook that was assigned to adjunct faculty for American History surveys (Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!*) was priced at \$65.00. While Foner's textbook is cheaper than many comparable history textbooks, it was even too expensive for many GHC students. As a result, many instructors reported that students in HIST 2111 frequently went without a textbook for some or even all of the semester. These challenges combined to make HIST 2111 a "bottleneck course" that inhibited student success. In Spring 2017, a team of four historians at GHC began a 2.5-year process to redesign the course to mitigate these problems.

METHODS

The HIST 2111 course redesign team decided to focus on five main areas for improvement. First, we identified a high-quality, free online textbook called *The American Yawp* to replace the Foner textbook. We supplemented this with a host of new teaching materials, such as quizzes, essay questions, review questions, primary source documents, and a video glossary.

Second, we created and implemented a variety of activities in our courses, including:

- Note-taking pairs - A structured activity in which students take notes on a brief discussion, reading, or lecture and then compare those notes--and their note-taking strategies--with a neighbor and then share helpful strategies with the class.
- Exam wrappers - A metacognitive activity in which students answer guided questions that help them analyze their preparation for and performance on a summative assessment. The goal is to get them to identify connections between the content, learning activities, and assessment, so that they can better prepare for future exams.
- Quote-integration exercises - These are structured activities designed to help students use the “ICE Method” quote integration, in which use of a direct quotation begins with an introduction (who said it and in what context), then cites the quote (using the required citation format), and finally explains the significance of the quote for their argument.

All of the approaches above were used to provide underprepared students with more tools for success.

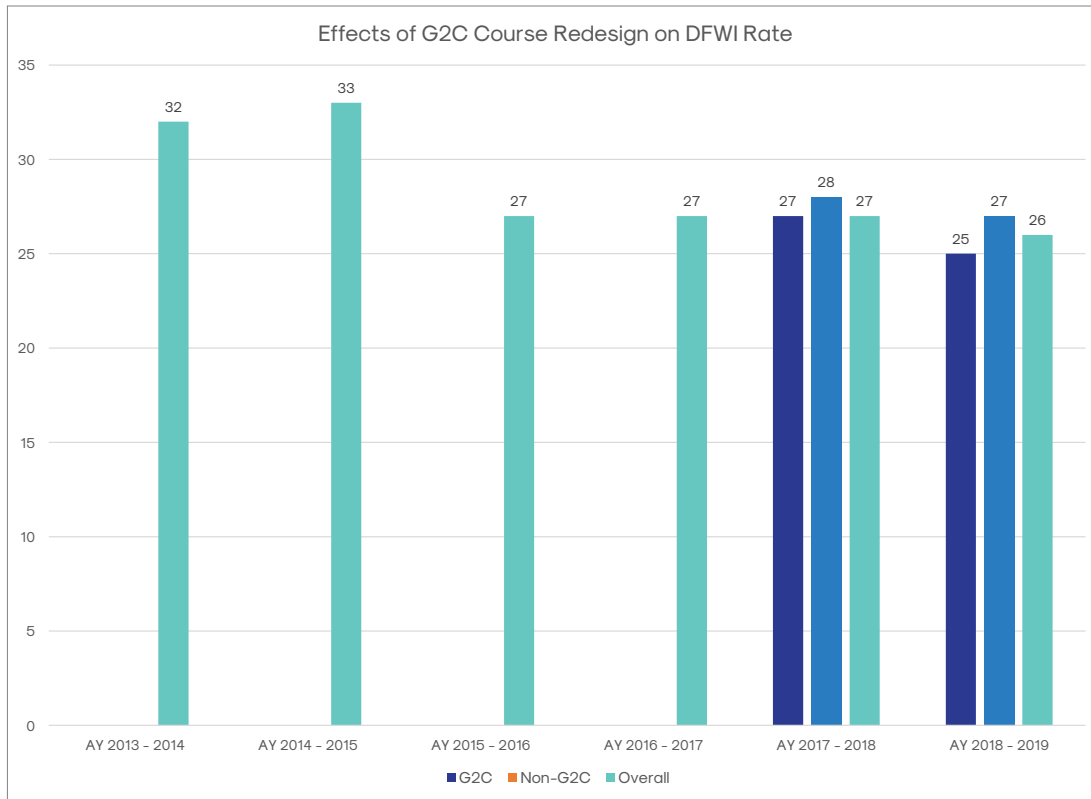
Third, we instituted an early warning policy that included multiple reporting points and meaningful emails to help students identify steps they could take to improve their performance. Next, we created an Adjunct Liaison position, which served to connect our part-time faculty to our textbook OER resources and classroom activities. We also provided course at-a- glance worksheets detailing the basics of each course. This is an especially useful resource for new instructors and academic advisors. Finally, we implemented a new curriculum based on historical thinking skills and centered around active learning techniques such as think-pair-share activities and primary source-based analysis assignments. We further redesigned our assessment mechanism to better reflect this focus on historical thinking, rather than content memorization. Finally, to disseminate the new material and gain “buy-in” from other faculty members, we facilitated annual history adjunct faculty training sessions.

OUTCOMES

Even allowing for differences in pedagogical strategies and the variety of assignments given in history classrooms at GHC, the interventions implemented in HIST 2111 for the Gateways to Completion project at GHC yielded positive results on student success. History courses at GHC share common student learning outcomes and a common assessment mechanism to measure those outcomes, but the techniques used by individual instructors differ from section to section. However, by the end of the second year of implementation, the DFWI rate in G2C-redesigned sections improved by 2% from the beginning of the project, moving from 27% to 25%. Further, this new 25% DFWI rate reflected an improvement of 8% from its high of 33% in 2014-2015.

Figure 1

Effects of G2C Course Design on DFWI Rates in HIST 2111



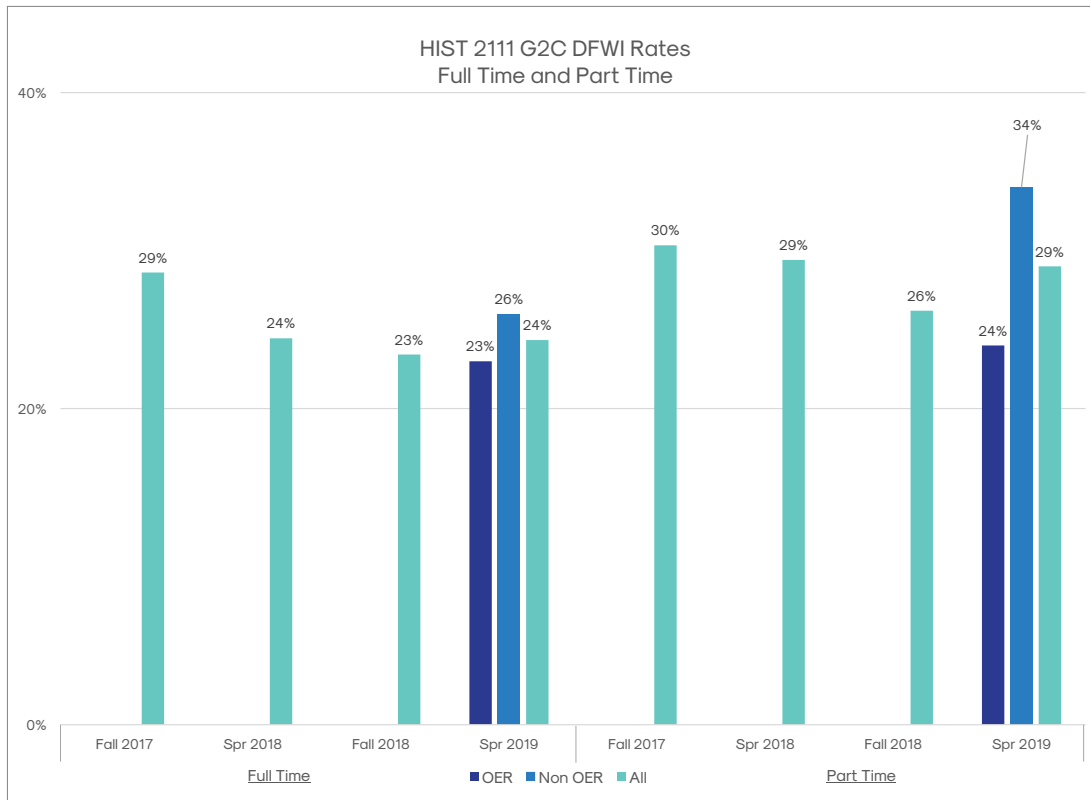
While the overall results were thus encouraging, the revision team identified three specific interventions that seemed to have an outsized impact on student learning outcomes:

1. The most effective intervention in our course redesign was the replacement of a relatively expensive textbook, which many students opted not to purchase, with OERs. By Spring 2019, sections of HIST 2111 using *The American Yawp* (OER) demonstrated considerably lower DFWI rates than those using the traditional textbook. For full-time students, the difference was 3%, with a 23% DFWI rate for those courses using OERs and a 26% DFWI rate for those using a traditional textbook.

For part-time students, the difference was even greater. While the DFWI for part-time students in sections using OERs (24%), was consistent with that of full-time students (23%), there was a much larger difference within the part-time-student cohort, since part-time students in sections using a traditional textbook had a DFWI rate of 34%. This suggests that use of affordable learning materials can play an invaluable role in part-time student success, particularly in institutions with a significant number of low-income students.

Figure 2

Comparison of HIST 2111 DFWI Rates for Full- and Part-Time Students



2. The second effective intervention noted in this revision process was the use of exam wrappers. Students in the redesigned sections were asked to complete exam wrappers after reviewing their first exam. These assignments required students to evaluate both their preparation for and their performance on the aforementioned exam, with the aim of helping them identify which of their learning strategies were helpful and which were not. They were further provided with suggestions for improvement in preparing for exam 2. Students who completed the exam wrapper showed a 10.2% improvement on their second exam, compared to a 2.2% decrease for those who did not complete the exam wrapper (see the table below). This suggests that taking the time to help students reflect on their learning can improve student outcomes.

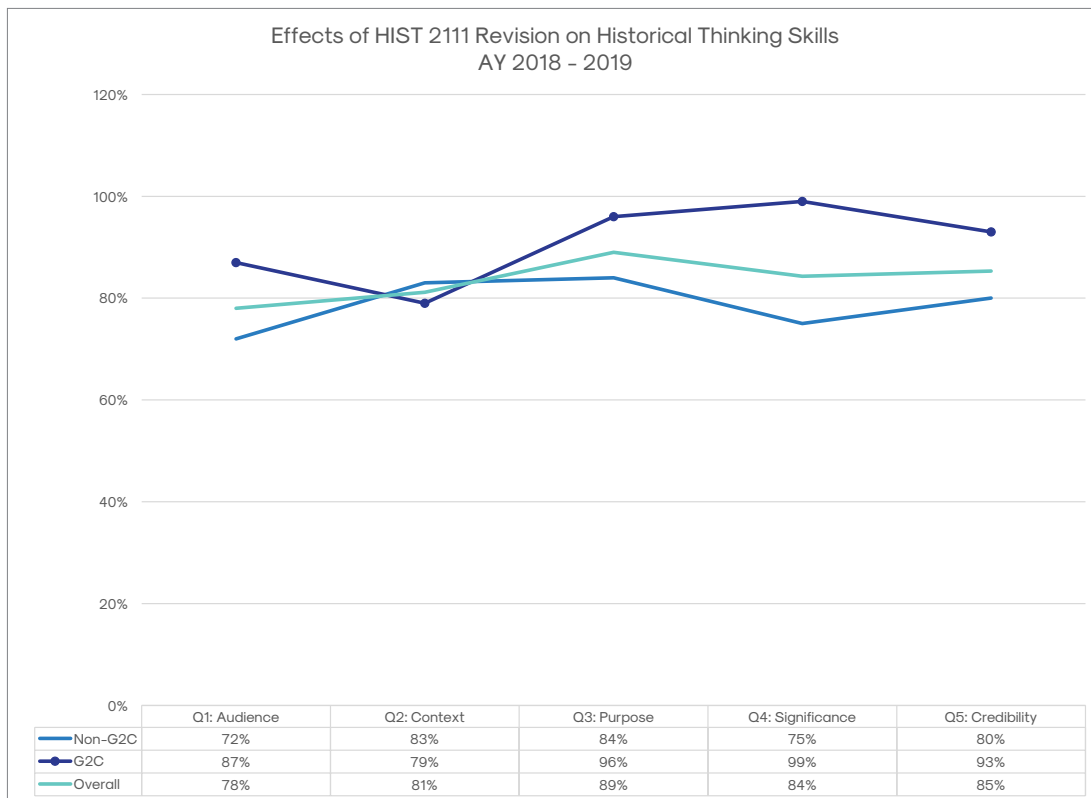
Table 1

Comparison of Average Test Scores

AY 2018 - 2019	Average Grade on Test 1	Average Grade on Test 2	Average Percent Improvement
Students who completed exam wrapper (n=48)	66.7	73.5	10.2%
Students who did not complete exam wrapper (n=31)	76.3	74.06	-2.2%
All students who took both exams 1 & 2 (n=79)	70.5	73.72	4.5%

3. Finally, redesigned sections showed significant improvement in students' historical thinking skills as measured by a newly designed assessment. In this universal assessment, students were provided an excerpt from a primary source and then asked to identify the audience, context, purpose, significance, and credibility of the source via multiple-choice questions. As a result of targeted active learning strategies spread across the semester, HIST 2111 was the only one of six survey-level courses to meet **both** the primary goal (student average of 70% on the 5-question quiz) **and** the secondary goal (70% of students answering each of the 5 questions correctly). Students in G2C-redesigned courses also outperformed students in non-revised sections in all but one category of analysis, indicating that the multiple targeted interventions (think-pair-share, quick quizzes, I do/we do/you do practice activities) were successful in improving students' historical thinking skills.

Figure 3
Effects of HIST 2111 Revision on Historical Thinking Skills (2018-19)



PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

Based on the success that we experienced in this course redesign, the history team at Georgia Highlands College has opted to focus on two areas for sustainability and growth. First, we have continued to increase the number of sections of HIST 2111 using the OER. As of Spring 2021, 79% of HIST 2111 sections (15/19) were using The American Yawp and accompanying learning material. To facilitate this transition, the history team created a master course in GHC's learning management system that can be copied over to individual courses and then modified to suit a particular teaching style. The master course includes not only the textbook links but also a text bank, videos, sample graded assignments, and pedagogical material that emphasizes active learning techniques, historical thinking skills, and metacognition.

To expand this work, the team also created a similar master course for HIST 2112 (American History since 1877), including the OER, graded assessments, and pedagogical resources. Supporting videos are in development now. As of Spring 2021, 76% of HIST 2112 sections (13/17) were using the OER material. Having these resources available to all faculty (including part-time instructors hired at the last minute) makes the most successful interventions more readily available to students.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our successful redesign of HIST 2111 demonstrates three central themes for student success in history gateway courses: flexibility, guided reflection, and repeated opportunities for mastery. We are using these lessons to guide our current revision of the world history courses. Because we could not find an existing OER that suited our methodological approach, we opted instead to create a video textbook, which allowed us to include even more flexibility, reflection, and opportunity in the course design. The video textbook includes more than 150 video lectures, spanning human history, organized into a website using the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Each video was closed-captioned, transcribed, and structured with key terms and review questions to help guide students' viewing. The transcripts were then edited for clarity, illustrated using open-access images, and combined into a PDF mini-textbook; thus, whether students watch the videos or read the mini-textbook, their access to the information is the same. By making what are traditionally seen as accommodations available to all students, we can remove both cost and stigma as obstacles to student success. The video textbook and mini textbook have been inserted into a master course on the college's learning management system, complete with a test bank, practice quizzes, and possible assessments. The next step is to create pedagogical materials that help instructors use active-learning techniques to engage students in historical thinking. This redesign of the world history sequence is funded by an Affordable Learning Georgia grant, and as such, materials will be shared under a CC-BY license, thereby making them available to a broad public