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Aplia™ Engages History Students in Analyzing Lessons from the Past

Verdis Robinson is passionate about history and African-American studies, so it's no surprise that he holds a Master's Degree in each of them. Since 2006, Verdis has also been passionate about teaching these subjects at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, New York. As an instructor for MCC's new Diversity and Community Studies degree program, Verdis is always looking for ways to improve and innovate in the classroom, and the Aplia™ online learning solution is one of his newest finds for his American History course. Verdis reviewed other online history learning resources and found Aplia to be easier to use and more helpful to instructors and students. "Aplia allows me to meet course goals by engaging students in their learning, enhancing their critical thinking skills, and easily assessing those skills," he says.

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Verdis' course is taught face-to-face in two 80-minute lectures each week. Most students are fulfilling a social science elective requirement and "are not there for the love of American history," he says. They represent a range of ages, races, and ethnicities, with many in their mid to late twenties. Preparedness and reading skill levels are all over the map.

THE CHALLENGES

The ever present challenge of engaging students doesn't faze Verdis. "I walk the room. I ask questions on top of questions to get students involved and to get to the point of discussion," he says. He also uses Microsoft® PowerPoint® slides and videos. But once students leave, Verdis isn't always available to encourage or assist them, and he says they can be less than adept at managing their time.

Assessment of critical thinking skills typically requires considerable instructor effort. Before Aplia, Verdis developed and graded written assignments based on primary sources. He also created his own exams. He teaches as many as seven courses each term, so was stretched thin.

THE RESULTS

Aplia prompts history students to contextualize and analyze information. Exercises include primary source-based activities and interactive maps, and are written by historians who have taught undergraduates. Map, essay, and critical thinking tutorials guide students through the process of interpreting information and effectively communicating their ideas within the framework of the discipline.

"Aplia is very valuable in that it requires students to do much more than memorize facts and dates," says Verdis. "Activities test reading comprehension and critical thinking by asking students to consider context, interpret what they read, and draw conclusions. Students can't rush through assignments without reading the text, and they can't simply look up the answers in the text. They have to engage in the material."

continued



CHALLENGES

- **Disinterested American History students lack motivation** to engage with the course material.
- **Students need extra help and practice outside of class** to develop important critical thinking skills.
- **Assessment of critical thinking skills** is a time-intensive task that can be a burden to busy instructors.

SOLUTIONS

- Aplia for Integrated Reading and Writing
- Norton, Mary Beth, Carol Sheriff, David W. Blight, Howard P. Chudacoff, Fredrik Logevall, & Beth Bailey, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Brief Edition, Volume 1*

RESULTS

- **Weekly assignment deadlines hold students accountable**, increase their engagement, and assure that they come to class prepared. Detailed feedback reinforces learning.
- **Students think analytically, draw conclusions, and go beyond memorizing historical facts** with Aplia's interactive exercises. Tutorials offer guidance in interpreting and communicating information.
- **Aplia effectively assesses critical thinking** with exercises that prompt students to contextualize and analyze information. **Auto-graded assignments save instructors time** creating/grading assignments and answering questions in class. Students' familiarity with text material frees instructors to use class time for other topics and activities that enhance learning.

“Our conversations are not about ‘2+2=4’ but rather ‘why does 2+2=4?’ Students are asking questions, and the Aplia assignments help spur that interest and deeper level of thinking.”

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With Aplia, Verdis’ students come to class prepared. They have to complete their Aplia assignments on time because assignments are not available to them after the due date. “Aplia teaches students to take initiative and take control of their own learning,” says Verdis.

In addition, class discussions are more substantive than they were in the past. “Our conversations are not about ‘2+2=4’ but rather ‘why does 2+2=4?’ Students are asking questions, and the Aplia assignments help spur that interest and deeper level of thinking,” says Verdis. “I also have more freedom in lectures because students already know the material. I can go focus on my own research or on topics that need more explanation, better helping students get the whole picture of American history.”

Aplia’s instant feedback benefits students and saves instructors time otherwise spent grading assignments or answering questions in class. “Students work on their own time and can click on a button and see an explanation that helps them understand why their answer is right or wrong. The feedback is excellent, and students like it. I would love to give that type of feedback myself on every test, but I just don’t have the time,” says Verdis. “Aplia allows me to evaluate students’ critical thinking skills in a way that used to be more time consuming. This semester Aplia is taking the place of exams because it does better at assessing students than my previous tests.” Grades are automatically recorded and Verdis can monitor class and individual student performance on a topic-by-topic basis.

Verdis has embraced the use of technology in learning, in part as a result of observing his students. “Students come to class with iPhones®, iPads®, and laptops,” he says. “I think everyone is on Facebook and sometimes even during class. They ‘live’ online, so it makes sense to adopt tools that allow them to learn online.”

Says Verdis, “Aplia allows students to get more out of a history course than just putting facts, dates, and places in their short term memory and then forgetting about them. It allows students to understand the significance of historical events, the significance of the people involved, and why we’re studying them in the first place. Online learning is going to increase and get even more innovative, and I think that Aplia is at the forefront of that innovation.”

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