

On Teaching “Muslims and Identity in Europe”

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After teaching my ASEM course, Muslims and Identity in Europe, I find the challenge to be incorporating instructional time for writing. Writing is central to the ASEM but at the same time marginal. The ASEM is design for nonmajors, which means that some students may not have prior knowledge of certain concepts of social phenomena, like ethnicity and nationalism, which are explored in my course. Both concepts are complicated and each can be a course in itself, leaving little time for writing instruction. As part of the ASEM requirements, I engage the course topic “from multiple perspectives.” Teaching complex social concepts to nonmajors from different theoretical views leaves little time for writing instruction. I discuss the challenges of incorporating instructional writing in the ASEM and summarize lessons learned from teaching an ASEM course for four quarters. I end with an outline of strategies for incorporating instructional time for writing.

The ASEM overview requires that “students demonstrate their ability to integrate different perspectives and synthesize diverse ideas through intensive writing on that topic.” This requirement actually encompasses two objectives: learning the topic and writing. Having students demonstrate knowledge through

written assignments requires the instructor to assess both students’ comprehension of the topic and students’ writing. With regard to the writing component, the ASEM requires the instructor to assign “some instructional time devoted to writing... [and] to provide some minimal strategies that nonetheless can be very useful to students.” How much instructional time to allocate is open and left to the discretion of the instructor as indicated in the “possible teaching practices” listed in the Features of Writing in ASEM. The practices vary from a 10-15 minute talk about a writing assignment to a 45-minute workshop run by the staff of the Writing Center. The openness of instructional time for writing reflect the uncertainty of the abilities and skills of students each course. How can I incorporate writing more in the ASEM? Although the topic of the course remains central, I have tried to bring writing from the margins.

The first lesson is to assign a short writing exercise within the first week of the course. Previously, I had students submitting a five to seven page reaction paper to Eriksen’s *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (2010), at the end of the third week of the quarter. For the reaction paper, students are asked to summarize the anthropological approaches to ethnicity,

distinguish between ethnicity and nationalism, and present their viewpoints on the different theories using examples to support their positions. Rather than having student comment on the entire text, which takes three weeks to cover, having students respond to specific topics or sections in two to three pages each of the weeks covering the text has proven to be more effective. At the end of the first three weeks, students write an equivalent amount of pages. A short writing assignment in the first week of the course enabled me to assess the writing of the students and to determine the need for writing instruction. Why not have students respond to questions on discussion forums or create blogs? I have found that students are more casual with their writing within these genres. As formal writing assignment, students can later use their reaction papers as part of their theoretical framework for their research paper due at the end of the quarter.

The second lesson involves giving students comprehensive feedback on their writing assignments. Giving detailed comments on writing assignments is a method of providing instruction that does not consume valuable classroom time. The key to providing feedback is to give extensive comments on a section of the student's paper with the understanding the problems in the selected section are

found throughout the paper. I gained this insight from a workshop entitled "Responding to Writing While Saving Some Weekend," led by Doug Hesse. Detailed feedback works best when accompanied by additional instruction from a writing handbook or manual. In my comments, I refer students to the section of the handbook that deals with the specific issue or problem in their writing. Students can then use the handbook to review the shortcomings in their writing. Depending on their individual motivation, students can complete the practice exercises in the handbook to improve their writing skills. Moreover, students can use the handbook as a reference tool for writing. The writing handbook is also helpful to students, especially international students, who may have problems with grammar. In the instructional time devoted to writing, I focus on stylistic and process issues rather than grammar as the course is an advanced seminar and most students have a proficient understanding of grammar.

A third lesson is to take full advantage of the reading texts as both expositions of the subject matter and models for writing instruction. As examples of writing, the assigned texts for the course represent various genres. Although students are not writing in of the genres represented, they are exposed to them.

