Tag, That’s It!: Using Blogs for Creative Research, Applied Critical Thinking and Better Student Writing

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Concrete Obstacles to Good Student Writing in Intermediate and Advanced Courses:

1. **Process without (unneeded) suffering:**
   
   How can I get them excited about going through the process of researching, writing and, importantly, re-writing?

2. **Expanding the frame:**
   
   How can I get them to think critically about core concepts and apply them to examples and phenomena they see outside the main course texts?

3. **The “nose-to-tail” concept:**
   
   Is there knowledge being generated in my classroom that is currently “going to waste”? Can I capture this and use it to better my students’ outcomes?

One Solution developed for SPAN S312: Written Composition in Spanish: **TAGS**! (labels on blog posts)

SPAN S312 is a course designed to provide **grammar review** and to practice key writing skills in the cultural context of the Spanish-speaking world. I’ve designed the course to do this by examining two major political, economic and social phenomena that have deeply affected (and continue to affect) culture in Latin America and Spain: the inheritance of authoritarian military dictatorships and the problems and promise of globalization for these regions. After establishing key concepts and historical contexts in the first part of the course, we flesh out their effects in various cultural manifestations: immigration, music, sports and the environment.

Students write **short, formal essays on assigned topics** throughout the semester analyzing a series of films we watch to walk through these issues. However, their **research papers, which are submitted at the end of the semester, are developed in conversation with the class through a collective class blog**.

I assign the first topic, in which students explore dictatorship or armed conflicts in one of the Spanish-speaking countries **not studied** in class. When students post their 2-3 paragraph submission on the blog, they also assign their post “**tags**,” or labels, that describe the main topics the post develops. Those in the Web 2.0 field call this “**folksonomy.**”

The circled items are terms given in the assignment. The underlined words are categories assigned by the student who wrote the post. These new categories open up lines of inquiry and research that this or another student could pursue.
These tags appear collated in a word cloud on the right hand side of the blog.

In the second post, students choose 1-2 of these tags with the key concepts “globalization” and “neoliberalism” to search in databases for news articles, academic studies, YouTube videos, Twitter conversations, etc. in order to apply the concepts studied in class to areas of the Spanish-speaking world not studied in class.

A post on McDonald's adaptation to local cuisine in Mexico and Chile. (IPFW, Spring 2013)

A post on proposals to decriminalize drugs in Latin America as a strategy to combat drug trafficking. (University of Richmond, Spring 2011)

In the third and fourth posts, students “try on” new topics by combining freely from the word/concept cloud, additional areas covered (immigration, music, sports, the environment) and other areas that might interest them so as to expand the main concepts of the course (dictatorship, armed conflict, globalization, neoliberalism).

A post on the economy of pirated high-end fashion in Guatemala. (University of Richmond, Spring 2011)

A post on Afro-Latino identity in the United States and Latin America. (IPFW, Spring 2012)

The final blog post develops an additional aspect of the one blog post they’ve chosen to develop into a research paper. Students then rework these two posts into a research paper, refining research questions, formulating a thesis, establishing an outline, researching for more sources, etc.

Additional resources:
Description of blog assignment, Rubric and response sheet (used in class for discussing blog posts): http://bit.ly/1bS6Lc9
Brief List of Resources for further reading on Folksonomy, Tagging and Writing: http://bit.ly/1aqLCYw