GAC CTL FELLOWS REPORT

In fall 2014, I taught AMST 285 Born in Blood: Violence and the Making of America for the first time. As a CTL fellow, I had three goals for the course: 1) To create a successful hybrid of the traditional large lecture course in the humanities. 2) To employ a rigorous weekly assessment model based on short answer questions (in place of the more usual 3-5 page essay question). 3) To try out pre-testing, which is to assess students on subjects they have yet to learn. In theory, the pre-test protocol better prepares students for new material—their brains have been primed to scout out the most relevant details within a large, unfamiliar body of knowledge they are to encounter.

With the help of an extremely bright teaching assistant I was able to successfully bridge the gap between professor and student that often plagues the large lecture course. The class met on Mondays in lecture format and on Wednesdays it was split into two separate seminar sections. The professor and TA headed the individual seminar groups and met once a week to organize the questions and learning activities we would engage in each week’s seminar sessions. The seminar format allowed for assessment of the class reading assignments, which often are ignored in large seminars. In addition, I was able to create a more personable teaching relationship with the students thanks to the reduced class size of 25 students per seminar section (the TA and professor swapped seminar sections each week to allow all students equal exposure to both teachers). The hybridization of the large lecture format was a success.

The rigorous assessment model, which was built on weekly quizzes, five exams (one for each major section), and a comprehensive final exam, was received with muted enthusiasm from the students. The weekly quizzes given immediately after each lecture served as reinforcement of the material just presented. But at the same time, the weekly quizzes changed the classroom environment from a more relaxed setting to a crazed, note-taking whirlwind. Students often focused more on transcription than on listening and asking questions. While the quizzes served as excellent study guides for the exams, their influence on the class environment was clearly a negative influence.

The pre-test method, which was employed on two occasions, proved an extraordinary success. After a pre-test, students found the lecture material far more accessible, far more interesting, and far easier to engage with on an intellectual level—they asked many more questions!

Looking ahead, I will use pre-testing for each major section in the class. This will, by and large, replace the weekly quizzes on the lecture material. Many thanks to my CTL colleagues who helped me to think through this course and its operation during the 2014-15 academic year.