Close Reading: Engaging and Empowering History Students Through Document Analysis on ePortfolio

Jordi Getman-Eraso and Kate Culkin
Bronx Community College

This article examines the intersection of the scholarship on ePortfolio and history pedagogy through an analysis of the success of the integration of Digication's Conversations feature into history courses at Bronx Community College (BCC). History professors at BCC have used the feature, which allows people to highlight and comment on text and respond to comments, to have students contribute to group analyses of primary source documents. This exercise combines the active learning, reflection, metacognition, and integrative learning recommended in both bodies of scholarship. The article includes quantitative and qualitative analyses of student success in hybrid courses that include Conversations, with the results suggesting ePortfolio use can intensify the development of historical thinking.

Scant ePortfolio scholarship has focused specifically on the discipline of history, but the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) history dovetails closely with the scholarship on and philosophy of ePortfolio. Both stress the importance of moving away from memorization and rote repetition to focus on active learning, reflection, and analysis. At Bronx Community College (BCC), part of the City University of New York, history faculty have integrated ePortfolios into their classes, recognizing that they help students achieve the learning outcomes laid out by the college, the university, and the professors themselves, in terms of gaining historical knowledge, academic skills, and a sense of an identity as college students. This article focuses on how two BCC professors use Digication's Conversations feature to help students develop their ability to analyze historical documents and understand historical arguments, strengthening their analytical skills in the process. Their experience suggests the benefit of understanding ePortfolio scholarship not in a vacuum, but in relation to the SoTL within the disciplines. This pedagogically-sound integrated approach also has proven effective in addressing the practical realities faced by students at an intercity community college. This connection helps answer the call issued in the 2015 Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based Learning (AAEEBL) keynote address, "Back to the Future: ePortfolio Pedagogy Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" by Helen Chen, Gary Brown, Ashley Kehoe, and Kathryn Colman, which encouraged the ePortfolio community to look "outward to explore the connections to evidence-related conversations occurring beyond AAEEBL" (para. 1).

Correlations Between ePortfolio Scholarship and SoTL of History

While not always using the same terminology and written largely in isolation from one another, the scholarship of ePortfolio pedagogy and that of teaching and learning history both emphasize the importance of high impact practices including active learning and reflection, as well as metacognition and integrative learning. Much of the scholarship on ePortfolio stems from George Kuh's concept of *high impact practices*, which stresses the importance of active learning and recognizes that much of the deepest learning takes place outside the traditional lecture-based classroom (Huburt, Pickavance, & Hyberger, 2015). ePortfolios also promote metacognition—a student's thinking about his or her own thinking and learning—as they allow students to document and reflect on their learning process. As Boesch, Reynolds, and Patton (2016) explained, "ePortfolios can be a rich tool for aiding students in the development of metacognitive skills. In fact, the process of creating an ePortfolio is indeed a metaphor for metacognition. That is what it is all about" (p. 456). ePortfolios also promote integrative learning, the ability of students to make connections among their classes and between their school work and their lives beyond the classroom, which can lead to greater student engagement and understanding of—and commitment to—their learning process. Eynon, Gambino, and Török (2014) have argued, for instance, that "the value of ePortfolio experience emerges from the ways it makes learning visible, facilitating connective reflection, sharing, and deeper, more integrative learning" (p. 98).

Much of the research in history pedagogy indicates student success, in terms of developing critical thinking skills and historical knowledge, as well as student engagement, improves when faculty move away from traditional lectures and assessments based on repetition of facts to an emphasis on developing historical thinking. This approach encourages students to understand history as a contested interpretation of facts and develop their own questions and arguments based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources (Calder 2006; Otremba 2014; Sipress & Voelker 2011; Wineburg 2001). The path to historical thinking

includes active learning, reflection, and, though rarely named as such in the literature, encouraging metacognitive and integrative learning. The analysis of documents, individually and in groups, incorporates active learning. Students' reflection on the analytical process through which they develop their own historical questions and understanding of the bias inherent in that process promotes metacognitive learning, which is critical to helping students learn to think historically (Frederick, 1993; Pace, 1993). Students' reflections on the relationship between the past and their lives, families, and communities—a type of integrative learning—often improves student engagement (Bischof, 2015; Lyons, 2007). At a deeper level, learning historical thinking also promotes the forming of metacognitive analytical skills that encourage students to connect academic learning to the prospects and demands of their lives, leading them to the discovery and development of problem solving and decision-making processes adaptable to the ever changing realities of their lives (Sternberg, 1985, 2012).

Bass (2012) has argued that "ePortfolios can be powerful environments that facilitate or intensify the effect of high-impact practices" (p. 30). Similarly, our experience, along with the small body of scholarship on ePortfolio in history courses, suggests that ePortfolio use can facilitate or intensify the reflection, metacognition, and integrative learning that is a critical step in developing the ability to analyze sources, ask historical questions, and craft arguments, as students move past the idea that history means only memorizing and repeating facts. The assistance ePortfolio provides is important, as this analytical progression challenges many students. As Calder (2006) explained, "questioning is an extraordinarily difficult skill for most students, probably because for their whole lives teachers and textbooks have posed the questions for them" (p. 1364). Penny Light (2005) documented her use of ePortfolio in her history classes in an early Making Connections report, noting that "the ePortfolio helps students to develop and demonstrate competencies for 'doing history' (critical thinking and analysis) over the course of the semester" (para. 2). More recently, Jordine (2015) analyzed her experience using ePortfolio for students to create exhibits about the Holocaust, noting that ePortfolio fit well with her commitment to integrative learning and a student-centered focus. Jordine concluded, "the degree to which students had to engage actively in thinking while creating their exhibit was definitely much greater than in previous semesters," adding that "the project required students to acquire or improve their integrated learning skills, and their level of proficiency could be measured by evaluating their final exhibit in ePortfolio" (p. 20). Bass and Eynon (2009) examined the Visible Knowledge Project (VKP), which from 2000 through 2005 supported research by history and cultural studies faculty into the

use of Web 2.0 technologies in teaching and learning. While the project was not specifically focused on ePortfolio, Bass and Eynon noted that the VKP projects indicated the importance of embodied and socially situated learning, adding that ePortfolios combined both of these powerful elements. So, while history faculty can, of course, introduce active learning, reflection, metacognition, and integrative learning into their courses without ePortfolios, the increased visibility and the sense of authorship and ownership ePortfolios provide can be powerful tools in the history professors' difficult but important job of introducing and developing historical thinking.

BCC Demographics

While our analysis of the integration of ePortfolios in history courses is relevant to a wide spectrum of academic environments, a desire to improve retention and passing rates and develop students' academic skills in the challenging environment of BCC has driven professors' adoption of ePortfolio. The school serves a student body that is motivated and intelligent, but often underprepared, both academically and in terms of college skills like studying and time management. Approximately 90% of BCC first semester students fail to place at the college level in at least one of the required reading, writing, or math assessment tests given to all incoming CUNY students, and a quarter fail all three. Of the students who entered in 2010, only 23% had earned an Associate degree by 2015 (although that number does not include students who transferred). Of the students who entered in Fall 2014, only 58% were still enrolled the following year (CUNY Office of Institutional Research, 2016). History, a reading and writing-intensive discipline, has posed a particular challenge to students at BCC, with average pass rates for the core courses sinking below 60% some semesters. A desire to address these troubling statistics has shaped the evolution of the BCC ePortfolio Program generally, and the use of ePortfolio in history courses specifically.

ePortfolio at BCC

While historians often have a reputation for resisting both pedagogical scholarship and technological innovations, History Department faculty members at BCC have led the campus in introducing technology into the classroom. In 2003, Howard Wach, then in the BCC History Department, designed the school's first online teaching training seminar. In 2009, Wach joined with Jordi Getman-Eraso, also in the History Department, to create the BCC ePortfolio Program, which Getman-Eraso currently coordinates. As of May 2016, 4,111 currently enrolled students have

ePortfolio accounts, and since the program's inception, 2,564 BCC graduates used ePortfolios in at least one class. In addition, 284 faculty and staff have ePortfolio accounts. To date, 14,248 ePortfolios have been created, 13,055 by students and 1,193 by faculty.

As with the school's approach to online teaching, the ePortfolio Program stresses introducing technology not as an end in itself, but as a tool to be used in the service of integrating larger learning objectives (Wach, 2007; Wach, Broughton, & Powers, 2011). Faculty development opportunities encourage professors to employ ePortfolios in ways that help students comprehend connections between their personal and academic lives and their work at BCC and their future professional selves. The overarching goal is to engage students in reflective metacognitive learning that develops a strong sense of authorship and ownership over their work, empowering them to become self-directed learners. While encouraging these broader pedagogical aims, faculty also design ePortfolio assignments specific to the academic disciplines they teach. The parallel integration of disciplinary thought and ePortfolio learning pedagogies have allowed BCC faculty to use ePortfolios in ways that encourage student engagement and deep learning, while introducing students to threshold concepts for their disciplines (Meyer & Land, 2005).

Data collected through BCC's Office of Institutional Research and Planning suggests ePortfolios have had a significant effect on student success and retention. In the Fall 2015 semester, students in ePortfolio classes passed at 81%, as opposed to 72% of students in non-ePortfolio sections; 85% enrolled for the following semester, as opposed to 76% in the non-ePortfolio sections (BCC Office of Institutional Research). ePortfolio, as a vehicle for integrative learning, has also been an important part of the successful implementation of BCC's First Year Seminar, introduced in 2012 (Karp, Raufman, Efthimiou, & Ritze, 2015). Of course, correlation does not equal causation, and there may be other factors at work in these courses, including that faculty who find meaningful uses for ePortfolios may be more interested in exploring effective pedagogies. Still, these results track with the cautious optimism that Eynon et al. (2014) cited on the campuses involved with the Connect to Learning ePortfolio initiative, particularly at community colleges, and provided incentive to continue to develop the program and go forward with further study of its effectiveness.

The History Department has been at the forefront of the school's implementation of ePortfolios and the integration of ePortfolios into online and hybrid classes. Ten of fifteen full-time department members have participated in the BCC ePortfolio Program's two-semester faculty development seminar designed to develop the pedagogical strategies to successfully integrate ePortfolios into their courses. The initial decision to integrate ePortfolios was driven at least in part by the traditionally low passing rates in history courses at BCC. The integration of ePortfolios into history courses were part of a larger sea-change in the department, moving away from traditional history teaching approaches that focused on coverage of a wide swath of historical time, lectures, and tests based on memorization of facts, toward student learning-centered pedagogical approaches that underline the development of metacognitive critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the epistemological foundations of the discipline of history.

History faculty incorporate ePortfolios in a variety of ways, including having students create local history projects, online exhibits, and primary source collections. The department has also used ePortfolios in the creation of open educational resources, such as primary source readers that aim to not only save students money but also allow for a targeted collection of resources specifically tailored to course student learning objectives. There is a commitment to having students reflect on their own learning, particularly in terms of their growing awareness of how history is written, their own historical arguments, how historical events influence their lives, and their place in the world. This transformation in pedagogical approach has over the last three years led to significant improvements in pass rates for HIS 10, the Modern World History survey (up from 56% to 67%) and bumped up the pass rates for HIS 20, The American Nation (up from 68% to 74%), even as HIS 10 was removed as a prerequisite due to CUNY-wide curricular changes.

Conversations

Digication introduced the Conversations feature in beta form in 2013. It allows users to highlight text directly on any ePortfolio page and comment on it, and other members of the ePortfolio community to respond to the comments, thereby engaging in an online "conversation" about the text. It was designed to encourage collaboration and social engagement, as well as to allow professors to comment on student work. While not developed specifically with history classes in mind, the group analysis the feature makes possible fits remarkably well with recommendations from the scholarship of teaching and learning history, including the importance of active learning and document analysis as critical steps to developing historical thinking (Booth & Hyland, 2000; Wineburg, 2001; Grim, Pace, & Shopkow, 2004).

Getman-Eraso and Culkin an Associate Professor of History who was part of the first ePortfolio faculty development seminar, have made the Conversations

feature a critical element of document analysis in their hybrid courses since it was introduced in 2013. Getman-Eraso used the feature in Modern World History (HIS 10) and Culkin used it in The American Nation (HIS 20). While teaching different courses and with some differences in implementation, Getman-Eraso and Culkin both considered document analysis the foundation of history education, a way to introduce historical thinking, encourage student participation, and develop critical thinking skills. Given their emphasis on student engagement and participation, both wanted to find ways to replicate the "interactivity of the physical classroom in an online environment" (Stern, 2015, p. 485). Each found the discussion boards in Blackboard frustrating as a way to introduce and measure student participation, as that forum does not encourage deep analysis of the document and conversation in the same way a face-to-face conversation does. Students will often identify a specific quote from a document, and discuss it intelligently, but the technology's focus on individual posts obscures a sense of the larger document and the larger conversation.

The Conversations interface comes much closer to replicating the face-to-face experience of group work, and, in some ways, improves on the in-class experience. All students must participate in order to earn credit, and students who are uncomfortable speaking in the physical classroom are able to contribute to the discussion in a way that may be less stressful and more productive for them. The conversation assignment thus fits well with Bass and Elmendorf's (2012) definition of social pedagogies "as design approaches for teaching and learning that engage students in authentic tasks that are communication-intensive, where the representation of knowledge for an authentic audience is absolutely central to the construction of knowledge in a course." This type of social pedagogy is one of the keys Eynon et al. (2014) identify as "improving student learning, engagement, and success" (p. 104) through ePortfolio.

Getman-Eraso first integrated Conversations into his HIS 10 hybrid course in Fall 2013, soon after Digication introduced the feature in beta form. Impressed with student work in Getman-Eraso's class, Culkin incorporated it into the first hybrid class she taught the following semester. Getman-Eraso and Culkin used Conversations in similar ways. Each week students together analyze a primary document relevant to the topic covered and material addressed in the face-to-face session by highlighting and commenting on a section of text they consider relevant. They read and could then respond to other students' posted comments, thereby engaging in an analytic conversation about the primary source, the author's intended meaning(s), and its larger historical significance. Unlike discussion boards in learning management systems, with Conversations the selected text, all comments, and responses are visible at the same time on the same page, next to the original document text, making the experience more intuitive and aesthetically logical. It facilitates drawing analytic connections and establishing a historical context not only between separate highlighted sections of text, but with the larger document as a whole. This "crucial bottleneck of learning" (Grim et al., 2004, p. 57) encourages students to become active participants in the identification and deployment of evidence as part of the evaluation of and engagement with larger historical narratives. In so doing, students collaboratively contribute to the historical analysis of the source, empowering them to gain confidence and a sense of interpretative authority. In a very real sense, they become historians. As Getman-Eraso wrote in the instructions for the assignment,

> Each week you will engage in collective analysis of primary documents, the center piece of historical interpretation. This is important not only for those wanting to become professional historians, but for anyone wanting to better understand not only our historical background, but, perhaps more importantly, the use of words to influence how we think as individuals and as a society. (Getman-Eraso, 2015, para. 1)

In Getman-Eraso's classes, the primary source analysis is an integral step of a weekly four-step scaffolded learning process aimed at replicating the epistemological approach used by historians. Short introductory online lectures and textbook readings contextualizing the historical period and the major debates of the time preface the tackling of the primary source analysis using Conversations. The collaborative peer-to-peer interpretations of the primary source are intended to contribute a deeper comprehension of the author's intentions and use of language to influence those debates. Faculty contributions are limited to directing students to higher level questions of historical analysis. Students then individually write a reflective essay using the lessons learned from the group text analysis to cogently address that topic's larger debates. The resulting essays reflect a more mature understanding of the historical debates and encourage a deeper personal engagement with the history the students are learning, helping them gain a place and sense of responsibility in the globalized world in which they live. The weekly essays build up to a final project that requires students to define critically the concept of globalization, both historically and in present-day society, and asks them to identify their place in a globalized society.

Table 1
HIS 10 Rubric: SLO: Identify and Apply the Fundamental Concepts and Methods of the Discipline of History

		Exceeds standard	Meets standard	Approaches standard	Does not meet standard
A.	Historical sources	Uses and critiques sources from a variety of perspectives to analyze the causes and consequences of historical events.	Uses historical sources from a variety of perspectives to analyze the causes of historical events.	Recognizes historical sources, but establishes weak and/or inaccurate connections to the causes of historical events.	Cannot identify historical sources and/or their relationships to historical events.
B.	Historical themes, ideas and movements	Studies the relationships between events to identify pervasive historical themes, ideas, and/or movements.	Identifies pervasive historical themes, ideas, and/or movements.	Identifies some historical themes, ideas, and/or movements.	Does not identify historical themes, ideas, and/or movements.

While Getman-Eraso focuses on global citizenship, in her HIS 20 course Culkin focuses on the theme "history is more than a textbook," encouraging students to understand that history is an interpretation of events, not a repetition of facts. Throughout the semester, students analyze the ways in which historical actors use events in American history, such as the Revolutionary War, to support vastly different positions at different times. In addition to the Conversations, students write weekly response papers, reflections at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester, and take-home essays for the midterm and finals exams. The midterm and final exams require students to develop an argument about how the authors of three primary documents use American history to support their points. The final exam question is:

> Write an essay in which you develop a thesis to answer the following question: How do Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his 1st inauguration speech, Ronald Reagan, in his 2nd inauguration speech, and Barack Obama, in his 2nd inauguration speech, use American history and American ideals, such as freedom, liberty, and rights, to support their vision of what direction they want to take the country and what they want to accomplish during their administration. Support your thesis with evidence from the text and your analysis of that evidence. (Culkin, 2016, para. 2)

Learning Outcomes Assessment

In assessing the Conversations assignments, the authors looked at not just passing and retention rates, but the development of critical thinking skills and comprehension of the discipline of history over the course of the semester, as measured through an evaluation of the Conversations-based document analysis at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. In addition, both authors assessed larger related assignments completed at the middle and end of the semester to see how students were able to apply the skills and knowledge they gained from using Conversations in a broader, more contextual dimension. For the assessment, the authors utilized a rubric adopted by the History Department in Fall 2015 semester for department-wide assessment of HIS 10, the core history course that all Liberal Arts majors are required to take at BCC (Table 1). The department designed the rubric to assess the larger student learning outcome (SLO) "Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of the discipline of history," which the faculty articulated for HIS 10 as part of a CUNY-wide curriculum reform. The rubric for the SLO includes two evaluative sub-outcomes. The first assesses students' ability to use and analyze historical sources (sub-outcome A), and the second, their ability to demonstrate an understanding of historical events, ideas, and movements (sub-outcome B). While HIS 20 does not yet use the specific rubric, the student learning outcome and criteria fit well with Culkin's learning outcomes for the course, as well as the general HIS 20 learning outcomes.

Norming for each of the sub-outcomes measured with the rubric was carried out prior to the assessment and included a discussion about the expected standards for each assignment, as well as for the overall course. The process was facilitated by the similitude in both authors' approach and expectations for the Conversations assignments. Even so, an attempt was made to parallel as

Figure 1
HIS 10 Sub-Outcome A: Historical Sources
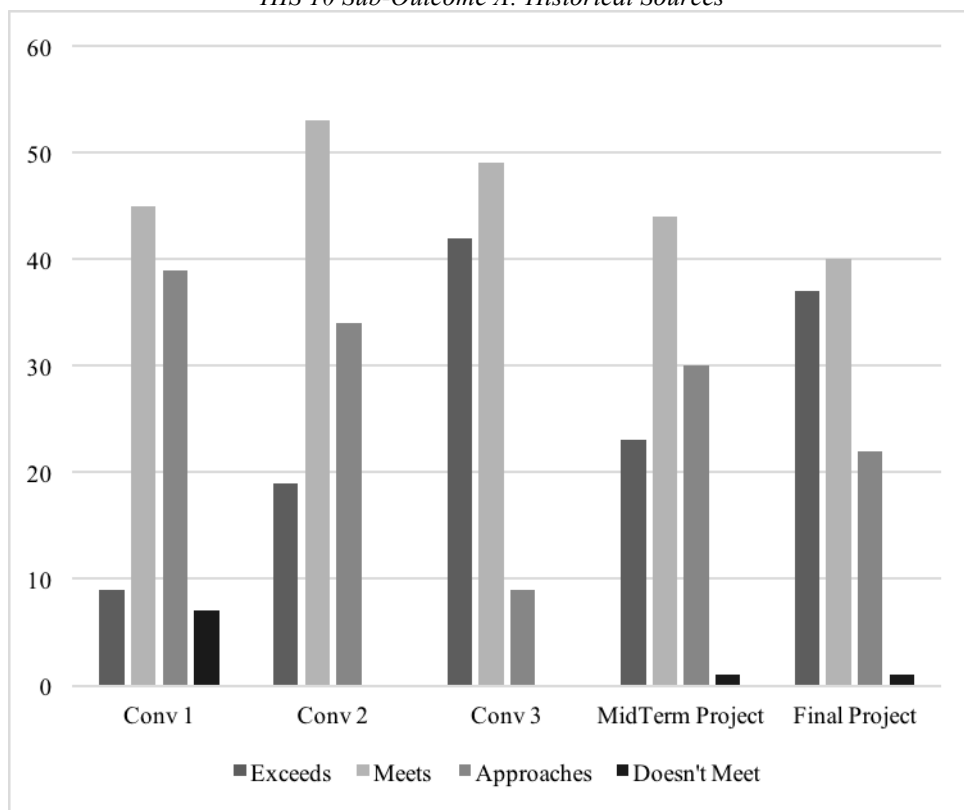
closely as possible the norming carried out for department-wide course assessments of both HIS 10 and HIS 20. What proved somewhat more difficult was the norming for the evaluation of midterm and final projects, as they varied more significantly in form between the HIS 10 and HIS 20 courses. That said, the use of the same rubric and sub-outcomes for these extender assignments mostly kept the authors' evaluative variance to within one step on the standards scale.

Assessment Results

HIS 10

The assessment of Getman-Eraso's HIS 10 included four sections from Fall 2013 to Spring 2015, with a total of 95 students. The evaluation of student learning sub-outcomes A and B in the HIS 10 primary-source analysis Conversations showed a marked progression toward analytical mastery for a large majority of students. See Figures 1 and 2 for data related to sub-outcomes A and B, respectively in HIS 10. For sub-outcome A analysis of primary source), the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard increased from 54% of students on the first conversation at the beginning of the semester

(45% met, 9% exceeded) to 91% on the third and last conversation at the end of the semester (49% met, 42% exceeded). For sub-outcome B (application to historical themes, ideas, and movements), the trend was similar. On the first conversation, 49% of students met or exceeded the standard (41% met, 8% exceeded) and on the third and last conversation, 93% met or exceeded the standard (48% met, 45% exceeded). The increase from the first to the third conversation in the percentage of students meeting the standard was positive, but not significant (4% and 7% increase for sub-outcomes A and B, respectively). There was, however, a significant increase in both outcomes of students exceeding the standard (33% and 37% increase for sub-outcomes A and B, respectively), which is diametrically opposed to the decrease of students approaching the standard (30% and 37% decrease for sub-outcomes A and B, respectively).

The impact on the midterm and final projects showed a similar, though not as pronounced positive progression. For sub-outcome A, there was an increase of 10% (67% to 77%) of students meeting or exceeding the standard. Sub-outcome B showed a moderately higher increase of 14% (62% to 76%), perhaps related to the broader thematic learning objectives of the final project on globalization.

Figure 2
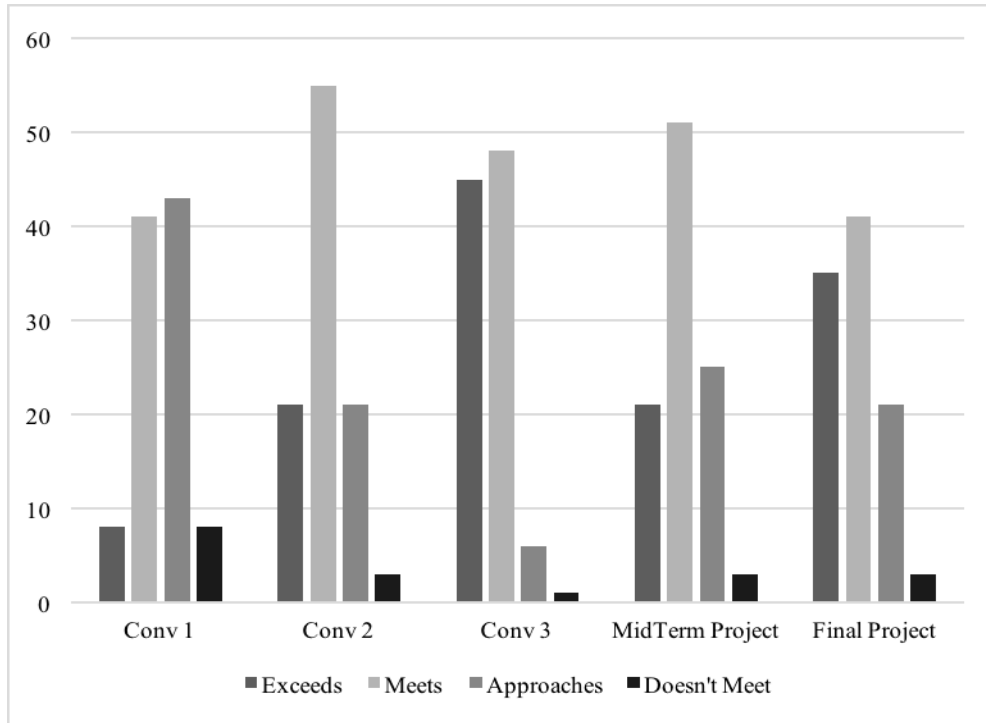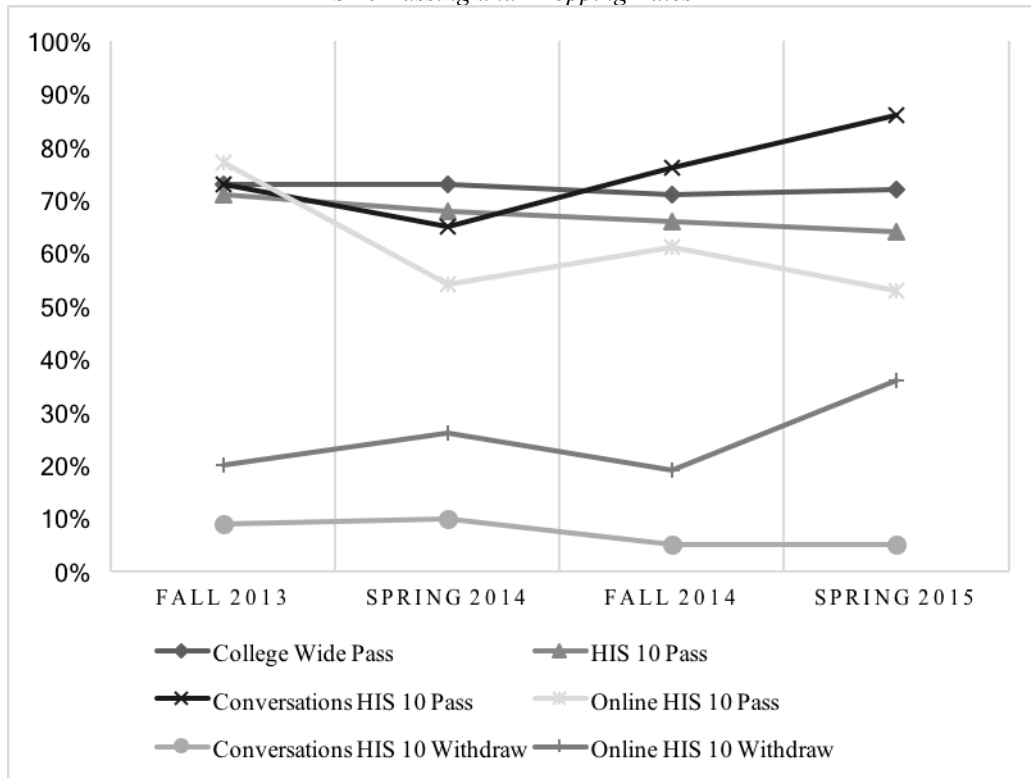*HIS 10 Sub-Outcome B: Historical Themes*

Figure 3
HIS 10 Passing and Dropping Rates

The dramatic increase in student learning was also reflected in the passing and retention rates (Figure 3). The Conversations-integrated HIS 10 courses evidenced an increase from 73% to 86% passing in the four semesters between Fall 2013 and Spring 2015. In the same period, the departmental passing rate for HIS 10 decreased from 71% to 64%. More significant was the comparison with other online courses (hybrid and asynchronous), which declined from 77% to 53% passing.

The trend continued when looking at retention rates (Figure 3). The Conversations-integrated HIS 10 courses saw a decline in drop rates, from 9% to 6%, while drop rates in other online HIS 10 courses increased from 20% to 36%. It seems logical to draw a connection between the student engagement and growing sense of proficiency encouraged by the weekly conversations and the higher passing and lower drop rates.

Although the assessment results for HIS 10 proved quite satisfactory, there was room for improvement in specific areas. The prompting used to introduce students to the concept of online textual analysis was somewhat unclear, leading to some student frustration with not only using a new technology, but also the assignments' basic concepts and expectations. This issue was addressed by editing the prompts to include more detailed and logical instructions on the use of the Conversations feature in Digication and by adding examples (with accompanying screenshots) of model analytical comments. Even though not yet assessed quantitatively, the prompting change has positively affected the student on-boarding period for the use of Conversations.

Perhaps more important of an issue was students' ability to connect conceptually the course's low-stakes and high-stakes assignments, limiting the broader applicability of the analytical approaches developed by the Conversations assignments. This has led to the development of more clearly identified conceptual threads linking reflective thinking used in the low-stakes Conversations primary-source assignments with the bigger picture thinking expected in the midterm and final projects.

HIS 20

The assessment of HIS 20 encompassed three sections, one in each semester from Spring 2014 to Spring 2015, which enrolled a combination of 58 students. The data from the Conversations assignments indicates that students developed their ability to analyze documents and understand historical events. See Figures 4 and 5 for data related to sub-outcomes A and B, respectively in HIS 20. In the earliest conversation, 66% of students met or exceeded the standard for sub-outcome A (and 72% met or exceeded the standard for sub-outcome B. At mid-semester, these numbers inched up: 75% were meeting or exceeding the standard for sub-outcome A, and 80% met or exceeded the standard for sub-

outcome B. At the end of the semester, 90% met or exceeded the standard for sub-outcome A, and 70% met or exceeded the standard for sub-outcome B. And in the second half of the semester, there was a significant movement from meeting to exceeding the standard, suggesting that students' capacity for deep thinking expanded; from the mid-semester to the final Conversation, the exceeding standard for sub-outcome A jumped from 9% to 34% and for sub-outcome B from 8% to 34%.

The numbers for the final exam were not as promising, but they indicated progress. The final essay asked students to apply the analytical skills they had developed through the Conversations. Students often stumble when moving from a low-stakes writing assignment, such as the Conversations, to more formal, higher stakes assignment, such as the exam essay. This difficulty was indicated in the assessment, as only 60% met or exceeded the standard for sub-outcome A, and 61% met or exceeded the standard for sub-outcome B, significantly lower than student performance on the end-of-the semester conversation. That said, the final represented progress compared to the midterm, which required students to write a similar essay. Even though they could turn in a draft for feedback before turning in the midterm, which was not an option for the final, student performance improved in the majority of the categories between the two exams. Students struggled more with sub-outcome B, their ability to demonstrate an understanding of historical events, ideas and movements, in these high-stake writing assignments, with the number exceeding the standard falling from 22% to 13% between the midterm and final.

To address the differences between the assessment results of the Conversations and the exams, Culkin plans to develop activities that draw on the scholarship of Writing Across the Curriculum in community colleges and history courses to help students apply the skills and ways of thinking they develop in the primary source analysis to formal essays (Akkaraju, 2015; Elbow & Sorcinelli, 2005; Murphree, 2014; Quintana & Zajkowski, 2014). These activities will include low-stakes ePortfolio posts that ask students to reflect on what they have learned from the document analysis about using evidence to support an essay thesis before the midterm and the final. Culkin will also have students brainstorm about the evidence in the documents used in the exams, through in-class writing and small group discussions, early in the essay process. These steps may make more visible to the students the relationship between the different kinds of assignments and help them apply the high-level thinking done in the document analysis to the high-stakes essay writing.

As with HIS 10, student passing rates were notably higher in the Conversations-integrated HIS 20 sections when compared with other HIS 20 online sections

Figure 4
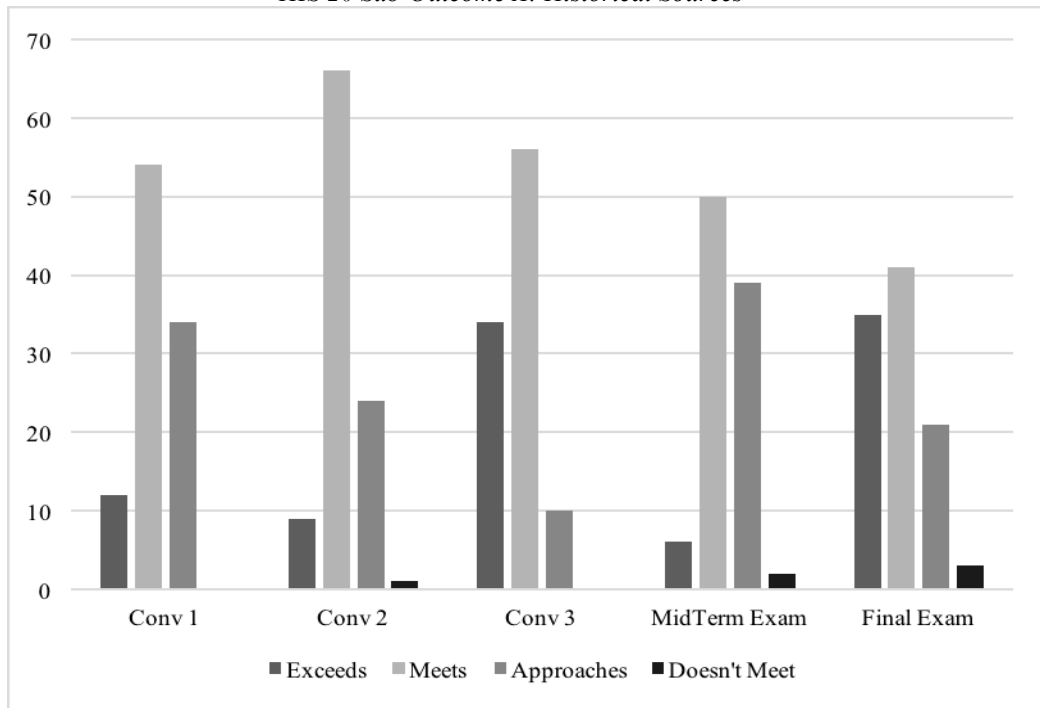*HIS 20 Sub-Outcome A: Historical Sources*

Figure 5
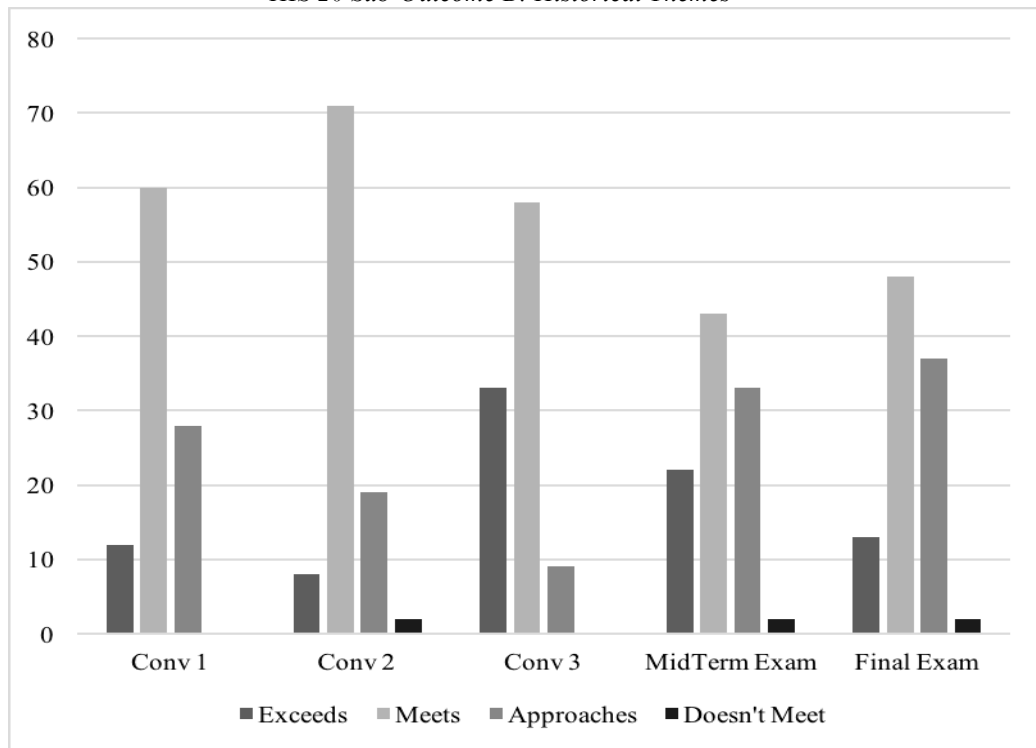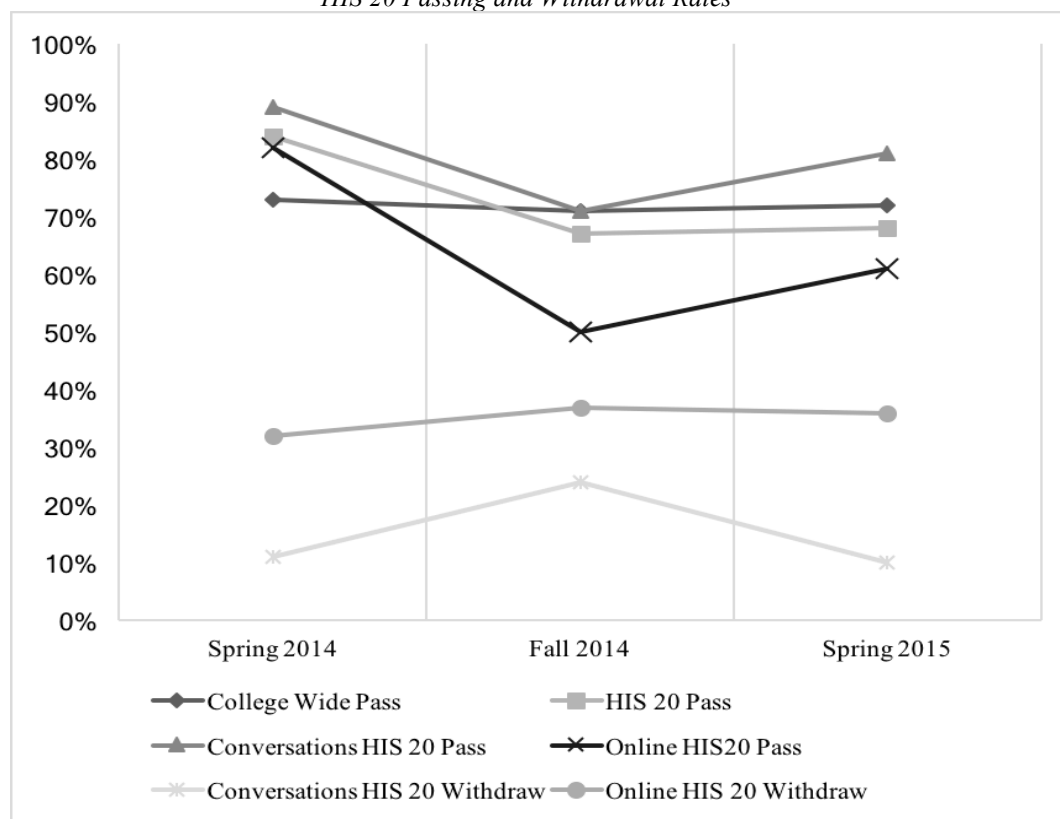*HIS 20 Sub-Outcome B: Historical Themes*

Figure 6
HIS 20 Passing and Withdrawal Rates

offered at BCC (Figure 6). All HIS 20 rates dipped significantly in Fall 2014, as the full impact of the curricular changes that resulted in less-prepared students enrolling in the course was felt. However, Culkin's HIS 20 hybrid rates rebounded more dramatically the next semester, coming in at over 10% higher than other HIS 20 sections in Fall 2015 and almost 10% higher than general college passing rates.

In Students' Words

The assessment data tells part of the story, but the reflections both Getman-Eraso and Culkin have students write at the end of the semester illustrate students' engagement with the study of history and how it influences their sense of themselves as students and their place in the world. This type of reflection and engagement, of course, is at the heart of ePortfolio's potential. It may be particularly important at community colleges, where many students believe in the importance of a degree, but do not necessarily comprehend the importance of what they learn to earn that degree. As Bellafante (2014) wrote in a profile of professors at LaGuardia Community College, another CUNY school, "One

enormous challenge for community college instructors is that many students arrive with the notion that a college education is essential, but remain unconvinced that what they will learn during the course of their studies is equally so." The use of ePortfolios in history courses can help students understand the relationship between their own lives and historical events, which can be a powerful step in student engagement.

The applicability of the Modern World History course's (HIS 10) themes came across in students' end of semester reflections on their academic learning and its impact on their notions of the world in which they live. Student comments ranged from the practical (e.g., "Our weekly reading and writing assignments helped me to organize my thoughts in preparation for my final project") to the more affective; for instance,

The wonderful observations provided by my classmates has [*sic*] allowed me to move onward with my belief that there are no strict interpretations of good and evil, as heinous acts and atrocities have unfortunately been committed by almost every nation in the name of peace and prosperity, leading to conquest and anguish.

The notion of a cognitive shift was common among most students in the course. As one student noted, "class was 'an eye opening' and something I had missed in my life." The approach of the course and its break with traditional notions of instruction was in many students' thoughts:

My first day in the History 10 class my thoughts were that it was going to be a regular class; where the professor lectures, I memorize a little here and there, and then pass the class to move on to the next semester but it certainly did not happen that way. I did not expect that so much concentration and discipline were needed for a half on-line course. Now I come to realize that purpose of this intense course has been that students understand and interpret history fully.

The broader impact of the learning experience also surfaced. The comment "I think after this semester I have a deeper understanding of history, instead of it being about big names and big dates," is representative of many students' newfound understanding of the discipline of history.

Perhaps more significantly, many students were empowered by applying what they learned in the course to their notions of present-day society, established mores, and their ability to influence its future. In one student's words, "In this course I learned more than History. I learned tolerance, persistence, and respect; qualities that are much needed in the present days." Another one commented,

Taking a page out of what we learned in class I feel too many people in general have a culture of being raised to feel superior. History tells us that that's not a good idea to put yourself over anyone else and try to make them inferior . . . Instead of trying to be #1 people should try and learn how to work together. Be an individual but at the same time try to learn as much as you can from the next person so in turn that makes you a better people.

In Culkin's American History course, many students noted the power of learning about historic injustices and social justice movements, not surprising given the demographics of the school and the course's emphasis on these movements. One student wrote,

Being of African descent I also learnt the bitter truth of my ancestors' past and realized yes we did suffer, yes we are still suffering from racism, but as a people we have achieved a lot we went from being poorly taken cared of slaves to being doctors, lawyers, teachers, military personelle [sic], politicians and even a president . . . you have to see

it because of the fight, the struggle, the sweat, the tears that is what built America, honestly that is what built you.

Another noted,

Studying history for me definitely helped shape my understanding of history in today's world. Being a Puerto Rican male and openly gay has really inspired me to learn everything I can about history—that will better educate me on the constant struggle I have to go through.

As much of as the assessment statistics, students' ability and willingness to articulate a connection to the history they have studied indicates deep learning and a commitment to future interest in the discipline, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Final Thoughts

As educational environments become increasingly non-traditional, where more and more students find long-established teaching approaches antiquated, foreign, and, most notably, inaccessible, it is our responsibility as educators to develop intuitive, adaptable, and engaging models of learning that engage students in the context of the realities of the world in which they live. Rather than fall down the rabbit hole of labeling any innovative teaching approach as challenging disciplinary standards, a growing number of faculty who think creatively are realizing the educational advantages afforded by the multiple interfacing and aesthetic dimensions that can be integrated into the pedagogical adaptation of new technological tools. As has been often argued, technology in and of itself does not engender meaningful improvements in learning experiences. However, the alignment of the specific educational aims of academic disciplines with the functionality offered by software platforms has the potential to produce very positive learning outcomes.

The aim in redesigning the HIS 10 and 20 courses has been to integrate the pedagogical rethinking made possible by the advent of the new ePortfolio Conversations feature in Digication. The authors have sought to engage students with a pedagogical approach which blended active learning, reflection, and integrative learning in the hopes of helping them learn the "secrets of the trade" and become, in some dimension, historians, even if that is not their major (as is the case with a great majority of them). At a broader level, the authors aspire to empower students by developing their metacognitive learning skills, so that they can develop the interpretational aptitude necessary

to approach any conceptual obstacle, whether in the realm of academics or of their real world experiences.

While the authors have focused on the use of Conversations in history courses, close reading of texts is at the heart of most disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, which suggests that professors could integrate the technology into a range of courses. It is easy to imagine, for instance, an assignment structured around a collaborative analysis of a poem in an English course. The Conversations feature also holds promise to help students struggling with college-level reading. Melissa Cross, an English professor at BCC, has already adopted the technology. Before class, students read an assigned article and used the commenting feature to define words they do not know; they are then better prepared to discuss the work in class and reflect on their experience of reading the article on their ePortfolios. This type of assignment could work not only in the humanities, but any course that requires students to do intensive reading outside of class. While Digication's Conversations feature has made integrating textual analysis into class assignments wonderfully simple, professors could surely adopt other platforms for similar use. Google Docs, for instance, allows for multiple people to insert in-line comments on the same document, and teachers have begun to adopt it in their courses, for collaborative writing and peer review, as well document analysis (Edwards, 2011; Moran, 2010).

The assessment of HIS 10 and HIS 20 student learning outcomes showed a significant increase in discipline specific analytical skills, not only in the weekly interpretation of primary sources, but also in larger assignments which integrated said analytical skills. Statistically, students in both courses demonstrated a notable increase in their ability to read closely primary source documents, identifying and interpreting the use of specific language, its intended meaning, and its impact on the events of the historical moment. The peer-sharing nature of the Conversations interface contributes an added sense of visibility, audience and social dimension to the students' analytical comments, something that would not be possible in a traditional two-way exchange with a faculty member or even in a physical classroom. In addition, the interpretative skills students acquire from analyzing primary sources through group conversations impacts positively their ability to develop thoughtful and reasonable arguments in larger high stakes essay assignments that require broader contextual thinking. The statistical numbers are supported by student reflections, which indicate an intellectual awakening for many students, a crossing of an interpretative threshold of their notions of the discipline of history, its epistemological functions and its broader real life application.

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JORDI GETMAN-ERASO, PhD, is an Associate Professor of History at Bronx Community College-CUNY. His area of specialty is modern Spanish history, with special interest in the growth and influence in the early twentieth century of the anarcho-syndicalist movement and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). He has taught at Bronx Community College since 2003, concentrating on Modern World History and Modern Latin American History. He is the coordinator the BCC ePortfolio Program, a co-coordinator of the New Faculty Seminar, serves on the leadership council of the Center for Teaching Learning and Technology, and chairs the Institutional Effectiveness Committee.

KATE CULKIN, PhD., is an Associate Professor of History at Bronx Community College. She is the author of *Harriet Hosmer: A Cultural Biography* (UMass Press 2010) and an associate editor of *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* (UNC Press 2008). She has recently published on teaching history at BCC in *Remaking the American College Campus: Essays* (McFarland, 2016) and *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*.