Mc Graw Hill connect®

Success Story

Weatherford College



Challenge

Engaging students beyond static quizzing

Solution

Connect's SmartBook® and Critical Thinking Assignments for Active Learning with *U.S.: A Narrative History* by James West Davidson

Results

More reading, more context, and more connections

> **For me, Connect was simply a superior product. The idea of adaptive quizzing vs. static quizzes was highly appealing."**
>
> – Professor Scott Williams



Scott Williams

Professor of U.S. History, Weatherford College

The Challenge

When Professor Scott Williams began teaching U.S. History at Weatherford College, he sought tools that would move students beyond passive reading and repetitive quiz cycles.

Williams adopted McGraw Hill's *U.S.: A Narrative History* by James West Davidson and implemented Connect in 2012. With 180 students per term across online and hybrid formats, his primary goals were:

- Reducing repetitive questions in assignments
- Driving deeper engagement with the textbook
- Ensuring students arrived prepared to apply knowledge in class

While Williams was an early adopter of Connect, his colleagues have since joined him in integrating Connect and SmartBook into their courses, creating greater consistency across the department.

The Solution

> **"SmartBook has pushed students to engage more consistently with the textbook, while the Critical Thinking Assignments have challenged them to connect primary sources to the broader historical context. Together, these tools ensure that students are not just reading but actively analyzing and applying what they learn."**

Williams structures his courses around two primary Connect tools **SmartBook** and **Critical Thinking Assignments.** Every chapter in both his hybrid and online courses is paired with a SmartBook assignment, ensuring students consistently engage with the textbook. In his online courses, students also complete 12–15 Critical Thinking Assignments each semester. These assignments require students to link a primary document or image to a specific section of the textbook, identify key ideas in response to a guiding question, and then demonstrate how that source could support a larger historical argument. In his hybrid, flipped-format classes, he uses fewer Critical Thinking Assignments but frames them as close readings that prepare students to arrive ready for deeper discussion.

Each Critical Thinking Assignment follows a three-part structure: first, students place the source in its broader historical context by drawing on the textbook or lecture materials; second, they annotate and explain the main idea rather than simply highlighting; and third, they show how the source could be used either to support an essay argument, connect with a prior document, or anticipate links to future topics. As Williams explains, "In all of this, I am trying to have them make connections between the sources and the context and between this specific assignment and the rest of the class."

Williams also makes extensive use of **Connect's reporting tools,** with the Challenging Concepts report from SmartBook being his favorite. The insights help him pinpoint where students are struggling, adapt lectures on the spot, and make long-term improvements to course design—such as revising online lectures, refining discussion questions, or adding explanatory videos. As he notes, **"I like the Challenging Concepts the best coming out of SmartBook. I can use them before class to see what my students struggled with, and at the end of the semester I use the aggregate data to guide what I might need to change for future courses."**

Connect is also fully embedded into **Weatherford College's Canvas learning management system,** providing students with seamless access through single sign-on. Assignments appear directly within the course pages Williams builds for each class meeting (hybrid) or unit (online), eliminating barriers to access and saving time for both students and faculty. "It is a seamless process for them, and I do not have to do any trouble-shooting on this aspect at all anymore," he notes.

The Results

Williams notes clear improvements in student engagement and preparedness:

- Students consistently use and reference the Davidson textbook in discussions and assignments.
- Critical Thinking Assignments lead to breakthrough learning moments, with unsolicited positive feedback from students.
- SmartBook ensures students engage with course readings, while reporting tools allow Williams to refine lectures and better address difficult concepts.

Students also praised the Critical Thinking Assignments for showing how history is built from primary sources, helping them connect classroom learning with real historical evidence.

> **"I get unsolicited feedback that students really like the Davidson book. That means they are in and reading the book which is exactly what I want."**

Conclusion

For Professor Williams, Connect is more than just a digital tool—it is a way to actively engage students with course content and develop critical thinking skills. By combining SmartBook and Critical Thinking Assignments, he ensures students consistently read, analyze, and apply historical material, whether in online or hybrid courses. He recommends starting with SmartBook for first-time users, aligning assignments with course objectives, and using Critical Thinking Assignments to integrate primary sources into learning.

Through this structured and thoughtful approach, Williams helps students make meaningful connections between readings, primary sources, and classroom discussions fostering a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of U.S. History.

> **I have found that with Connect students use the textbook, have read and understood it, and are more capable of bringing everything together into a strong understanding in either the online or hybrid format."**

About Weatherford College

Weatherford College embraces a culture of excellence, fostering the success of all of its students and enriching the communities it serves through innovative, affordable, and accessible learning and cultural opportunities. Established in 1869, Weatherford College is the oldest continuing community college west of the Mississippi River. Weatherford College provides programs that parallel the first two years of baccalaureate education, prepare students for vocational and professional degrees, and provide valuable lifelong learning opportunities.

About Scott Williams

Professor Scott Williams has taught history since 1998, beginning as a graduate assistant and instructor at Penn State, where he led courses including U.S. History, Western Heritage, World Religions, and Vietnam at War. He currently serves as a full-time instructor at Weatherford College, where he teaches both halves of the American history survey across traditional, hybrid, and online formats. His professional interests center on course redesign, curriculum development, and the integration of innovative teaching methods to enhance student learning while upholding rigorous academic standards.

