

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Teaching as a Historian

As a teacher of history, I must begin with one basic truth: most students sitting in my classroom – even those who might major in history – are unlikely to become historians. However, throughout their lives they will repeatedly have to deal with the past. Historical narratives underpin the textures of current moments, lending authority to social movements and political arguments, informing perceptions of identity, belonging, and exclusion. None of us can escape our historicized present. Consequently, the most valuable thing that I can do for my students is to help them to understand, interrogate, and process the narrative historical claims that will confront them. Even if they will not *be* historians, they will be well-served if I can help them to *think* like historians.

Perhaps the most important step towards this goal is to teach them that history is, in fact, a narrative production. The majority of students come from high school with the perception of history as an established and definitive record -- their history textbooks hold the same weight of absolute authority for them as their chemistry textbooks. Students are generally uncomfortable with the idea that historical truth might be perspectively contingent, or that historians constantly reassess and argue about the past rather than merely reporting it like court stenographers. They often believe in, and expect, an unbiased historical account. In working to move my students past this point, I have had success in using lessons that demonstrate the futility of trying to write the type of complete and wholly detached work that students often want to demand from historical writing.

In one such lesson, I will ask a student to count out loud to five, while the rest of the class waits. I then lead a discussion about whether we could write a bias-neutral and complete history of our classroom in those five seconds. Once we begin considering the scope of the variables, by asking what different people noticed during the five seconds, what they were thinking about, and what types of things we did not notice, the impossibility of the exercise quickly becomes apparent. This type of activity, which upsets students' comfort with the concept of history as a single, fixed, and knowable timeline, encourages them to question critically the motives and arguments of historical narratives in the world around them.

Students as Stakeholders

In my courses, I have found guided discussions such as this an organic and fruitful means of achieving learning outcomes. Bringing the class into a conversation serves multiple ends. It lets students come to important historical questions and conclusions on their own, making them stakeholders in the class's intellectual process. It can foster participation from reticent class members. And it gives me the opportunity to learn from my students. Smaller classes offer great flexibility for using a range of active learning techniques to engage students, but even in larger classroom settings offer opportunities for engaged learning and discussion. Employing team-based learning, setting activities such as think-pair-share breakouts, or using technological platforms such as PollEverywhere.com are all ways of making students collaborative participants in a learning community.

Creating a classroom culture that encourages productive discussion requires both diligent commitment and an explicit structural framing. Giving students low-risk spaces to process readings helps to establish pathways for participation. In order for these tactics to be successful, however, I also need to help create the intellectual and emotional place for open dialogue. Students have to believe that their contributions have merit, and recognize that an admission of not understanding can be as generative as an analysis based on comprehension. I have found that establishing a high standard for participation and dialogue early in the course pays dividends in consistently robust discussions

throughout the semester, where students feel comfortable both putting forth ideas and appropriately challenging each other's thoughts.

Part of engaging students as stakeholders means giving them ways to identify to the materials, and this can be a challenge with medieval history. Popular film and video game cultures usually articulate a male, cis-gendered, and European image of the period. Women, students of color, and learners from traditionally underrepresented minorities are often discouraged from engaging with the Middle Ages because they do not see its connections to their own identities and interests. But medieval Europe was a racially and ethnically diverse zone, connected to the broader world by the movements of goods, ideas, and people. Women played important roles in culture, trade, and politics throughout the period. Teaching a global and diverse perspective on medieval history that confronts our cultural misapprehensions about the Middle Ages helps to make the classroom more inclusive, demonstrating to a broader range of people that they have a stake, and a voice, in the field.

Active and Kinetic Learning

I believe that inaction is antithetical to learning, and I employ a range of active teaching techniques such as student-led instruction, small-group work, and jigsaws, as well as emerging technological tools, such as Padlet or Panopto, to help facilitate collaborative learning. However, I also strongly believe in the value of physical movement and place-memory in teaching. My earlier career as a volleyball coach taught me the value of presenting singular concepts through multiple modalities; students' understanding and knowledge retention is maximized when they apply not only mental attention, but also some degree of physical attention. Muscle memory aids cognitive memory. I frequently require my students to move around the classroom, using whiteboards on opposing walls and shifting groups and locations within the class space. These types of kinetic learning activities break up static patterns of classroom behavior and expectation, keeping students' interest while facilitating their engagement with the day's materials and ideas.

In the fall of 2018 I taught a course following from these principals, that examined walking in literary and historical contexts. We held every third class session in motion, while walking on the track or around the campus. The coursework encouraged students to think about the world around them through the combined lenses of their own walking and the assigned texts, linking physical motion to mental exertion through structurally integrated kinetic practice. I believe that helping students to draw these connections will serve them well throughout their college careers and beyond.

The Social and Disciplinary Value of Academic Teaching

I strongly believe that teaching needs to be central to the mission of academic historians. The work that we do as educators is essential, both to the general public welfare and to the sustainability of our discipline. It is imperative that historians be a part of the public discourse, speaking to broad audiences as teachers. As professionals who study the past, our voices are needed in the civic square. If we do not speak out, others will say our parts for us; the recent incorporation of ahistorical European medievalisms into American white nationalist mythology should remind us of the important role that historians must play in helping to create and maintain an educated and historically conscious citizenry.

In this, academics must be educators for the long haul. Most learning in life happens outside of a university setting, and we should aim to educate on a longer timeline than a mere four years. We need to try to reach people across the whole course of their lives, and to reach them where they are. To do so, historians must embrace the idea of outreach and public engagement as constituent parts of scholarship. Digital humanities projects, more accessible academic writing in both professional and popular forums, and personal participation in activities at the local level all offer avenues through

which academic historians can consciously expand the scope of their teaching to include a broader public.

Valuing the role of teaching in historical practice is not only socially necessary, but it is an emerging disciplinary necessity as well. We live in a moment where social and political actors are increasingly questioning the value of humanities programs in the curriculum. Both because of their easily obvious career streams into industry, and because their requisite skillsets appear comparatively clear-cut and measurable, STEM fields attract increasingly more attention, funding, and students. To remain viable in this marketplace of funding and resources, historians need to make a counter-argument for our own value. We cannot do this by remaining isolated, and by talking only to ourselves. We have moved past the time when humanities scholars could afford to remain professionally secluded. Teaching broadly, and helping to create a better educated and intellectually careful public is perhaps the single most effective way that historians can demonstrate our social, political, and economic worth.