

Teaching Philosophy

Many academics see teaching as an opportunity to share their knowledge with students and pass on their years of learning and insight. While I see this transference of information as an essential part of teaching, in my classroom I stress that it is more important for students to learn *how to learn* history than to learn the content of the course. My philosophy is to teach my students how to read, write, and think about the past critically, and to provide them with ample opportunities to rehearse these skills so they can build up proficiency. By setting aside the content of history and focusing on historical inquiry as a practice, I teach students how to ask questions, find information, and debate interpretations for any topic or time period.

Students of history should understand that history is interpreted, not objective fact. The past is not a list of events but rather a web of interconnected actions, attitudes, and beliefs. An historical interpretation attempts to explain how, when, and why certain attitudes and beliefs motivated certain actions (or vice versa). One method that I favor to expose students to the complex and oftentimes contradictory nature of the historical record is to take a comparative approach. When students read primary source documents that describe the same event—such as President Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima—from different perspectives, I ask them to explain how the same event could be recorded so differently. I use these discussions to assess students’ comprehension of the readings and their facility with interpreting these events. If during a full-class discussion my students identify that some observers perceived Truman’s decision to have been clear and made easily, while others perceived him to struggle with uncertainty, I can glean that the class has collectively reached an understanding of the material and are ready to answer questions that yield deeper insight into the history, such as “What arguments might have persuaded Truman to find an alternative to the atomic bomb?” To increase students’ engagement with more complex questions, I regularly use a variation of the think-pair-share discussion model. The small group discussions that students have after taking two minutes to contemplate the question on their own yield deeper insight and debate, and I have the chance to clarify misinterpretations or provoke deeper scrutiny of certain responses before they are contributed to the full-class discussion.

In addition to analyzing historical documents and articulating their own interpretation, I teach my students how to make connections between their own ideas and the interpretations and arguments of other scholars. My philosophy is to balance primary source documents with scholarship written by historians. This trains students in the two fundamental practices of historians: examining the past by analyzing archival texts to arrive at an interpretation of events, and comparing various interpretations. Continuing the example about the atomic bomb, if during a discussion a student were to conclude from the primary sources that it was military advisors who had persuaded Truman to drop the bomb, I would ask them whether their interpretation agreed or disagreed with the explanations offered by the historians whose work on this subject they had read. Through classroom discussions, students verbally practice what they are asked to do in their papers: articulate an interpretation and defend their argument with evidence from both primary and secondary sources. By the time they write, I have already assessed students’ arguments and provided them with gentle corrections, suggestions, and counterpoints.

To starkly demonstrate the sorts of interpretive debates common amongst historians, I assign texts that offer contradictory frameworks to explain the same historical event or phenomenon. When learning about the Holocaust, for example, my students read one text that explains the genocide as a plan orchestrated and carried out by Hitler and another text that argues

that the Holocaust occurred because the German people participated in or acquiesced to the genocide. These starkly opposite explanations of how and why the Germans murdered six million Jews forces students to ask the big, important questions that historians tackle: how do rulers gain and hold on to power? Why do certain groups oppress other groups? And how do some people manage to resist and oppose those in power, when the majority supports the status quo?

It is question like these, I believe, that demonstrate the value of taking a history degree. Coursework in history prepares students to be informed, analytical, and empathetic citizens. By evaluating and learning from past decisions, and considering how choices made in the past have affected diverse constituencies, my students reflect on how powerful groups retain influence by denying status and resources to marginalized groups, and likewise how vulnerable populations have fought for rights and equality. This is fundamentally a practice of empathizing with others. After taking my courses, students—whether they themselves benefit from relative privilege or are part of marginalized groups—should recognize how individuals' social and economic status is historically conditioned, the result of legacies of political engagement or disenfranchisement, racial privilege or oppression, and financial inheritances or exploitation.

I try to model empathy as an instructor, and so my teaching practice is intentionally mindful of established hierarchies. As a discussion facilitator, I am sensitive to my student's differences and to the implicit power relations between students. In my syllabus for a new course I have designed on the history of global ghettos, I have provided discussion questions for each class session. In addition to providing a reading guide for students, I intend for these questions to democratize class conversation. My goal is for my female, minority, and shy students to speak comfortably with their peers without having to be called on, which avoids the feeling of tokenization that students have when instructors attempt to diversify discussions. I nonetheless always monitor discussions so that students' contributions are not invalidated or dismissed by peers as a result of unconscious bias.

Throughout discussions, I also model how to conduct a respectful dialogue—using each students' preferred name, citing their contributions when I elaborate on what they have said, and acknowledging useful elements of a response even when correcting a mistake. Most importantly, I try and model humility. I do not know everything, and I am comfortable with admitting to students when they have stumped me with a question. Indeed, when I am able to come back the following session with a response, I believe it reinforces my most essential pedagogical value: a demonstrated love for learning.

Ultimately, history is a writing-based discipline. I assign multiple papers throughout the semester so I can assess whether students have learned how to draw interpretations from primary documents, analyze the conclusions of other historians, and use these sources to defend their own critical arguments. Can they make claims about how and why events occurred in the past, or how relationships of power were established and maintained? If so, it demonstrates their ability to recognize patterns of change over time and how social dynamics have been constructed. Rather than testing students' rote memorization of content, these papers provide students the opportunity to demonstrate that they have learned *how to learn* from the texts I have assigned them—to decode meaning, make connections, critique ideas, and articulate their own interpretations. For students still working on these skills, I provide precise constructive feedback, such as to return to their sources to find specific evidence, that students can incorporate into subsequent papers.

In the future, I look forward to designing and teaching courses that put the practice of history at their center *and* introduce students to entwined histories of oppression and resistance—particularly racism and anti-Semitism. In the fall, for example, I will teach a course that traces how the term ghetto evolved from a descriptor of Jewish neighborhoods to a pejorative symbol of black poverty. By choosing a definitional question to guide the course—what *is* a ghetto? To what specifically do we refer when we use the term?—students will have to constantly revise their interpretation of the phenomenon as they read histories of ghettos from sixteenth century Venice to urban America in the twentieth century. Students will read several examples of how other scholars have defined “ghettos,” compare that to what they observe in the sources they read about historical ghettos, and make an argument for their own definition. In doing so, they will learn *how to learn* history—how to ask the questions and find the information that will allow them to empathize with individuals and groups in the past and present as well as to debate interpretations for any topic or time period.