

Philosophy of Teaching

My Perspective: Emphasizing Culture, Complexity, and Contingency

As a cultural historian committed to intersectional analysis, I understand the importance of a comprehensive history curriculum. In the courses that I teach, I emphasize the experiences of under-represented people and employ cultural texts to inject complexity into the broader historical narrative covered in most survey courses. This deliberate focus on cultural history and intersectional identities not only captures the attention of humanities and STEM students but also ensures that history majors deepen their knowledge by connecting familiar political, social, and economic events to cultural developments. By actively highlighting culture and diversity in my courses, my aim is to cultivate a classroom environment where students develop a profound appreciation for the complexity of the past and its representation by historians.

Although it is important that students learn facts about the past, I want them to interact with it from the present too. In my courses, we access the past through various activities, such as listening to music, examining artwork, reading short stories or novels, and watching film clips or performances, so that we can weave together a more detailed historical tapestry by the end of the course. As a result, many students come to understand that their contemporary experiences are intricately linked to the actions of complex historical actors who could not predict the far-reaching consequences of their decisions. This not only introduces students to the idea of contingency and its role in history, but also underscores why it is important to learn history in order to be more proactive and thoughtful citizens.

My Mission: Building Transferable Skillsets and Boosting Student Success

History courses, whether general surveys or upper-level thematic classes, attract a diverse audience of students, which is why it is important to focus on building a transferable skillset that empowers students so they can properly analyze course content. At the outset of each course, I introduce and emphasize the importance of reading comprehension, critical thinking, and argumentative writing, which are fundamental skills in the historian's toolkit. To demystify historical thinking and writing, I encourage students to seek out common threads across lectures and chart significant developments on timelines enabling them to track change over time. Students can then use the details they have learned from lectures and readings to make well-supported, evidence-based claims about the past. By promoting this layered and relational approach to history, I have observed how students move beyond memorization in order to engage with the primary sources and historiographical interpretations presented in lectures and readings.

During my lectures, I use multi-modal PowerPoint presentations as dynamic tools to enhance the learning experience for students. These slides serve not only to convey information but also to incorporate visual aids, share relevant online clips, and provide crucial links to significant sources. Each class session also involves a notecard activity that either focuses on source interpretation or improving writing strategies and lecture comprehension. Beyond serving as an attendance measure, these activities prove invaluable in gauging student clarity, especially in the context of large lecture halls, where tracking individual awareness can be challenging. Moreover, at the end of the semester the collected notecards allow me to reflect on the course in order to make any necessary changes to readings and lectures.

Given my devotion to fostering critical thinking and honing students' writing and argumentation skills, it should be no surprise that I prefer writing-based assignments to in-class examinations. In lieu of exams, my students take short online quizzes that check reading comprehension, demonstrate critical thinking about readings in reflective writing exercises, and draft argumentative essays that clarify their understanding

of a course unit or theme. Certainly, I understand that some departments seek coherence in the delivery of their introductory history courses, so I will comply to departmental expectations and shift my syllabi to include midterm and final examinations if required. My preference, however, is to nurture students' abilities to synthesize information from lectures, consider historiography and context, and develop their own historical interpretations by tracking their progress across essays.

The success of my student-focused approach and attention to building transferable skillsets is reflected in my consistently positive course evaluations, which are available upon request. Students appreciate my dedication to their academic success while recognizing my genuine concern for them as individuals and my unwavering commitment to developing their historical-consciousness. Furthermore, my pedagogical approach and mentorship has resulted in an increasing number of students pursuing history majors and minors—especially students from STEM departments. Altogether, this demonstrates the positive impact my specific historical perspectives and approaches can have within the broader department.

Fostering Informed Opinions and Respectful Dialogue in History Classes

While serving as an adviser for Northwestern University's History Writing Center, I noticed that many students can thoughtfully interpret primary sources, but they struggle to create their own arguments in response to diverse scholarly interpretations. Many courses incorporate contrasting interpretations within the assigned readings, but it is crucial that the pedagogical emphasis on primary source interpretation is balanced with attention to comparing scholarly interpretations too! During appointments to discuss essays written for other courses, I worked closely with students on ways to think critically about interpretations presented in assigned readings and lectures. This one-on-one mentoring encouraged them to identify similarities and differences between course materials and enabled them to construct more nuanced historiographical arguments. Although few took daring positions in their essays, numerous students crafted historiographical "middle-of-the road" arguments that demonstrated recognition of the positives and negatives of the different assessments posed by scholars by the end of our sessions.

Undergraduates have the potential to grasp the fundamentals of historiography, and their argumentative writing skills would benefit from more targeted in-class activities addressing scholarly dialogue. During lectures, I highlight my own interpretation if it is particularly distinctive or present simplified understandings of key historiographical debates whenever appropriate. If I am concerned about reading comprehension during a particular week, then I use the notecard activity to ask students to identify an author's thesis or consider the clarity and effectiveness of their introductions or conclusions. These activities not only break up the monotony of lecturing but also introduce students to historiographical debates while reinforcing their writing and analytical skills as historians in training. Furthermore, by emphasizing that the practice of history is about source interpretation, contextualization, and dialogue, I encourage students to pursue their own informed opinions of history. Many students enter history courses with the misconception that our field solely prioritizes the memorization of facts with little understanding of historical methods. They leave my courses with the realization that history is the narrativization of the past based on substantial research, and therefore it is an evolving and enriching discourse rather than an immutable canon.

Introductory history classes offer the most widespread opportunity we have as educators to expose students to sound historical thought because access to scholarly literature outside the college campus is minimal at best. In contrast, bad or oversimplistic interpretations of history have pervaded popular culture and the internet. Shifts in student literacy have made reading secondary literature and a handful of novels each semester more difficult, so films and miniseries have become accessible tools that enable discussions about interpretations of history in my courses. Most of my courses, and especially my introductory surveys,

require students to watch assigned films. Using my guidelines about reviewing films, students evaluate these popular presentations with a more critical eye, and then they contextualize the events or themes using lectures and readings in their review essays. Likewise, referencing social media, especially memes, in lectures can highlight the prevalence of misinformation or the problems posed by a lack of historical context. More than ever before, depictions of history and historical interpretations have saturated our culture, so it is crucial that students not only learn good history in our courses but are also equipped to detect bias, lack of context, and misinformation.

Additionally, we live in an era where course subjects relating to race, gender, and sexuality can be viewed as politically-charged or even unnecessary, so it is crucial that students develop skills that allow for informed historical interpretation so they can have candid discussions about the past and engage in respectful dialogue with one another. As an educator, I value free speech and understand that students may hold opinions counter to my own understanding and presentation of history. By sharing writing guidelines and grading rubrics with students before assignments are due, I clearly demonstrate that student work is assessed based on the strength of their arguments and the accuracy of their supporting evidence rather than their personal beliefs. Overall, students have consistently reported feeling valued, heard, and fairly-assessed in my evaluations.

Experience Educating and Advocating for Diverse Student Populations

Throughout my academic journey, I have been a champion of student diversity and advocate for student welfare. As an undergraduate at the University of Evansville, I was recognized for my role as a student liaison for the president's specially-appointed Diversity Initiatives Officer. Our initial work ultimately blossomed into an entire department of student services focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In my capacity as an educator, I ensure that service members receive necessary reintegration support and students with disabilities are provided with essential accommodations. Likewise, I work closely with international, first-generation, and under-represented students, who are often unaware of support programs and tools they can access because of their student fees.

Thus far, in my career, I have had the pleasure of teaching a diverse array of students at institutions in Ohio, Tennessee, and Illinois. At the University of Cincinnati, I engaged with students from neighboring inner-city public schools, high-performance magnet schools, and prestigious private academies located across the Ohio River. Unfortunately, the demographics of our student population did not match the level of diversity in the city more broadly, and many African American and first-generation students had to closely navigate the complexities of maintaining scholarships, securing financial aid, or seeking off-campus employment in order to stay enrolled. In contrast, the student population at Middle Tennessee State University was more diverse than surrounding Rutherford County, and included students from Nashville inner-city public schools, challenged rural public schools, and a mix of private academies and Christian schools. The increased diversity of the student population was especially noticeable in large lecture halls, but many students still came from challenging socioeconomic backgrounds—especially during the Great Recession. Furthermore, at MTSU there was a substantial population of military reservists, veterans, and non-traditional students who needed mentoring on course assignments and study skills because of substantial time elapsed since their previous educational pursuits.

At Northwestern University, I was presented with new challenges, such as working with non-native English speaking (ESL) students and STEM students in order to foster better writing skills and boost humanities enrollments by lessening their anxieties. It is incredibly rewarding to track improvement in these students as they learn better writing strategies and engage with historical content. I am very proud that three

of the international students I worked with have enrolled in more upper-level history courses and have even received coveted independent study slots. Likewise, one of my STEM students changed her major from pre-med to history and earned a prestigious campus-based humanities fellowship within one year of switching her major. A few others have secured placements in graduate programs across the United States and in Europe. So, I have seen firsthand how students from all different backgrounds can benefit when they learn transferable skillsets from my courses.

Conclusion

A staunch commitment to historical methods pervades my teaching style, and I take my role as a transnational cultural historian seriously because humanities education and public funding for the arts is consistently a hot-button issue. I do not seek to be the most popular instructor on campus, but I certainly covet the title of most effective. Based on student improvement and feedback, I know that my focus on building transferable skillsets works, and my hope is that students will engage more broadly with the history department by taking other courses, adding minors, or shifting majors. Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of my students leave my courses with a more comprehensive understanding of the past while recognizing that their instructor was invested in their success. Regardless of where I teach, my goal is to collaborate with other instructors in order to help the history department expand its impact on the broader campus community. Furthermore, I am also committed to the methods and practices of digital history and public history, which emphasize the need to reach audiences beyond the academy. In an age of pervasive misinformation, it is crucial that people can access good historical scholarship and are able to think critically about the past.