

Title: Getting Students to Write Like Historians in HIST 319 “History of Women and Diversity in the United States”

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Summary:

A history professor redesigns the learning goals and written assignments in an undergraduate class in order to teach students to write like historians, becoming producers of knowledge rather than consumers of knowledge.

Background:

Students assume that that to be a historian is to memorize dates, events, and people from the past. To challenge that assumption, I have redesigned a mid-level undergraduate history class that both majors and non-majors take to help them understand that to be a historian requires many skills, most of which center on the identification, analysis, and synthesis of source materials. As the Stanford History Education Group explains about dynamic curriculum, it “teaches students how to investigate historical questions by employing reading strategies such as sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and close reading. Instead of memorizing historical facts, students evaluate the trustworthiness of multiple perspectives on historical issues. They learn to make historical claims backed by documentary evidence.” By redesigning the Learning Goals and the written assignments so that they directly address those Learning Goals, I aim transform my students into producers of knowledge rather than consumers of knowledge.

HIST 319, History of Women and Diversity in the United States, focuses on a broad range of women’s experiences in order to interrogate the notion of diversity in the United States. Women have been at the forefront of activism and social change in the United States throughout the country’s history. Specific areas of investigation include women and work, abolition, suffrage, reproduction, sexuality, civil rights, feminism, education, sports, and the arts, as well as the role of women in society and the family. Particular attention is paid to race, ethnicity, and class in order to understand more fully women’s roles across cultures and over time.

During the three-year study, the course met on two different campuses, the main University of Kansas campus in Lawrence, Kansas, and the Edwards Campus of KU, a satellite in Overland Park, Kansas. The Lawrence-based classes included approximately 45 students and was offered two days a week in a combined lecture/discussion format for 2.5 hours total. The Edwards campus class included 14 students who met once a week for 2.5 hours in a combined lecture/discussion format. In Year 3, I offered the course back on the Lawrence campus, twice a week in lecture/discussion format for 2.5 hours per week with 30 students.

The course also meets KU Core Goal 4 (Culture and Diversity), Outcome 1, which is defined by the University as follows: “Upon reaching this goal, students will be able to investigate the diversity of human experience within the United States, considering, for example, age, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, language, race, religion, sexual orientation, and social class, and appreciate the contributions of different social groups.” I mention the Core requirement because the inclusion of the class in the Core has triggered a dramatic increase in the number of non-majors who take the course. The first time I taught the class, approximately 75% were Humanities majors, and more specifically, History, American Studies, or Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies majors/minors. The second time I taught the class, about half were Humanities majors and half majored in Business and Nursing, along with a greater number from the Social Sciences. The third time I taught the class, about one-third were History or Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies majors or minors; the majority of students were non-majors. Regardless of the number of majors in the class, I set the expectation at the beginning of each semester that as long as they are in a history class, they are required to read, write, and speak like a historian. My job is to ensure that they have a set of tools (Historian’s Toolbox) that they can use to meet those goals by the end of the semester.

Historian’s Toolbox

I did not coin the term, but I find it very useful in explaining to students how they can use a class to learn a set of skills that they can store, apply in the class, and then use in the future. I define the **Historian’s Toolbox** as a set of skills focused on identifying, reading, interpreting, and analyzing (in oral and written form) primary sources. These skills are integral to the development of critical thinking skills—in the classroom and beyond. The part of the Historian’s Toolbox that I am focusing on in this teaching portfolio relate to primary sources: finding, analyzing, and synthesizing. I define primary sources as a textual, aural/oral, or material object usually produced during the era that the historian is examining.

Implementation:

Before I began an overhaul of this course, I used to define the Historian's Toolbox more broadly as a set of skills that included: inquiry, critical thinking, and writing (in particular, primary source analysis). I created a variety of assignments including small-group discussions, exams, Blackboard posts in response to reading material, a short paper, and a group project that I thought would help students learn and apply the skills of a historian.

These were my original learning goals in Year 1 of this 3-year teaching cycle:

1. Read, view, listen, and discuss material relevant to the histories of women.
2. Promote critical thinking in class discussions and other assignments as directed, (e.g., large-group discussions, small-group discussion, writing assignments, digital narratives).
3. Promote research, investigative, and synthesizing skills through assignments.

After discussions with colleagues and taking a closer look at my assignments, I now realize that these learning goals are too vague and that the assignments do not match up with each goal. Therefore, I have changed the Learning Goals for Year 2 of the class (Spring 2016).

In Year 2, I was able to get students to demonstrate their ability to "Read like a historian" and "Speak like a historian" through weekly reading responses focused on reading materials and through discussion sessions and a group project in class. Helping students, some of whom had had practice in historical writing and some of whom had not, learn how to "Write like a historian" proved to be more difficult. Therefore, for the purposes of this portfolio, I will focus on the Learning Goal, "Write like a historian."

I have changed the bulk of the graded work from a primary source paper, a longer research paper, and three tests to three primary source papers that get increasingly longer and require more independent analysis with each assignment. Students have and will continue to write weekly Discussion Board Posts on Blackboard, to participate in class discussions, and work in a group on a final oral presentation with a visual component that focuses on primary sources. These are the new assignments:

Now the Learning Goals are clearly written and should be easily understood by students. And, the assignments for the class, line up directly with the Learning Goals.

This seems like a simple switch, but what I am trying to do is have the entire class focus on the finding, analysis, and presentation (in written form or orally) of primary sources. I am not only showing students in my own presentations, lectures, and discussions what professional historians do, I am restructuring the class, so that they can mimic professional historians' work. (Professional historians do not, for example, take identification and short answer exams even though we ask our students to do so in many of our classes.) I expect my students to show a greater mastery of all of the

Learning Goals.

The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard reminds instructors that if we follow traditional course-design formats, we will continue to perpetuate this model: “For many years the traditional Harvard College course workload was (a) a weekly reading assignment; (b) a one-hour midterm; (c) a 20-page paper due at the start of reading period; and (d) a three-hour final.” On their website, [“Creating Assignments & Exams,”](#) the Bok Center recommends assigning “shorter pieces of work due at more frequent intervals.” This allows for more “useable feedback” throughout the semester and encourages students to keep up with their reading throughout the course rather than just before midterms or final exams. This is one of the changes that I made in this class.

Write Like a Historian

The rest of this teaching portfolio will focus on the Learning Goal #2: **Write like a historian.**

Instead of mixing up assignments, I had students focus their written assignments on the acquisition and analysis of primary sources. They had three assignments, each one greater in page length and each one requiring students more independence in initially identifying the sources. By having students do an assignment multiple times, I allow them to build their historical skills rather than have to learn a new set of skills to address a different type of assignment.

Results from written assignments:

Year 1 Students wrote 1 Primary Source Paper and 1 Biographical Sketch (research); they did not have the chance to repeat the Primary Source assignment.	Primary Source Average $139.42/150 = 93\%$ (75% class earned grades in A range) Biographical Sketch Average $168.50/200 = 84\%$ (30% of class earned grades in A range)
Year 2 Students wrote 3 different Primary Source Papers; each assignment increased responsibility level for the student in terms of identifying the sources and in terms of the page length of each paper.	Primary Source #1 Average $80/100 = 80\%$ (31% of class earned grades in A range) Primary Source #2 Average $163.93/200 = 82\%$ (46% of class earned grades in A range) Primary Source #3 Average $252.50/300 = 84\%$ (85% of class earned grades in A range)

In Year 1, when students only had one chance to practice their interpretive skills, their

grades declined between the first (Primary Source) and second writing assignment (Biographical Sketch). They moved from interpreting a single primary source to having to identify and analyze several primary and secondary sources in the form of a research paper. Although 30% of the class still earned A-level grades on the research paper, I argue that the decline in A-level grades between the two assignments indicates that the students did not actually master the skills that I had hoped that they would acquire in the first assignment.

In Year 2, when students had the chance to repeat the same assignment (although increasing page length and their level of responsibility for identifying sources), student grades increased from 31% of the class earning A-level grades to 46% to 85%. I interpret this increase in A-level grades as an indication of improved student mastery of the skills that I wanted to teach. The Year 2 grade increase may also be explained by the additional support students received while preparing for their writing assignments:

- Primary Source PowerPoint dedicated specifically to a 4-step process of Examining Primary Sources:
 - Identify
 - Contextualize and Explore
 - Analyze
 - Evaluate
- Interpretive Worksheet matched with the PowerPoint that requires students to apply the 4-step process before they could begin each assignment. Students were required to turn in an Interpretive Worksheet for each primary source used in each assignment.
- Since one of the major revisions for this course included providing an opportunity for students to hone their historical skills by practicing the same assignment, I replaced a longer research paper with three Primary Source Papers. Each assignment required students to gain more independence—for example, for Primary Source Paper #1 and #2, I provided the sources that they were to interpret. For Primary Source Paper #1, they chose 1 source from 2 offered to them. In Primary Source Paper #2, students chose 4 sources from a packet of 17 sources. All of the sources provided for Primary Source Paper #2 directly related to a 4-week in-class unit. In Primary Source Paper #3, students had to choose their own primary sources and then proceed through the same steps that they had learned in the 2 previous assignments.

Writing Workshops

Professional historians never write in isolation and then publish their work, so it does not make sense to ask students to use that approach. In Year 1, I included in-class time for students to work together on their final group project, but I did not give them time to workshop their individual writing. In order to bolster students' mastery of the Learning Goal, Write Like a Historian, I will schedule in-class, peer-review writing workshops in advance of each Primary Source paper due date. Sharing written work and getting feedback from peers is part of a historian's professional practice and should be encouraged among students as well.

Student Work

Student Work: A-Level Primary Source Paper

This short paper examines an interview, describes the motivations of the interviewer, provides examples from the source itself, and places the subject of the interview into a larger historical context. The paper is a concise analysis of a source and the student is able to connect the source to other historical themes examined in the course.

Student Work: Medium Level Primary Source Paper

This is an example of a student's second Primary Source assignment. The paper provides a good combination of primary sources in order to make broader historical claims. The student's use of sources in the paper is skillfully executed. With a stronger introduction and conclusion to tie the paper together and a bit more attention to historical context, the paper would move into A-range.

Student Work: Low-Level Primary Source Paper

This is an example of a student's third Primary Source assignment. This paper provides a nice overview of its subject and the student has done an excellent job of selecting a set of credible sources, however, the overall structure of the paper is weak. The paper does not provide an argument to hold the sources together and to explain the historical context of the subject. Without these elements, it is difficult for the reader to understand the significance of the subject that has been analyzed in the paper.

Student Work: A-Level Final Group Project (Movie)

At the end of the semester, students become shift completely into the role of instructor by putting together group projects that reflect the themes of the course. The projects are focused on primary sources that students find and analyze in order to explain a historical problem. This group tackled the subject of gender wage gap in the United States and presented their information in the form of a short film.

Reflection:

I realized between Year 1 and Year 2 that by restructuring my assignments I could have students spend more time focused on the essential skills that I wanted them to learn. Rather than having a variety of assignments that would measure multiple skills, I decided to create opportunities for students to practice a smaller set of skills. In order to measure student mastery, I compared their grades between their first and second written assignments in Year 1 and Year 2. A greater percentage of students demonstrated mastery (A-level grades) between the first and second written assignments in Year 2. This information, along with a pre- and post-test that I gave to students in Year 2, helped me to realize that students appreciated having the chance to repeat the Primary Source Paper multiple times. They took seriously the feedback that I gave them on their first assignment because they knew that they could seamlessly apply it to the second assignment. Since the second assignment followed only a few weeks after the first assignment, they did not have time to forget what they had learned the first time around. The third Primary Source assignment came at the end of the semester, several weeks after the second assignment, but I designed it to build on what they had learned in the first two assignments. They also incorporated skills that they had practiced during in-class workshops. Most students (85%) earned A-level grades on the third and final paper. Overall, by having students repeat the Primary Source assignments, I am also creating a context that mimics the work of professional historians. Professional historians do not examine one set of primary documents, write about them, and then move on to another project. In fact, historians build on small sets of primary sources, systematically make the sets larger, and deepen the analysis. This new set of assignments more closely mimics these types of methods.

In Year 3, I plan to repeat the new structure of repeated assignments in order to gather more data on student mastery.