

## **Re-envisioning teaching graduate seminars**

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**The convergence of three experiences cause a history professor to take a new approach to teaching graduate seminars.**

### **BACKGROUND**

I was dissatisfied with the way I was teaching graduate seminars. The model for our department was somewhat unstated but dominant: select a number of readings relevant to the topic, bunch those books and articles together in topical groups, sit around and talk about them on the assigned class day, and have students write a 20 to 30-page cumulative paper, usually on how history is written or what the debates are on a current topic—basically a historiography. I went to a file of syllabi that the department maintains to see if my hunch for this model was accurate, and it was. In theory, the end result of this method is to move the students closer to their comprehensive examination.

This idea of re-thinking our approach to learning led me to try to create a seminar that would do different types of things to prepare our graduate students for their professional life. The graduate seminar that I taught Spring 2005 was titled “The Global City,” a course that was offered for the first time. It was broader in scope than most seminars; for instance, few graduate history seminars go across geographical lines to investigate more than one area. Instead, they generally look deeply at only one geographical area, such as Latin America or Russia.

Two Carnegie events helped me consider ways that I could make this seminar more relevant to the diverse needs of students. In readings, a visit, and a workshop, the authors and participants pointed out that students have different methods of learning. This conflicts with our department’s current style of teaching through one mode only, a replication of how we have been taught in graduate seminars.

A semester-long seminar at the KU Center for Teaching Excellence led by Dan Bernstein, Director, and including Andi Witzak, a design professor, served as the final catalyst for me to change the seminar content and structure. Prof. Bernstein showed us a particular curriculum design called “backward design.” In this method, the teacher begins by setting enduring goals that the students are to achieve by the term’s end. As a teacher, I first needed to decide what it was that I wanted students to get from this class and translate those ideas into goals. Choosing the readings was the last part of the process, not the first part, which was a complete turnaround from the way traditional seminars are planned. That delayed choosing troubled me, but I’m now okay with it.

### **Project Notes**

#### **Course goals**

I found that having the enduring goals as the first item gave the course real direction, and it reminded us each week of why we were there. The goals I established are broad, and they do a

lot of things. Not all are centered on comprehension. Some work on skill building, an important part of developing a professional. We assume that students come to graduate school with these skills, but that's not necessarily true.

Seminar goals (included in syllabus):

- To have students approach the central question of “What is the place of the City in History?” from a number of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives.
- To provide students with the tools and the (partial) knowledge to teach an introductory undergraduate course on world history or urban studies.
- To allow students to explore the theory and practice of the comparative method of analysis.
- To have students define the boundaries of their own graduate disciplines by answering the questions, “What is the relationship between history and sociology?” “What does it mean to think like a historian?” and “How is history relevant?”
- To provide students with the tools and practice to write and analyze historical narratives.
- To provide students with access to a wide body of literature on the theme of urban history that crosses national and continental lines, and ranges across many decades.

### **Department discussion**

Besides my own questions about the dominant seminar model, I was influenced to investigate seminars after the Department of History was named a partner to the Carnegie Foundation. We were one of ten departments nationwide so named, and our project is to re-think and re-envision the PhD. We have already spent two years discussing issues on this topic, a conversation that has led to acknowledging a general dissatisfaction with the written comprehensive exams as they now are. We have adopted a strategy for phasing them out in favor of a student portfolio of written work from seminars.

Our department meetings with the Carnegie Institute focused on how teaching methods impact student learning. In particular, a four-day workshop held at Stanford University and an on-site visit with a senior staff member influenced me. I think at present that our department loses graduate students who might be promising because they don't fit into our mold. If one size does not fit all, a presupposition that means our students have to figure out how to adapt to our teaching, then it is incumbent upon us to change our curriculum. Therefore, I considered different levels of knowledge and learning styles when I planned this course.

### **New teaching methods**

I decided to rip up the original plan that I had for the course (formulated a couple of years earlier) and redo it entirely. I was dissatisfied with the standard topical discussions focused on the content of books and articles. I'm really glad that I'm not doing it that way.

I hadn't worked before with a backward design method, but Prof. Bernstein was explicit about the steps. The key was to put the goals in the front of the syllabus. At the CTE seminar, we also talked about helping students acquire access to literature, not just trying to focus on knowledge building. We discussed creating teaching plans that foster a sense of intellectual formation and acquisition of skills, tools, and practices with less emphasis on knowledge and data.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Once the goals were established, I then had to figure out how students could demonstrate that they had mastered these ideas. I set up a system that had students move from weekly topics to units. Each unit had an assignment that included a writing component. The units were incredibly varied; for instance they had very different types of required readings, some of which required the students to “read” visual materials or interpret documents. Several assignments included primary research, such as an analysis of a text. Others included secondary research, such as reading what has already been said about a particular topic. I think it’s an advantage to have students look at different types of texts. This methodology leans towards a social sciences model and probably reflects the time I’ve spent teaching in the Department of Sociology over the past several years.

What we didn’t have were reaction papers or a semester-long research paper. Instead, the students wrote “in-between” papers of five to six pages in length that employed methods, theories, and sources. There was an element of the cumulative as each student planned out a teaching unit for an urban course, an idea I stole from a colleague who is also teaching in a new World History minor track that prepares students to teach in this frequently demanded area.

### **Project Notes**

#### **Course model and materials**

The readings that I came up with are fairly different than what I had chosen the first time I contemplated teaching this course (although I had planned to teach this several years ago, the course wasn’t held). This time I looked at readings that intersect, overlap, or can be read for several weeks. The visual materials included film, postcards, and still photography. This variety helped to give some sense of what cities are all about, not only in the past but moving towards the present. The class also did far more student presentation than I have done in previous graduate seminars. I set aside at least three weeks for student presentations.

The weekly topics focused on the comparative model, a model that is not used much in history and again is more common for sociology. Instead of looking deeply at one case study to learn something, we looked at two or more. We also needed a specific methodology. This means that I had more planning work for the assignments than may be the case in the standard seminar model. An example of how people employ the comparative method is that I had students look at US and non-US contemporary cities and one problem that they share. Some cities included in the class were Berlin, Las Vegas, Paris, and Buenos Aires. We began the semester with a discussion about what the term “global city” means. I took a devil’s advocate position that Las Vegas is a global city, a position that sparked a lively debate. This made the course appear more cross-disciplinary as the students used both historical and sociological methods to examine ideas.

#### **Why these changes?**

The changes in this course addressed the questions that the Department of History has about what we are preparing our graduates for. We want to prepare them for research, but in reality about 50% of our graduates move into teaching positions in liberal arts or secondary tier state institutions that require little research. Therefore, we need to make sure that our graduates have

exposure to thinking critically and creatively about teaching. Even if they are in a GTA position, they are not always prepared conceptually for teaching. Often the GTAs take a template for a syllabus, tinker with it, and add their favorite ideas. Adding a teaching element to this course is a small way to help them think more rigorously about how they approach teaching.

### **Student background**

I think in some ways the scope of this course may have been uncomfortable to history specialists and thus they hesitated to enroll, for usually graduate history courses have a very limited scope. Ten students enrolled, all of whom were graduate students. They were from the disciplines of Spanish and Portuguese, American studies, Latin American studies, sociology, and geography. The course was cross-listed in sociology, another department that I teach in. Although it was also cross-listed for International studies, there were not any students from that program enrolled.

With no historians in the class, I felt like I was dragging the other majors towards my discipline. However, I wanted them to make explicit what their discipline does and to consider the discourse that flows between disciplines. I think a lot of the students were already approaching an interdisciplinary mode, as was evidenced by their participation in this course.

### **STUDENT PERFORMANCE**

A close look at four student prompts and examples from each—the Travel Account Essay, Voices of the Street Essay, Analyzing Street Photographs, and Teaching Unit—indicated students had more positive than negative results in this course. The first paper, the Travel Account Essay, required students to use a primary document, an attempt to highlight the problems of cross-disciplinary work. It was not as successful as I hoped, but still very constructive. The Voices of the Street Essay was a pleasant surprise as students came up with very creative responses to a tough research question dealing with daily life in the past. Analyzing Street Photography required students to do comparative analysis, one of the main goals of the course. I thought their work was well done.

The cumulative unit required the students to create a teaching unit based on “The Global City.” I made three revisions to the prompt after the semester started, and I believe those changes added to the success of the student work. Instead of creating a final paper based on semester readings, the students had to create a teaching unit that would be applicable to their specific discipline. It required students to review the semester’s intellectual work and transpose that into materials that freshmen and sophomores could access.

Student evaluations also added to my knowledge about the impact of the course. I created an evaluation form that asked questions specific to the course units, and I believe that including paraphrased student comments from those evaluations provides a good balance to my observations.

### **Project Notes**

**Notes on assessment:**

It's difficult to differentiate one paper from another at the graduate student level. This writing is generally at a high level, so determining levels of papers in graduate school courses is a much finer point than in undergraduate courses. What I see students working on is fine-tuning their responses more than any other issue. In a graduate class, the differences are typically between a ten and a nine or a nine and an eight, as opposed to a ten and a five. I gave one seven to a student who couldn't write well in English. It is pretty common in graduate classes that students have the necessary writing skills and put in the effort needed to get an "A" on a paper. "B" papers fall short in one category. For example, in the travel account essay, students may fall short in addressing questions such as, "Does the essay draw on the preparatory readings in a meaningful way" or "Is the travel account revealed as a useful or problematic document on the history, customs and landscape of the city or cities under review?" A few students will just give up, for whatever reason, such as deciding graduate school isn't for them, etc.

What I would prefer to do is use a high pass, pass, and no pass system to explain how I differentiate among graduate students. That is pretty much what determines grades for me, and I think it provides a better distinction than A, B, C, etc. If I used this system, I would have given five high passes, four passes, and one no pass. The overall grades I did give out were seven solid "A" grades, one A- (for lack of effort, not skill), one B (for lack of skill, not effort), and one incomplete for a PhD student who just fizzled.

The highest possible score a student could have received was 410 points, and the top score recorded was a 402 that was given to a first year graduate student who had previously been an honors undergraduate at the University of Kansas. The second highest score, 389, went to another first semester graduate student. One student from Latin America also had a high score; he is now off doing research. In his papers, he tried different strategies, which sometimes worked well and sometimes didn't work so well.

When I looked at the rubrics for the papers, two areas stood out where students lost points. A key factor that often delineated "A" papers from "A-" papers was comparison. Because this idea was central to the class, I especially asked the students to look carefully at how they developed their comparisons. I also noted some weakness in using background readings, more often early in the semester. What I noted regarding this factor was that a student might not include enough references to the background papers given in class as preparatory material. Again, this is a matter of fine-tuning and not an egregious writing error.

To a lesser extent, but still important, I looked for how the student dealt with documentation. I also looked at research skills—all the papers combined skill and effort, but it is hard for me to tell whether lack of skill or lack of effort caused a problem in this area as I have only the product to use for judgment.

**Postcards:**

I used historical postcards as primary data when the students were discussing street photography. The class also read about the history of international postcards during the semester. This was a valuable way to introduce the students to other primary documents that are outside of the scope

of traditional readings. I believe that it helps broaden their understanding of ways to approach history.

**Travel Account essay:**

This was the first essay, and for it, students had to use a primary document; however, it didn't fully work. I intended that it would show the problems scholars have crossing disciplines. Beginning work on it was difficult, as the students were used to doing work on the contemporary period; therefore, going back 100 years for a document was a stretch. In spite of my concerns, I did think that overall they did okay.

The student Travel Account Essay featured in this poster points to some ways of using geographical categories and landscapes. It was all right, but the author clearly had to do a crossing over from previous types of work with documents. That attempt wasn't seamless, hence I gave it a score that reflects the minor roughness of the work.

**Voices of the Street essay:**

The Voices of the Street essay was interesting to the students: they really took off on the project. This was a pleasant surprise. In this assignment, students had to detail the daily life of a person or type of person for a historical period before 1946. The student author whose paper is included interviewed her grandmother, who had been a nightclub singer in Chicago. I liked this work because it shows an oral history in a specific way, it used the readings for the course, and it presented a unique creative response from someone who is not used to doing history.

**Analyzing street photographs:**

I was pleased with the way the student writing came along and with the growing skills that they demonstrated in applying comparative analysis. One of the course goals was to use a comparative method to do historical analysis, and the author whose paper I've included did a wonderful job of seeing photographs as constructions by a particular photographer in two different contexts. This essay critiques Helen Levitt street photographs, and those photographs can be seen at the attached link to the "Masters of Photography" website.

**Teaching unit:**

Students needed to create a teaching unit on the global city for their final project. It resembled a final exam because they had to go back to key readings and distill that material in order to create teaching documents that freshmen and sophomores would understand.

This unit might have been the most creative and may have created the best products (I tend to get the best products at the end of the semester). However, not all of the students see themselves as going into teaching, meaning that the project was less useful for them. The particular example included here was done by a student in Latin American studies with a background in economics who created an international course for business students. I think it is well thought out, with good length and good graphs. It focuses on consumerism, which is a practical way to connect business students to the global city.

This assignment originally called for students to prepare a unit on an unspecified topic for underclassmen on world history. I decided it was less useful than I had originally intended, as

these diverse students wouldn't be teaching history in their fields. Instead, I revised the prompt so that the teaching unit focused on the global city. This allowed students to center the project on their discipline so that it would serve their needs when they teach. One student created a teaching unit that she will use this fall at KU, while others created units that they can tap into at a later date.

The students were to have a required teaching presentation; however, I decided that they had done enough projects so I made it optional. Instead, the students decided to share portions of their work by e-mail because they were curious how people from different disciplinary backgrounds would construct a teaching unit on this topic.

The original prompt also had a lecture component, but I didn't think it seemed very useful. I thought the students would be able to construct a lecture without doing a special unit on it. Also, lecturing is not always the best way to get material across, so why was I privileging it? I killed that component in order to focus on the teaching assignment. It is a much better project in its revised form.

Revised Assignment of Teaching Unit for History 808:

You have been invited to teach a broad introductory undergraduate course on a subject of your choosing.

Prepare a unit of this class that covers the global city. The unit should comprise two or three weeks of course time.

Prepare a session-by-session outline of the unit that lays out the topics for lecture and discussion, including assigned readings, visual materials and any other data that will be shared, and places the unit in the context of the entire semester.

## REFLECTIONS

In a lot of ways, the course worked better than I would have expected it to. I didn't know how well students from other disciplines, especially those focused on their own research, would make the leap into something called "The Global City." This may not have been the primary interest for half of the class, yet they did excellent work throughout the semester.

I was also impressed with the students' willingness to look at things through new perspectives and to wrestle with new ideas. In most cases, that worked out well. These two points suggest to me that a great deal of what we did throughout the course had positive benefits for the students.

Specifically, I noticed improvement in several student skills. These skills should be transferable to other areas of learning, and I am pleased at their cognitive gains.

- Writing improved, specifically their ability to write and support arguments.
- Research abilities improved as they got more used to looking at different source materials.
- Understanding of research journal readings improved as that material began to percolate through, and I believe they came to understand those sources better.

- Ability to perform comparative analysis improved, although I do want to increase the attention to that area if I teach the course again. Students need to do more reading and have more discussions about what goes into a comparative analysis.

## **Project Notes**

### **Five Pedagogical Areas**

#### *Research topics*

I hoped that our work would lead the students to improve their ability to conceptualize research topics. Many students were thinking about their MA thesis topics when they came to the class, and they didn't yet have a clue as to what those topics would be. Other students who knew what they wanted to do on their dissertation developed skills that they could use for their research, such as looking at visual data. Almost all students remarked on this area; I don't think they are necessarily getting training in it in any other venue.

#### *Amount of writing*

The course had too much writing over a relatively short period of time for some of the students to handle. When we reached a point about two-thirds of the way through the semester, the other courses students were enrolled in became more involved and had increased demands, a situation that impacted the student writing for our course. "The Global City" asked them to complete six papers, of different lengths, but all requiring some research. Next time I plan to make the writing a little less intense. However, by doing six papers, I saw improvement in the students' skills. Because of that growth, I would only give up one assignment.

#### *Oral presentations*

I need to rethink how to structure oral presentations. We probably spent too much time on them. We often went over the time limit for individual presentations, and I think that happened because the students got so excited about their material. It never occurred to me to not have everyone do an oral presentation on each unit; instead, as the students suggested, I could divide the class in half, and have one group do oral presentations for one project, and the other half for a different project. Some early projects had oral presentations only, and it doesn't have to happen that way. I'd like everyone to do two, not four, oral presentations. I have other ways to assess participation without all four presentations.

#### *Coverage*

I hope that the skill acquisition and perspective shifting was a useful part of the course that helped to open the students' minds. I believe that they did gain from this new methodology and that they weren't closed to what I threw out. I suspect other seminar courses are more focused on topic coverage and having the students become real familiar with those readings. That wasn't the key part of this course, but we did do enough coverage to drive the subject matter. These readings provided some options for research methods and topics.

#### *Impact on teaching*

An undergraduate course that I taught on urban sociology led to this course; primarily, I brought its ideas back to history. Now there are ways in which this course will be used, such as pieces and texts, in a new undergraduate history course on Sin City that I am scheduled to teach next

fall. What I did in this semester's course will be applicable in the Sin City course as I will stress comparative analysis across at least 100 years, probably beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The undergraduate history course presents a broad history, but we will make use of universal methods, some out of this course. In particular, I will require one or two books used in this seminar and draw on some of the other readings for lecture material.

I'll wait a year before I reteach "The Global City." I almost never teach a graduate course back to back, and I think it's good to let the graduate course percolate. I'm still not sure of the audience; I suppose it would be a different course with history majors. I may need to teach it every other year.

### **Student Observations: Course Evaluations:**

The student evaluation that I created specifically for this course had sections for each unit, and I found the students' responses interesting. In general, the majority of students felt that the course met the six established course goals.

Using anonymous, paraphrased comments from the student evaluations in this poster will provide a more balanced view of the course. By including student voices, I will offset the heavy use of my voice. Finally, I look forward to receiving poster feedback about the student comments as well as about the structure and methods of the course.

- Each student got different things out of this course, an expected outcome as they ran the gamut of graduate students. Some were in their first semester of course work, and some were working on their dissertation. I had never created goals before for a course, and it seemed to work. I didn't hold to all the goals, but that absence was purposeful and not due to neglect.
- One student commented, "This class had the best discussion I have ever had in a class (as far as quality and participation by all)," which was true for me as well. I thought the amount and level of the discussions were good, especially as these interdisciplinary discussions were helping students to make some sense out of the material that would help them in their area.
- Another question on the student evaluation asked for their comments on the visual elements of research. We had discussed the idea that what a photo displays is a construction, both for what is in the picture and what is left out. This turned out to be very useful. The students acquired some critical skills about visual evidence by reading and performing this visual critique.
- One student noted that the class prepared students to be more informed about abilities to look at a place and to look through material. This indicates skill acquisition, and it comes from reading with a broad viewpoint.

### Student Evaluation questions:

1. What was the most valuable and what was least valuable in this course in terms of your intellectual development?
2. To what extent were the course goals met?
3. What new skills or disciplinary methods did you learn and what old skills were you able to improve?
4. How would you describe the instructor's approach to the course and to the students?

5. In what ways did the unit on Reading and Touring the Modern and Postmodern Cities (and the travel account essay) contribute to your knowledge about the global city and the use of primary historical documents?
6. In what ways did the unit on the Spectacle City and Public Space (and the Journal Article Review Essay) contribute to your understanding of cities?
7. In what way was the unit on Streetlife in the Global City (and the Voices of the Street assignment) valuable?
8. In what ways did the unit on Disciplines and Methods (and the comparative assignment on an urban process or problem) help you to understand the nature of cities and/or the value of the comparative method?
9. In what ways was the unit on the Visual City (and the assignment on Street Photography) useful to you?
10. In what way was the unit on the Postmodern City and Social Networks (and the teaching unit assignment) valuable?
11. Please rate the following texts as to their effectiveness in contributing to your understanding of the subject matter of the course (circle the appropriate number).  
1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Average, 4 = Good, 5 = Excellent, Not Read.
  - a. Donald, **Imagining the Modern City**
  - b. Fritzsche, **Reading Berlin 1900**
  - c. Cooper, **Last Honest Place in America**
  - d. Podalsky, **Spectacular City**
  - e. Lee, **Picturing Chinatown**
  - f. MacGaffey, **Congo-Paris**
  - g. Schwartz, **Pleasure Island**
12. In general, did you find the course readings to be useful?