

Title: Invigorating Class Discussion Using Multiple Engagements with the Past and Present
Kim Warren, History

Executive Summary

To invigorate student participation in class discussions, increase how much they retained from the course, and improve their ability to think like a historian, a history professor re-organized her course using student's out-of-class time, Blackboard discussion groups, and student presentations, to give students multiple opportunities to engage with course material.

Background

"The History of Women in the United States" is a 500-level course. In Spring 2008, 44 students took HIST 531 (which is cross-listed with American Studies AMST 511 and Women's Studies WS 511.) Although the course is an upper-division class, the skill level of the students is very broad, since there are no prerequisites for enrollment. Some students have not have taken any previous history classes, although most are majoring in history, American studies, or women's studies and have quite a bit of knowledge and several skills to contribute. It is typical that this type of class attracts students with various experiences in doing historical analysis. Students are drawn to the course material, often reporting that they have been looking forward to taking a course that focuses on women for a long time, even though they usually use other History courses to meet their general education requirements. For most of the students (regardless of whether they are majors in history, American studies, women's studies, or other fields), this 500-level course is one of their first classes with a large research component or a service-learning track.

Even though students come to the class with a variety of backgrounds, they all need to work toward the same objectives and goals. The syllabus states that by the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Think like historians—to gather evidence, evaluate evidence, and build arguments with evidence;
2. Link historical trends to contemporary legacies regarding the construction of gender;
3. Use service-learning approaches to apply ideas from class to community settings OR use research approaches to develop original arguments about women's experiences.

Having already reorganized the course to bolster the service-learning and research components, this time around, I focused on improving students' ability to meet the first two goals of the course.

I used Lendol Calder's approaches in "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey" to think about ways of having students engage with the course materials before entering into the classroom. Calder argues that students who are introduced to new information through lectures will not likely retain much of that information. However, if they have time to learn about the subject on their own, process the new information (through writing or talking), and then hear a lecture, they will be more likely to retain that new knowledge. My goal with this course redesign was to create multiple opportunities for students to engage with new historical information and then gather evidence, evaluate that evidence, and build arguments with evidence as historians do.

Implementation

Reorganization of class structure (Tuesday) and demonstration of understanding:

In an upper-level class that only meets twice a week (Tuesday/Thursday), it is important that students use class time to deepen their understanding of knowledge that they have acquired outside of the classroom setting. Rather than have students start their discussions of the week's readings in class, I wanted them to begin those discussions in advance of class meetings. Students were required to complete their reading before Tuesday's class meeting and then participate in online discussions through Blackboard. Once a semester, students joined a Lead Group of five to six students, which was charged with several additional responsibilities, including posting a short essay (two to three paragraphs or 200 words) that summarized significant issues, topics, and events presented in all of the assigned readings. There were no specific questions that prompted their written responses, but they were challenged to pull information from the individual readings that would allow them to compile for the rest of the class a timeline of significant historical events related to the reading. The timelines provided a historical framework and background information for the class.

During the first ten minutes of class on Tuesdays, students read printed copies of Blackboard posts and timelines in order to focus their thinking about the ways that the individual assigned readings related to each other. Since one of the important skills that historians build is assessing the *significance* of events, each week the Lead Group gave a 10-minute presentation to help the rest of the class sift through the vast amounts of information on their timeline and determine key historical turning points. The Lead Group used the assigned course readings as reference points. After the Lead Group made their presentation and clarified students' questions, I gave a brief lecture to fill in missing information and build more links between the readings.

By completing their reading on their own, reviewing the Blackboard essays and timelines, and creating/listening to presentations, students had several opportunities to familiarize themselves with the themes, chronology, and evidence that were critical to understanding the week's unit *before* they listened to a lecture or engaged in group discussions. By frontloading the preparation for the week *before* the first class meeting on Tuesday, students had several days to think about the week's topic before they entered the classroom. These opportunities prepared them to listen for significant arguments in short presentations by the Lead Group and brief lectures by the professor.

In addition to these assignments, I asked all students to follow-up Tuesday's class with more writing on Blackboard. This provided them another opportunity for them to ask questions, raise issues, and comment on their own learning. Requiring them to engage with course material before the second class meeting also created some continuity between the Tuesday and Thursday meetings.

Reorganization of class structure (Thursday) and demonstration of understanding:

During the second class meeting each week, I introduced a contemporary document related to the week's historical readings to help students connect their readings about the past to present-day issues. In small groups, students discussed links between the present and the past. After giving students time to talk with one another in small groups, I facilitated a large-group discussion to

help students think about broad concepts such as defining terms like "gender equality" or "comparable worth"; examining gender representations through the lenses of race, class, and sexuality; and determining how national events affect or are affected by the specific individuals/events that they had learned about in their course reading.

Intended outcomes:

By restructuring the class format so that students drove the initial interpretations of primary evidence (through postings to Blackboard and through presentations on Tuesdays), I hoped to increase the level of their engagement with the assigned reading. On a weekly basis, they demonstrated their interpretive skills through online postings and in-class presentations and discussions. By offering them weekly opportunities to link the past and the present, they had many opportunities to prepare for their final assignment by gathering and synthesizing data, determining how to pay particular attention to significant events/individuals, and linking contemporary and historical issues relating to labor, political activism, family, athletics, and other women's issues. I evaluated students' level of participation and their comprehension of the course readings by tracking the number and quality of their online postings as well as their contributions to group discussions.

Student Performance

The two assignments that specifically allowed students to demonstrate their ability to think like historians and link the past to the present were the Blackboard Participation Assignment and the Final Presentation (see also [Final Presentation Rubric](#)).

The Participation assignment required students to read, synthesize, and analyze course readings for themselves and their classmates. Through online posts, students began discussions with one another before the first class meeting of the week. Because this assignment put them into positions of interpreting and analyzing historical information for their classmates, they were much more active participants in their own learning than they were under typical discussion group conditions. The experiences of preparing Timelines and a Presentation allowed them to practice the way that historians pull details from primary evidence in order to build a cohesive narrative about the past. Students were evaluated on the number and quality of their online posts, contributions to the Lead Group Presentation, and participation level in small- and large-group discussions.

Having taught this class once with the revised format, I can already report that students' participation levels in group discussions were better than in earlier semesters. Students in the Lead Group became especially knowledgeable about the material for the week, because they had teaching responsibilities. Because there were multiple opportunities to engage with the course material, the rest of the students were able to sustain discussions in small and large groups at a deeper level than in earlier semesters when students only had one opportunity to read and then discuss the material. Overall, discussions in small groups and large groups were more energetic, and students were able to point to specific readings when building their own arguments. They connected individual readings, abstracted broad themes, and used evidence (rather than opinion) to advance their arguments. Moving the lecture component of the unit from the beginning of the unit to later on also minimized their expectation that the professor would provide all of the information for the week. Instead, students became both consumers and producers of knowledge. Students were far more ready to make connections between the past and present than they have been in previous versions of this class where the only opportunity to make those connections was at the end of the semester during the final assignment. Students more readily met the intellectual goals of the course within this new framework than in past semesters. (For a reference on active learning, see [learning_pyramid.pdf](#))

Students used their Blackboard posts as a way to engage with course reading before they arrived at class each week. In most cases (examples below), students highlighted an author's argument and how it helped them understand a certain time period or helped them think about how a historical problem persists today. By closely examining several primary sources from a certain time period, students were able to build their understanding of larger trends during that period.

Examples of student Blackboard posts:

1. In the Duniway [author] article I found that her focus centered around equality. Duniway emphasized the idea that men were a very important part of the suffrage movement, and that women were partners with men.

2. In the Luscomb [author] article I was surprised to find that the "open air meetings" had such a literal context. I found it interesting that women were literally doing their speeches in the out of doors.
3. Gilman [author] considered herself a sociologist rather than a feminist because her vision was not only for women. She was highly critical of private institutions like marriage and families because this isolated women and prevented their participation in broader social developments. This idea was very evident in this reading.
4. At the same time that Gilman [author] is promoting a lifestyle that is community-oriented, she takes care to defend the notion that besides sharing a common kitchen, the families could maintain their privacy: ("The home would [become a] place of peace and rest, of love and privacy.") Do you think that this is realistic?
5. Gilman [author] attempts to address the issue of how women should spend their time once liberated from most housework by a semi-communal living situation. Her suggestions focus mostly on the necessity of motherhood: ("If women did choose professions unsuitable to maternity, Nature would quietly extinguish them by her unvarying processes.") Would you consider this a feminist vision? Would this fit into any of the three categories of feminism described in *No Turning Back*? [The student is referring to assigned reading from previous weeks.]
6. In the essay, "From Tomboy to Lady," I learned that the issue of women in sports not only had to do with sex, but also with class. I had never heard of Babe Didrickson Zaharias until reading this short story about her. She was considered the best female athlete of her time and many believed she was the best athlete in general...She was a very versatile athlete and could adapt to any sport. Babe played basketball, baseball, track and field, and golf. Not to mention she tried tennis and bowling as well...Babe was in and out of professional sports and amateur sports due to endorsements that were offered to her...Babe had to face many critiques throughout her lifetime. People could not just accept that she was an outstanding athlete, instead they had to judge her appearance...The part that surprised me the most was that people could not accept the fact that Babe was amazing at sports, rather they noticed her boyish looks.

In the final presentation, students were asked to demonstrate their ability to think like historians (see [Group 1](#), [Group 2](#), and [rubric](#)). Since they had had several opportunities to practice their analytical skills (through Blackboard posts and Lead Group presentations) during the semester, most groups excelled with their final presentation. The video of the student presentation represents a high-level presentation that clearly incorporates students' understanding of the challenge of women's roles as parents and workers both in the past and the present. The students demonstrate that they are aware of general historical trends related to this problem and point to possible solutions that they learned from their reading.

Reflections

When I changed the course assignments so that students would have to take a more active role in preparing for class each week, the students were much more engaged in class discussions. I also found that I could spend less time on lecture and filling in background information and more time facilitating discussions that would help students think like historians.

The final assignment required a visual aid and most student groups opted to use PowerPoint. Although this did not create a challenge for most students, there were some who had to learn more about the technology before they could contribute to their final presentation. However, since the assignment allowed them to make contributions to their final assignment in several ways that did not necessarily tie them to using PowerPoint, no students were ultimately penalized if they were not familiar with the software.

Compared to the work presented in previous semesters, students in Spring 2008 created much more cohesive final presentations. They incorporated course material more clearly, they connected to large themes of the course more readily, and they demonstrated their ability to read and analyze historical evidence more successfully.

In future course offerings, I would probably make the Lead Groups smaller so that I could see more clearly the development of skills in historical analysis that individual students made. Having seen how much teaching information helped students retain information, I would also probably expand the role of the Lead Group by asking them to lead part of the small-group discussions in addition to making their presentations during the semester.

The obvious lesson from this experience was that giving students multiple opportunities to learn about a topic improves their ability to talk about and analyze information. I plan to look at the assignments in other courses to be sure that they build on one another and thus allow students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding and their ability to improve their skills over the course of a semester.