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Statement of Teaching Philosophy
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I best summarize my teaching approach as students “getting their hands dirty.” For me, engagement with history means writing history, using primary and secondary sources to develop an argument about why an event or process happened. Students coming into my courses can expect to learn not only the content of the class, but also a skill-set centered on critical analysis, engaging discussion, broad research, and argumentative writing—the combination of knowledge and practice that lie at the heart of an active, democratic society. Such activities first attracted me to history, and were those I most enjoyed as an undergraduate at Oglethorpe University, a small liberal arts college in Atlanta. I attempt to recreate those experiences for my students in courses at Emory University, the University of Georgia, and the University of Alaska Anchorage. These courses ranged from Western Civilization I and II surveys through upper-division thematic and French history topics, with student bodies including first-generation college attendees, international students, detached duty military personnel and non-traditional students. Guiding all these students through their own historical explanations allows me not only to impart the specific knowledge of the discipline, but also the techniques of research and writing that are the foundations of a liberal arts education.

I view working with primary sources as essential to understanding history. Students bring into the classroom a series of preconceptions of history as nothing more than a chaotic succession of dates and events, or a requirement to be more “well-rounded,” or as a battleground for political debates. My goal is to present history as a dynamic process, and working with primary sources allows students to see past generations struggling with the questions facing them. In my survey courses, I introduce a series of texts ranging from Locke, Marx and Engels, and Keynes to contemporary newspapers and biographical pieces, while digital technology allows me to present sources like female workers’ songs and visual tours of the world’s fairs. Classroom discussions focus on the dialogue between historical sources, an approach student evaluations view positively. In a survey class at Emory, students were having trouble understanding the appeal of Rousseau’s “general will.” I addressed this in the following class by a role-playing exercise that divided the class into groups presenting the complaints of different French towns drawn from the *cahiers de doléances*, and to propose solutions as part of a mock Estates General. As I wrote the responses from each group on the board, the students saw the parallels—and why the general will went from an abstract concept to a seemingly real phenomenon. I now use this exercise as a standard component of my survey classes. By assisting students in working through similar questions, I help them understand how the reactions of one generation were structured by the experiences of the previous—which ultimately helps them reflect on the contemporary world and the issues facing it.

The extensive work with primary sources prepares students for the written projects at the core of my courses, helping students develop from formulating a research strategy for an unfamiliar topic to constructing an historical argument based on critical engagement with sources. I start with a Scavenger Hunt project to teach the fundamentals of research. Students select a topic from a list, and compose a brief summary of the topic and a list of related primary and secondary sources. Sessions with the library reference staff helps students locate sources and introduces an often underappreciated academic resource. Later projects ask students to prepare a causal argument for a historical event, based in part of sources provided by me. Knowing my students through classroom and office hour conversations

allows me to tailor such assignments. A recent class composed primarily of economics, business and public health-related majors wrote on the British Public Health Act of 1848, an admittedly obscure topic that allowed students to explore the development of the regulatory state, industrialization and class conflict in a context that resonated with their own interests. The Scavenger Hunt project gave students the confidence to find and work with relevant sources, while in-class and office hour discussions of writing strategies guided them towards a critique of both the sources and their own writing. This combined approach not only allowed me to help students develop an understanding of history, but also to critically analyze their own research and writing strategies—a skill my non-traditional student experience indicates is applicable far beyond the university classroom.

Technology represents one of the greatest developments in contemporary education, which I believe enhances the liberal arts classroom. Students are increasingly relying on electronic databases and the Internet, and the ability to access research sources beyond the campus library needs to be encouraged. This creates an obligation to help students identify and assess such sources; my Scavenger Hunt projects promote proficiency with databases such as WorldCat and JSTOR as a fundamental component of a research agenda. In the classroom, I have used technology not only for class management and to introduce non-textual sources, but also to expand the teaching environment. A simple “Getting Started” guide or a Frequently-Asked-Questions list for projects increases student confidence, while alerts of relevant events on campus create the opportunity for deeper involvement with the academic community. My work with other faculty at the Emory Center for Interactive Teaching has led me to consider future Internet-based presentations and pod- and video-casting. Although I have a deeper appreciation of the very real problems that arise when a project becomes more about the technology than the content, pressing students to move beyond the analytical essay can help enrich their understanding of history and provide them with another tool to interact with the world to which they belong.

Reflecting back over my teaching experience, I believe my overall approach of emphasizing primary sources and writing history has been successful. Yet my teaching style is continuing to evolve, in both approach and content. Teaching the full sequence of Western Civilization at the University of Alaska Anchorage has encouraged me to expand topical discussion to make students more aware of the broader impact of history. I feel less restraint introducing in classes that Thucydides’ interpretation of the Peloponnesian War poisoned Western views of democracy as long as he remained a core part of the education corpus for elites, or that Napoleon was very self-consciously modeling his speeches to the troops of the Army of Italy on Julius Caesar’s dispatches, even if the vocabulary Napoleon used was that of the French Revolution. I am more willing to let students turn discussions to matters tangential to my lesson plan but of interest to them, as in a recent class when a comment on the change to religious organization in France after the 1801 Concordat sparked a class debate on differences in charity and welfare among Western nations. I still struggle with some of these changes; finding enough time in the term (the “rushed” nature of the class is a too-common complaint in student evaluations) remains a pre-occupation for me. Yet students articulating that one of the strengths of a course was “the level Gavorsky made us think on (much more deep in reasoning)” and naming a skill that improved as “enjoying history” indicate to me that I have begun merging both the discipline knowledge and the broader goal of educating students in the best liberal arts tradition.