

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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My classroom method emphasizes student expression, both written and oral. Depending on the size of the class, I make an effort to lecture for no more than about half the allotted time and use the remainder of the time for discussions of primary sources or, more rarely, my lecture or student presentations. If classes are large, I break the participants into smaller groups and run discussion by having groups report back to the plenum. So far, my classes have tended to be small, so that has rarely been necessary.

I think classroom content should be relevant to the lives of the students and to their worldview, especially in survey classes where the majority of the participants are there only because they are required to be and not out of love of the material. This not only makes for more engaging and productive learning, it in turn facilitates achieving the goal of student expression. People stand and talk, or sit and write, if they care about the issue. Instead of trying to introduce survey classes with a vague defence of the field of history, I have found it more effective to pick subject matter and source material that speaks to issues that are current and important to students and their beliefs. For example, in my *Western Civilization to 1600* classes, I have stressed the early history of Christianity more strongly than the textbook. On the one hand, this has the somewhat subversive effect of challenging the previous assumptions about religion that some students bring to class. On the other hand, it is a way to tap into the wealth of deep, if often narrow, knowledge that those same students often bring with them to class and turn it to the advantage of the others present. Those students who are irritated by comparisons between Christianity and other religions, for example, are in their element when we use Biblical source material to discuss the effect that Christianization might have had on citizen loyalty to the Roman polity during the late empire period. This approach has worked even in the University of Maryland University College system with low admission hurdles and no religious context.

I try to find subject matter and sources for discussion that are still, even if centuries later, emotively laden. Plutarch's description of the institutionalized homosexuality of the Spartans always inspires lively debate. Since I have been teaching mainly within the American military community, I have tried, with only partial success, to have students themselves discover the tension between Spartan military prowess and the current American "don't ask – don't tell" policy in the military. In my online classes right now, I am running student debates on whether Jesus of Nazereth historically existed and on whether or not the United States is an empire that can fruitfully be compared to the Roman Empire. In my

German classes on more recent Baltic history, finding such subject matter has been easy. The identities and histories of the Baltic peoples are so entangled in the wars, ideologies and catastrophes that provoke vociferous responses from German intellectuals that the discussions have almost run themselves.

One more example should suffice. During my *Western Civilization from 1600* lecture on the Cold War, I put on a none-too-subtle ideological mask. While I use only Soviet sources and perspectives and Marxist-Leninist vocabulary to describe the events, some students take diligent notes while others watch me sceptically. The discussions have been lively. This not only draws attention to the “facts” of history, in an admittedly crude manner, it also unmasks the influence of socialization and historiography on attitudes. Student presentations on Arab views of the Crusades have a similar effect.

Having constantly drawn on their own resources and questioned their own perspectives throughout the term, students can then, at the close of the semester, hold a more productive discussion about whether history matters. If that discussion had been held up front, at the beginning of the term, we would have gotten mostly vague abstractions or platitudes about the supposed “lessons of history”.

Even teaching *Western Civilization* surveys has given me some opportunity to integrate my research into classroom teaching. I use the diary of a German woman from Riga that is of central importance to my dissertation to illustrate the attributes of nominally totalitarian regimes. Her descriptions of life under the Bolsheviks give contour to abstractions used to describe dictatorships in the literature. My survey of American and Soviet veterans has also been part of my unit on the Cold War. I am certain that I could do more with classes on Russian and German history.

Ultimately, writing is just as important as the content of the course. Even if it were the case that the content of humanities and social science classes included nothing of import or relevance, students need the writing skills, even now, in the computer age. In the German system, where I have only taught at a level where written assignments have, by university policy, not been required, this hasn't worked out. With American students it has become the backbone of student grades. Classes have been small enough to allow me to check and re-check their term papers and book reviews, often walking them through techniques as simple as footnoting and as abstract as constructing a sound argument. Some students have feared my midterms – where only broad essay questions await them – only to return to the final more confident than before. I am certain that they leave my class with fewer misgivings about

writing in higher-level courses or out in the “real world”. I differ from many of my Maryland colleagues who still rely on fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice tests.

In summary, throughout the term I make every effort to make what we cover in class relevant to the students and in turn give students the opportunity – in the spoken and written word – to express their views on those subjects. This approach challenges and empowers class participants. My teaching evaluations show that students appreciate the opportunities that my classes give them to express themselves and test their ideas in open discussion. Of course, one student remarked that the thing he most liked about the course was that it was now “over”!

In the short term, as long as I remain with Maryland in Europe, I will work to further adapt my approach to online class formats. That will mean finding more and better subject matter for internet forums which encourage lively student interaction on important and relevant historical issues. The challenge in the longer term, assuming I move back into the traditional classroom, will be to refine my presentation technique and find topics and source material in Russian history, for example, which speak to or challenge the identities and socialization of American students the same way that the broad discussion of religions, mentalities and ideologies does in the survey classes I have taught so far.