Restructuring the Initial College History Experience

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My fellow history nerds:

As historians, we've spent our professional lives deepening and refining our understanding of particular time periods and places, and (save for the frustrations that accompany most jobs) we love it. We find history fascinating. We find the hunt for evidence enlivening. We enjoy communicating what we know, whether it's in the classroom, at a conference, or in an article or book. We want our students to share our passion, and to join with us in diving deep into the past.

But our shared nerditude can sometimes create obstacles to achieving that goal.

We were very likely exceptional history students. We had minds that loaned themselves to historical thinking; we liked to read; we understood the structures of historical writing, whether by clear instruction or intuition. Our habits of mind made history rewarding and fun. This means we sometimes have difficulty understanding that the majority of our students do not think or create or read or write as we did. We extrapolate our own experience to make it universal, when it often is not.

We have developed a capacious understanding of the past. I remember once being asked by the local historical society to present a St Patrick's day talk on the Irish in America (despite the fact that I am a specialist in Native history, not the Irish). I explained to the audience that to really understand the topic, we needed to begin at the Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169; I truly could not figure out how to choose a more recent spot to begin (I am not a historian of the Middle Ages either). This is perhaps an overblown example, but we are all historical sponges who have soaked up tremendous amounts of information in our careers and that can make it tricky for us to know when to do deep and when to stay at the surface of an idea.

We love content. We're aficionados of historical detail, and we often think our students should become aficionados too. We try to jam into our quarters, terms, and semesters as much information as we can, because if someone really wants to know the history of a thing, we should provide it. We have all, I'd guess, at some point or another, lamented the people, places, and events we've had to drop from our survey classes. We're educators who've had years to accrue all that information, but sometimes we mistakenly think our students should accrue all that information at once.

So where does that leave us, and the initial college history experience?

I think it leaves us with skills.

While we cannot teach students all that we know, we can equip them with the skills to go out and learn for themselves. That's why my college treats students in history courses as working historians from the moment they walk into a classroom. In 100-level courses textbooks take a back seat to primary sources in every survey. My colleagues and I supply

some primary sources ourselves, and we teach our students how to wrangle databases and websites to gather as much other material as they can. We work together to analyze those sources – be they shards of pottery, illuminated manuscripts, oral origin stories, letters, or a chair in which Lincoln sat – to build a picture of the past. We practice the arts of collaboration and corroboration, and learn to synthesize primary and secondary material to make meaningful arguments. We emphasize that we are storytellers. We work on digital literacy, and use tools like Wordpress, Hypothesis, and Slack to aid us in our studies.

I rarely ask students to remember dates, or to offer definitions of words and phrases as a form of assessment. I'm more interested in them learning how to read critically, to enjoy the art of the hunt for source material, and to know where to look for answers when someone poses a question that has them stumped.

This focus on skills ensures that students have the tools to continue learning and writing and creating like a historian long after their class is over. Skills are crucial. They drag a net behind them in which students can catch all kinds of historical content without us insisting that they'll only learn enough if we tell them most of what we know.

And then there's the question of security.

Skills are essential learning tools, but learning is about more than words on a page, or ideas in a classroom. To learn our students need basic security – a roof over their heads, a bed to sleep in, food to eat. If they're having trouble with any of those things, we work with the office of the Dean of Students to make sure their needs are met. It's also important to honor the fact that our students are emotional learners as well as intellectual learners. Leaving their emotions at the door is not an option, so we need to make room for our students' delight, horror, grief, and trauma. When their emotions are particularly complex or large we need not wade in where we are not trained to go, but can facilitate a student's visit to the counseling center and get them the help that they need.

If we can provide for our students the stability and skill sets they need to flourish as incipient historians, we're a long way toward ensuring we will be followed by other history nerds for years to come.