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History for the 21st century

Students arriving in many college classrooms, at least those with which I am familiar, are generally underprepared for doing college level work. The students whom I most typically encounter, to put this up front, tend to be sophomores, with the occasional freshman and a larger group of juniors, who have only recently decided that they want to pursue one of the degrees for which world history is a required course. (These are Bachelor's degrees in Global Studies and Political Economy—each of which is a larger major on my campus than the degree in History.)

While these students are not prepared for college level work in terms of critical thinking skills, they *are* prepared with some degree of self-knowledge, the most basic point being they have no interest in an academic career. They want to do something that will either change the world (which makes them generically interested in doing good) or advancing their own financial goals (which is often a result of parental pressure). What also unites these students is a disinterest in the discipline of history, because almost uniformly they have been required to memorize places, people, and dates without understanding their relevance. They cannot imagine history as anything other than a boring subject. Many believe it is irrelevant to their lives, present or future. And to top it off, we require that students get a B- or better in World History on their first attempt if they wish to be admitted into one of these majors. This causes a great deal of student stress, and actually causes a significant number (say 20-35%) to fail to approach the subject in anything like a way that would actually help them learn. We also have discovered that this course is the single best predictor we have of success within our two majors—which have a large number of required social science classes.

Given this context, and given my own experience chairing the AP World History Development Committee before things went truly in the wrong direction, I've become a big believer in asking questions that are rooted in the idea of relevance. This means starting where students are *now*. By this I mean explaining the context for why the world looks the way that it does at this moment in time, identifying contemporary world problems, and then working backwards to explain how these problems developed. It creates a kind of counterintuitive narrative for many historians, but I have found that it engages students in a way that stimulates their intellectual curiosity. (Or, at least, most of them.)

The other thing that I and my colleagues have done, and that we have been able to do because we are all historians outside of our campus's history department, is work on theory. We can take an event, or a theme, and connect it to some political economy or globalization theory. We are, in other words, not afraid to reduce some of the actual content (in terms of historical places and dates) in order to work on building themes and asking students to theorize about them—for example, what does the fact that so many people from certain socioeconomic classes around the world were involved in reform and/or revolutionary movements have to do

with how we ought to understand popular movements now and today? What can we say about poverty alleviation now by looking at the lives of poor people decades, centuries, and millenia ago? Rhetorical questions are not my preferred way to raise issues, but our introductory courses encourage students to theorize and to generate larger understandings, which in turn, brings us back to the idea of relevance.

With these two ideas in mind—restructuring the world history course (at least at the introductory level) will it seems to me require the excision of specific content, while focusing instead on deeper analysis and the explication of themes. It will require using reduced content in such a way to focus the revised course on supporting inquiries that are rooted in understanding current events. And all of this should be done with the realization that most students still will not be that interested.

In terms of skills, we should be teaching students nothing without modeling some skill. Most students are not good at determining whether something they read on the internet is fact or opinion. Many more are not good at reconciling contradictory interpretations. Still others are not great at contextualizing what they read with what they themselves have observed. The AHA some years ago created a list of historical thinking skills, and those skills governed how the AP History exams were revised. The College Board has since revised this list and created a distinction between skills and reasoning processes that does not seem to be advancing the cause that students need to think critically—and they can do so in many ways. Simply asking a question, whether in writing or in verbally in a classroom setting or even in an assessment, must require a skill to answer it. We cannot afford to do recall anymore.

This project might be most useful if it created ways to assess the skills that go with each modular unit. This would allow teachers to be very specific in the ways that they approach teaching a subject. (Note: I am not suggesting that teaching to the test is the right way to go—I think that teaching skills that are later assessed in very particular ways could lead to something quite positive in terms of increased student learning.)