

College Courses in World History

Who are we teaching? How does that shape what we teach?

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I want to start by questioning the brief Trevor and Steve originally sent: what does “first year” really mean in various higher ed settings? I have a much clearer sense of what “first year” means in history departments and degree programs outside the US than within the American academy. In South Africa, Britain, Australia, and the Netherlands, a “first year” course is designed for—and taken by—students in their first year of a degree program, and is required before students may enroll in second year courses. I’m not aware of any history major at a US college or university that requires students to take a set of courses in sequence.¹ In fact, history as an undergraduate discipline in the US seems to be remarkably short on prerequisites, relying instead on earnest suggestions that students take the department’s foundational course soon after declaring the major,² but not insisting that courses variously described as methods, gateway, or foundational be taken before tackling any other classes in the department, and not necessarily requiring survey classes in US, world, or other areas to complete the major. So who is actually in our “first-year,” introductory, or survey world history course? Where does this class fit in their degree program? What do these students

¹ In 2014 I did an extensive survey of undergraduate history major requirements as background for revising the major at UCI. I did an admittedly lighter sampling of major requirements as I prepared these comments. If you’ve got counter-examples, or know of interesting history major structures/requirements, please share them with me.

² For example, from the University of Michigan website: “All history majors are required to take History 202 in the semester following their declaration, unless they receive approval for postponement.” <https://lsa.umich.edu/history/undergraduates/majors/major-requirements.html> Accessed 7/15/19.

want or need to take away from this first—and perhaps only—college-level engagement with world history, or any history at all?

This attention to the structure of departments and majors is not intended to deflect our gaze from a shared interest in world history that brings us together, but instead is a chance to practice with our disciplinary tool kit, bringing contextualization, comparison, and perspective to bear. I also invite conversation in which we specify the terms of our analysis, rather than presuming we’re all talking about the same kind of course.

My experience and institutional context have led me to hold tightly to the notion and nomenclature of an “introductory” world history course: an entry-level class that offers both an overview of the discipline and exposure to ways of practicing world history. I am keenly aware that most of the 150–200 students I teach in a ten-week quarter do not start the term with intentional or sophisticated historical thinking skills, and would be hard-pressed to identify the world historical narratives they arrive with—though most have more than one narrative that surfaces in the course. They are undoubtedly beginners at history and novice students of “the world” as a unit of analysis. Although this is probably their first history course in college, they are overwhelmingly not first-year students. What’s more, they are not history majors, and not likely to take another history class.³ So the implicit baggage of a “first-year course” does not serve me or my students well.

³ Enrollment data for History 21b, Winter 2019 (the class I most recently taught), n = 164 students: Frosh = 1%; Soph = 37%; Jr = 32%; Sr = 31%. Only 3% of the students were history majors; 22% were international studies majors, another 13% undeclared. Data from UCI Compass: <http://ovptl.uci.edu/compass/>. Accessed 7/15/19.

I've got one ten-week window—in which we are working on challenging material at a fast pace—to help students grapple intellectually and emotionally with their place in the world, convey some insights about how historians ask and seek to answer questions, model methods of inquiry, and provide opportunities for students to practice this multi-layered skill set. I bring a Shrek doll—and an onion—to class early in the quarter. Ogres, like historians and allium bulbs, have layers.

The students laugh at the Shrek jokes—but there are limits to their status as youths and novice learners that I can't push without earning resentment. These students are enrolled on a campus they worked very hard to be admitted to.⁴ They are simultaneously: proud of their academic achievements; eager to appear confident about their academic skills; in over their heads; somewhere between hesitant and frightened about having to engage with materials outside their wheelhouse. These students know something about history, and the world, though often this starting place is at odds with where I want the class to go. I can't, however, challenge Whiggish history, break a universalist frame, take their phones away for 20 minutes at a stretch, and banish "bias" from their vocabulary in the first week without alienating them, or having them think the course goals either ridiculous or unattainable.

This is where focusing an introductory world history course on narrative comes in. Stories—and story-telling—give the students and I common ground, a place to start having conversations that don't immediately feel intimidating. Having the whole world as an analytical unit is helpful. Somewhere under the sun there is something deeply

⁴ In 2019 UCI received more applications from California high school seniors than any other UC campus; this cohort is also racially and ethnically diverse. <https://news.uci.edu/2019/01/29/uci-is-no-1-uc-choice-for-californias-college-bound-high-school-graduates/> Accessed 7/15/19.

interesting to every student—something about which they can tell a story. Encouraging them to ask questions about this interest, finding ways to connect their questions to one of the narratives presented in class, asking them to dive deeper than their first response, and putting their topic in conversation with their neighbor's help students to make world history their own. This approach helps accomplish my course's learning objectives, but does not necessarily help students move from novice learners in this domain to "second year" students of (world) history.⁵ There's a deep inherent tension between a GE course and a foundation for majors, brought into sharper relief in world history compared to other history courses because the scope of the course is unwieldy and the narrative lines are less clear than for most national or regional histories.

As a profession, we have plenty of conversations about what we teach, and how—but do not pay as much attention to the context of classroom, the demographics of our students, or the specific purpose of our course. I suspect that's at least partly because publishing the particulars of our pedagogical context isn't helpful to most other college instructors. No one reading this comment is going to teach History 21 at UCI. Nevertheless, naming the particularities of our circumstance matters for each of us—and for every one of our students.

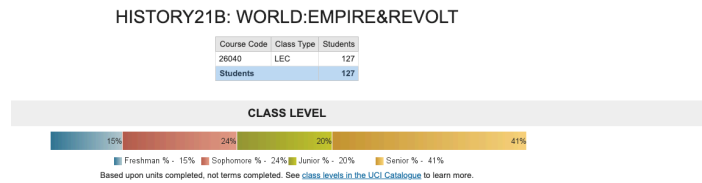
⁵ FWIW: LO's for History 21, Winter 2019: Students who successfully complete this class will be able to:

1. Explain differences between primary and secondary sources.
2. Employ intentional reading strategies to effectively analyze different genres of evidence.
3. Support a historical argument with evidence from primary and secondary sources.
4. Differentiate between local and global processes; in other words: explain how scale influences historical analysis.
5. Evaluate similarities and differences; in other words: make historical comparisons.

One closing note: the particular circumstances for the majority of students taking a post-secondary world history class are unfolding at community colleges—both in person and in on-line classes. How are we capturing that audience and addressing those experiences of teaching and learning? This is one space in higher education where we might reasonably expect many students to be only months removed from high school in terms of academic experience (though not necessarily in age). How might a greater proportion of freshmen in community college classes change teaching in that arena?

Visual evidence: a marked drop in first-year students enrolled in UCI's introductory world history course over five years.

Class composition by student year: History 21B Winter 2014



Class composition by student year: History 21B Winter 2019

