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Statement of Educational Philosophy

While some people think that the study of history is about memorizing dates, names, and facts—essentially history trivia—my pedagogy is motivated by a desire to address broad themes and big questions as creatively as possible, particularly stressing the idea of perspective by incorporating primary sources as a core portion of my instruction. When students leave my classroom, I expect that they will be able to critically examine historical events and figures from multiple perspectives. In doing so, my students should be able to talk about the past in a way that respects historical complexity while still making it relatable and understandable.

To accomplish those goals, my teaching style especially leverages primary sources. In addition to written documents, my classes also incorporate works of culture (paintings, photographs, etc.) to help students get a glimpse into an unmediated past. In general, somewhere between a third to one-half of my instructional time is spent supporting students in their analysis of primary sources. When students directly engage with past peoples, they understand U.S. and world history on a much more visceral level than a typical textbook could ever provide.

Beyond our work with primary sources, my teaching style mixes a variety of engaging methods, including, but not limited to, lecture, Socratic-style questioning, class discussions, and group work. I typically arrange the desks in my room in a U-shaped pattern to encourage discussion and decenter myself from seeming like an omnipotent vessel of knowledge. Students should be able to see their colleagues and interact with them, helping each other to create knowledge instead of being told it. I do believe that lecture has a place in the history classroom. But, we historians tend to lecture too much (a 2015 survey by education scholar Grant Wiggins found that history teachers lectured more than any other discipline, and that we did it, on average, for well over half of the class period). My classes, therefore, try to involve students as much as possible, believing that merely disseminating knowledge does not guarantee learning.

I thus intend for my evaluations to facilitate student learning and not just measure it. Shorter, more frequent essays provide students more opportunities to practice constructing historical arguments and narratives, especially employing primary sources. But I also require longer works, especially research projects. At my previous institution, for example, students completed a research project on WWII-era Japanese-American internment camps in Arkansas. Lesser known than some of the other camps, I wanted students to learn that their state history is important national history. They did so by creating their own research projects via several archives, culminating not only in a scholarly essay but also a video to emphasize the importance of public history. In doing so, they learn how we have created this nation together, for better or worse.

In many ways, that is ultimately what my U.S. history teaching is about—trying to help students engage with the past in order to determine what it means to be an American. That answer has changed over time. But with a healthy supply of primary sources and interpretations that respect historical complexity and multiple perspectives, my students will hopefully be able to answer what being an American has meant for varied peoples in the past and today.