

Building History One Student at a Time
Newell Innovative Teaching Award Submission

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HIST 102: Historical Reasoning Culminating Project

The Memphis College of Urban and Theological Studies: A College of Union University

Context

A glazed and discontented look comes across most students' faces when they encounter history on their schedules. When they realize the course is called historical reasoning, their looks of surprise morph into confusion. At the beginning of this Spring session, their faces were draped in boredom; they were not amused. During the first class, they are confronted with what they think they know about history as a course and how remembering dates, names, and eras can be exciting. The confusion they feel is understandable, as historical reasoning is not commonly taught, and thus its significance is overlooked. While the course centers on history, its primary goal is to equip students with the skills to navigate and comprehend several critical aspects of historical study, including:

- How history is collected
- How history is categorized and organized
- How history is selected
- How history is constructed
- How to analyze historical references and their sources

Historical reasoning, then, helps students gain the ability to critically investigate how we come to know history by forging connections within and across historical narratives. This course exposes students to various subfields of history, allowing them to engage in meaningful discussions about different approaches to understanding the past. The following historical subfields help guide students to that end:

- Business History
- Scientific History
- Economic History
- Political History
- Biographical History
- Intellectual History

Course Objective and Learning Outcomes:

My hope for students is to foster an understanding that history is not merely a collection of dates and events; it is a dynamic, ongoing dialogue about the past in which they play an active role as participants. That said, the following learning outcomes create the scaffolding for a culminating project that will help students' participation in history materialize.

- Analyze the arguments of historical texts
- Identify and engage sub-histories
- Demonstrate knowledge of historical movements
- Research and write a historical paper using primary and secondary source materials

Description of the Project:

The culminating assignment for historical reasoning involves a personal case study wherein students apply specific and relevant sub-histories to explore a historical narrative tied to their family history. The project is nuanced in that it requires students to:

- Construct a detailed family tree
- Identify a significant individual from that lineage
- Contextualize that individual within a pivotal historical moment
- Integrate three subfields of history to...

- Compose an academic paper that examines what it may have been like for their relative during that era
- Present the findings to the class

Innovation

While the first half of the course employs a traditional didactic approach to historical education, the culminating project marks a significant and innovative departure in that it allows students to engage as historians themselves. Rather than memorizing historical facts (the lowest rung for Bloom's Taxonomy for critical thinking), students actively contribute to the narrative by weaving their personal histories into the larger tapestry of history, moving students up the critical thinking chart to its pinnacle, where they create or innovate an original work using what they've learned throughout the course.

Witnessing students select their sub-histories and delve into areas of personal interest is incredibly gratifying. Their enthusiasm for connecting academic pursuits with their family histories enriches the course. Students often express amazement at the histories they have yet to uncover and find that collecting family narratives invigorates their learning experiences and motivates them to keep digging.

Further, the research process is collaborative in the course. Students unearth information in their searches that can help their classmates. This fosters a sense of connection and discovery, helping students glean insights about themselves and their peers. They learn where their pasts intersect and diverge. As students share their case studies, they become historians and family experts. They are simultaneously students, teachers, and evaluators, thus elevating the class discussion and culture of collaboration, encouragement, and educative growth. This instills within students a sense of pride and academic confidence.

Challenges and Opportunities

The primary barrier of this project lies in the accessibility of essential records needed to complete their family trees. Still, this also presents an opportunity for students to utilize local libraries and campus resources to access census information, maps, and other primary sources. While ancestry.com can be a valuable tool, its subscription costs for just one project can limit access for some students. Many of my students are older; they may not have living family members who can pass down family stories, dates of birth, etc. These students have a more challenging time collecting information. Likewise, international students may face significant barriers if historical records have been lost or destroyed due to the circumstances surrounding their families' past, civil unrest, or separation.

Final Words

Each time this course is taught, students come away with a deeper understanding of their thread in the grand tapestry of history. The class resonates with the students, and they are eager to share what they learn with families and friends. In every class, there is wonderment, celebration, and profound respect. Sometimes, there is a sadness that leads to deeper understanding. One student learned that his grandmother had ties to the sanitation workers' strike here in Memphis. Another student learned how her grandfather rallied a small community together against injustice. She also learned that, at one time, the same community was a standalone city in Memphis. Another learned of his estranged father's extraordinary career as an investigative journalist in the Dominican Republic. I could go on, but the pages don't permit the stories. The point here is that this assignment, like good poetry, teaches and delights in a way that improves how students innovatively think about history. And students are personally affirmed by what they've learned.