



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

As a young scholar, embarking on a career of teaching and scholarship, I have thought much about what kind of an educator I want to be. I have been privileged to observe and engage with many brilliant teachers, and have tried to take from them the best tools of their craft. One of my professors at The University of Texas at Austin worked during every class session to build community in his lecture hall and never ended a class without the invitation, "Come and see me!" Another UT professor, in a class on Antebellum Slavery, encouraged the students to ask difficult questions and used them as a foundation for further investigation. These strategies conveyed a sense of intellectual openness and approachability, and created an environment where ideas mattered, where students were invited to participate in a valuable, shared exploration.

This fall, I had the chance to test the strategies I observed with my own class of 26, in an upper-division history course. I expected most of the students in "South Asian Migration to the U.S." to be what have come to be known as "heritage students" who enroll in a class that focuses on the area of the world from which their families hailed before settling in the United States. I did have a handful of these students, but overall it was the most diverse classroom in which I have ever been, much less in which I have taught! There was a diversity of ages, majors, racial and ethnic origins; the students brought many different experiences into the classroom. My first challenge was to establish common ground and to create a sense of community.

I started out with an interview exercise. The students each brought an object that was important to them and conducted a brief interview with a partner they then presented to the class. Unlike a typical "name game," here the students learned more than why each of them was taking the class. Objects ranged from a wedding ring to headphones, from a Tibetan inscription to a children's story, and from a Hindu deity to a *hijab* (the

veil worn by some Muslim women). Through these objects, we all learned about where our colleagues came from, what their priorities were, where they had traveled, their aspirations, and how they related to the content of the syllabus. Above all, the students heard one another's voices and used their own. This prepared them not only for the class discussions we had every week, but ultimately for the oral history interview project that would occupy them for over half the semester.

As an environment for learning, the classroom must be a place where trust prevails over all interactions. Teachers must cultivate their students' trust in the idea that the goal is to learn, understand, and successfully analyze the content of the course. (What happened, why did it happen, and what does it mean?) To make this real, students must do more than read books; they must engage in historical thinking. They must learn that by engaging with content in this manner, they will be rewarded with a sense of personal accomplishment that their instructor and others will support with encouragement. This insight is the foundation of the education that will serve them beyond the boundaries of the university—indeed, for the rest of their lives. My role is to spread enthusiasm for the idea that education is not merely the mastery of content, but the development of a set of skills of interpretation and communication that define our personal and professional lives.

Particularly when engaging with sensitive or controversial material, students must believe that their colleagues' intention is to cultivate a deeper understanding, not to engage in ideological battle, or to perpetuate damaging prejudices. When they know one another better, they can discuss this difficult material and use it to deepen their educational experience. In addressing this kind of conflict, the teacher must guide the students through a process of inquiry that takes seriously the questions of importance to the students as well as the points of controversy. Above all, the classroom functions best as a collaborative environment, one in which all parties are engaging in an ongoing investigation of meaning. It is the *meaning* of the



historical investigation that leaves an impression, not the rote memorization of dates, names, and places.

To cultivate the kind of environment where both instructor and student feel empowered to express themselves and to engage in dialogue begins long before the semester begins. As I select readings for a course, I try to be mindful of the expense my students must bear in purchasing the materials. I try to remember that while my interaction with them in the classroom feels like the primary learning experience, in fact much of their learning will take place outside of the classroom as they read, attend cultural events, and interact more with me in office hours or less formal settings. Keeping this in mind, I encourage them not to get overwhelmed by a heavy reading load, but to read carefully and critically, and to engage constantly with the themes of the course. When they see the reading as a tool for investigating meaning, it becomes just one of the tools they can deploy to deepen the conversations in the course. There are other sources that also do this, so I encourage them to pursue the themes of the course further in discussions with friends and colleagues, and to explore the rich cultural environment around them.

The content of the course is the material through which the skills of the historian must be taught. In order for my students to complete their final project, they had to locate an interviewee; conduct, record, and transcribe a one-hour interview; and then analyze it and write about it. This required them not only to deploy the knowledge they were learning in the course, but all of the skills of investigation, communication, and analysis that historians use every day. Historical data are sites for teaching students how to analyze historical information and understand trends. The skills of analysis and expression, however, are as important as the content of the history syllabus. It is, therefore, my goal to teach students to write more often and to write better. The substantial feedback I give on all writing assignments becomes part of the conversation we are having about what learning is and how it happens.

When it is possible, I supplement the syllabus with films, audio recordings (often from my own field research), and photographs that help the students to imagine the past and to experience its textures. Like the interviews my students collect, these materials humanize historical stories and provide rich material in which to search for meaning. They also reveal that history is contingent, variable, and the product of interpretation about which students must be equipped to develop their own thinking and conclusions. The two interview projects in my fall course book-ended the semester by first introducing the students to one another and the basic steps of listening and analyzing before they

deployed their new skills to create, as a class, a collection of interviews that will form the foundation of two South Asian American Oral History Collections: one at The Austin History Center (<http://www.austinlibrary.com/ahc>) and one at The South Asian American Digital Archive (<http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/>).

Through these exercises, I strive to convey to the students that history is a process, not an outcome, and that by applying their own perspectives to the data, it may appear different. The students learn that by applying their minds, they make history happen. This is an empowering, if sometimes daunting realization, but it is when students grasp the relationship of a person to history that the meaningful experience of true education begins for them. Suddenly, history is alive because it has become tangible and personal within the mind of the individual. Facilitating this understanding and cultivating the ability to express it should be the goal of the history teacher. It is my goal.

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