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Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is built on the notion that teaching is a practice that can always be better and is never finished. To that end, I focus on improvement through feedback from colleagues, students, and critical self-reflection. Ultimately, my approach to teaching is something I cultivate with each class and semester so that I can produce critical thinkers and active citizens who can apply the skills and knowledge learned in my classes to their everyday lives and the broader world.

Still, some values are consistent and essential to my teaching. I bring enthusiasm, humor, and empathy to interactions with students, emphasize transparency, and present learning as a collaborative process requiring students' active engagement with me, each other, and course materials, particularly primary sources. For each activity and assignment, I make students explicitly aware what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they are being evaluated while always encouraging them to ask questions if any part of what we are doing is unclear.

In teaching history, I use transparent assignments and activities to teach students to identify, describe, and then analyze (answer the "so what?" question) primary sources in relation to their context. To aid in that effort, I first model this work in class followed by practice doing that work together in something akin to a history lab. By the time students are working independently, they understand the objectives of the assignment and how to achieve them. These methods work to empower students and reduce (the sometimes invisible) obstacles to learning many students face. Ultimately, this philosophy in action demystifies the practice of history and helps all students pursue clearly defined learning objectives.

To support students in learning this process, I provide continuous feedback and encouragement by building opportunities for feedback into the course and being consistently available to talk with students. This is evident in teaching writing. I focus on process stressing that writing is a skill that can be learned and not simply an inborn ability by using assignments that are about content and not grades. For full credit, I require students to demonstrate engagement with constructive written feedback as they move through the stages of their writing assignment. These efforts help students achieve learning goals, provide intellectual mentorship, and demonstrate that I am invested in their work. Thus, students feel empowered because they understand that their writing is about content and quality and see that we are working collaboratively in a supportive environment to improve.

My philosophy in action is evident in my class "B-boys, Punks, Gangstas, and Slackers: Space, Place, and Power in American Music," an interdisciplinary class studying the co-constitutive relationships of musical forms and social scenes with their cities of origin in the late 20th century. Through analysis of individual scenes and distinct places, we make sense of the longer histories of cities, suburbs, and social identities as we dissect relationships of power in the socially produced spaces of postwar America.

The first unit centers on the emergence of hip-hop in the South Bronx. During a multimedia lecture on the history of the Bronx and the broader urban history of the U.S., I guided students through interpretations of primary sources to prepare them for the central work of the course. After that practice, I gave them two sets of primary sources to analyze on their own for the next class--news articles about the 1977 blackout and time-lapse photos of the South Bronx taken by Pulitzer Prize-winner Camilo Jose Vergara. To help them, I assigned worksheets due next class that followed the method of analysis modeled in class.

Purposefully designed worksheets and short, structured writing assignments allow students to think and reflect before class meaning reducing the barrier of entry into a conversation. They also reinforce the skills and content being learned as students complete a structured, low-stakes assignment. In this particular class, this assignment denaturalizes the notion of cultural history as primarily describing “fun” texts. The assignment encouraged students to move from description to analysis—to highlight not only what some text said but to articulate what it helps us understand about the relationships of urban communities of color to American institutions like city government, utility companies, suburbanites, and the press in a specific historical context.

Using this foundation, we had a productive discussion about the spatialization of identity, particularly the “ghettoization” of the inner city, and the implications of that perception. Students drew contrasts between news stories of looting and violence with Vergara’s photos of Bronx residents’ resilience in the face of urban crisis. Further, they engaged in a wide-ranging exchange on the role of graffiti. They highlighted police and city officials saw it as vandalism, but young African-American and Puerto Rican men used graffiti to represent themselves and their communities as the effects of deindustrialization and urban renewal marginalized and stigmatized them.

Despite the quality of that conversation, we still had work to do to pull together and articulate what we had learned. To do that, I work with students to craft the big “takeaways” of what we had done. I assign at least two students to recap class during the next session. Working from an assignment sheet, they write up their takeaways from one session including both content and method and post it to Canvas. They then lead the discussion of those takeaways at the beginning of class. Finally, at the end of a unit or module and the course, we put it together on the board or shared document. Building on the connections drawn by recappers between an individual class session and the unit and course as a whole, we capture what our various ideas and analysis added up to.

In this case, students made clear that they understood the results of postwar urban policy as largely discriminatory toward communities of color due to racial hierarchy written into the rules of urban renewal and suburbanization as evidence by their analysis of our primary sources. Still, they also highlighted the important but marginalized counter-narrative voiced by urban communities of color through cultural productions they interpreted as resilient and hopeful while others rethought their perceptions of city spaces and people by putting their views in a different context shaped by what they had learned that week.

The success of that class and that discussion--moving beyond description to historical analysis of primary sources that were then connected to students’ own lives--was the direct result of my teaching philosophy that prioritizes feedback, transparency, and empathy to create a context for learning and discovery inside and outside of the classroom. I provided students with verbal and written guidance as well as in-class training resulting in more fully formed historical arguments and critical engagement with ideas about race, class, and space in American urban history. Further, this episode demonstrated the importance of primary sources in my courses where the class found a rich vein of inquiry centered on their own analysis of sources rather than reading about it in a textbook or scholarly monograph. Lastly, using their own analysis and the recap, this diverse group of students at an urban university drew parallels and connections to their own lives and contemporary political conditions helping them to craft a more historically informed understanding of the world.