

MetroCITI 2015-16 – Pedagogical Project Reflection Report

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Pedagogical Project Reflection Report

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Summary of Pedagogical Project

This project sought to develop in students the ability to “think historically” in history survey courses. That is, beyond mere content memorization, thinking historically emphasizes developing the skills inherent to the discipline, such as asking essential questions, marshaling evidence, analyzing multiple perspectives, and synthesizing disparate historical accounts. This project also sought to address the educator’s quintessential lament: “students aren’t reading.” Its central feature was the implementation of “For and Against” quizzes, and its methodology built upon (and modified) the work of reformist history educator David Voelker.¹ In short, at the start of the semester, for each week’s readings students were given two accompanying historical claims called “For and Against” statements. These statements were necessarily broad and examples included “Agriculture was the worst mistake in human history” (Western Civ I) and “Hitler and the Nazis were mostly to blame for the start of World War II” (Western Civ II). If there was a quiz during a given week – some were announced, some were “pop” – one of the two claims for that week’s readings would appear on the board and students were asked to write two paragraphs: one “For” paragraph supporting the claim (with historical examples), and one “Against” paragraph arguing against the claim. The “For and Against” quizzes replaced previously used multiple-choice reading quizzes, which measure memorization more than the ability to explain historical significance. This project incentivized students to (a) do the reading, as they had to explain their answers and not just circle a letter, and (b) think historically, as they were asked to defend a position from multiple perspectives with historical examples.

Content for the Pedagogical Project

This project is rooted in a reformist movement in history education that has primarily taken shape over the past fifteen years. In short, the reform effort has sought to instill in students, specifically those in the survey course, not mere content knowledge but also “historical thinking skills” or “historical habits of mind.”² That is, reformist history educators want students to think like historians, and this means, among other factors, (a) explaining historical significance, (b) asking exploratory questions, (c) analyzing historical issues from multiple perspectives, and (d) marshaling and utilizing historical evidence. Chemistry students conduct

¹ See David J. Voelker, “Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses: A Sample Strategy,” *History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (2008): 505-518.

² For excellent articles related to these reforms, see Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, “The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model,” *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 1050-1066; Andrews, Thomas and Flannery Burke. “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives* 45 (January 2007); and Sam Wineburg, “Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 80, no. 7 (March 1999): 488-499.

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experiments, writing students write stories, anatomy students work on models, and yet history students are far less frequently asked to “do history.” Instead, too often they are asked to memorize and repeat (and quickly forget) myriad historical facts – but professional historians do so much more than this! One principal aim for this project, then, was to move away from the “facts first” or “attic theory” approach to history education. According to this theory, students must simply master content and somewhere down the line the facts that they have stored in their mind’s “attic” will naturally come to surface in meaningful ways. Lendol Calder, however, argues that the opposite is true:

As it happens, people do not collect facts the way homeowners collect furniture, storing pieces in the attic for use at a later time. Teachers may like to think they are "furnishing the mind," but since the late 1950s, investigations of human mental functioning have shown that this metaphor falls apart when taken too literally. Facts are not like furniture at all; they are more like dry ice, disappearing at room temperature. Cognitive science has much to teach history teachers about memory, about the relation between facts and thinking, and about the nature of historical thinking itself.³

I recall that in my own case as an undergraduate student in US History classes, I had to “re-remember” facts from elementary school; they did not suddenly manifest themselves at the right time. In fact, there is not a single exam that I can remember from a history class. Yet from my undergraduate education I *do* remember doing the *things that historians do* – examining non-traditional interpretations, such as the surprising journal article about how slaves in Mexico used the court of the Inquisition to their benefit; researching controversies, such as that surrounding President Polk and “spot resolutions”; or analyzing evidence, such as reading non-canonical early Christian texts to find out why they “didn’t make the cut.” Thus the foremost objective of this project was to build analytical, inquisitive, interpretive, and argumentative skills instead of strictly focusing on memorization of content. This project also aimed to ensure that students complete the assigned readings each week and, beyond simply “doing the reading,” think carefully about the subject-matter.

As stated above, at the start of the term students were given two “For and Against” statements each week and it was their responsibility to be able to write “For” and “Against” arguments *in the event* we had a quiz that week. Examples follow:

- I. Example from History 210, “Western Civ I”: **Week 6** Chapter 6 – “Republican Rome”
 - a. “Military Expansion (Conquest) benefitted the Romans.”
 - b. “Julius Caesar was a “Man of the People.”

- II. Example from History 211, “Western Civ II”: **Week 6** Chapter 20 – “Atlantic Revolutions”
 - a. “The French Revolution lived up to its later slogan of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.”
 - b. “Napoleon continued the ideas of the French Revolution during his reign.”

³ Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1361.

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On a quiz day (5 overall quizzes during the semester, 3 announced/2 unannounced), one of the two assigned statements appeared on the board and students were given the following instructions:

PROMPT

- Write two brief (but thorough) paragraphs labeled “For” and “Against.”
- In the first paragraph (“For”), summarize the best evidence (examples) that you can give **in support** of the statement
- In the second paragraph (“Against”), summarize the best evidence (examples) that you can give **in opposition (against)** the statement.
- Evidence must be accurate and specific (and should show that you did the reading) – don’t exaggerate or make things up!
- Come up with 3-4 points for each “For” and “Against” paragraph.
- Write legibly in complete sentences.
- Each paragraph is worth 2.5 points (5 total).
 - 2.5 = Outstanding, 2-2.25 = Good, 1.75 = Adequate, 1.5 = Minimally Acceptable, 0-1 = Failing.

Students were graded on their ability to write well-reasoned and analytical responses that were rooted in historical examples. Students who wrote vaguely or in generalities scored poorly while students who supported their ideas with insightful comments and historical examples scored highly, with others falling some place in between. The quizzes were not especially high stakes, but overall amounted to 20% of the course grade, which is enough for students to take them seriously. The quizzes took about 20 minutes to complete on average, which was a bit longer than anticipated.

Dates Used in Class:

The statements were used every week and students were responsible for preparing their “For and Against” arguments in case there was a quiz, but quizzes only occurred on five separate occasions scattered throughout the semester.

How the Project Unfolded

From the start, students were receptive to the quiz format, which surprised me. I anticipated pushback in favor of “easier” multiple-choice tests, since explaining answers requires more thought and, in a sense, is less anonymous. Yet students liked the idea of something new. When I asked students why they thought I was making this change in my teaching, one student commented that “multiple-choice only sees if you can remember a word and circle a letter.” At one point I also feared that students were going to bitterly complain about the “For and Against” statements on their student evaluations, but out of nearly 175 students, only one mentioned the quiz in a way that was not positive, but the comment was by no means negative.

Results, Outcomes, and What I Learned

Strengths:

The results of the “For and Against” quizzes were outstanding in many regards. First, it was much easier for me to get a sense of not only which students read and which did not, but also which students read *thoughtfully*. With multiple-choice reading quizzes, I had a general

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sense for which students read, but was never totally sure and often worried that they merely read key terms. With the “For and Against” quizzes, however, it became quite clear who did the reading. For instance, in response to the statement, “Agriculture was the worst mistake in human history,” a student who did not read crafted an “Against” argument that was quite vague, something along these lines: “Farming actually helped people because it gave them lots of food and allowed them to ‘do all sorts of trades’ with each other.” On the other hand, students who clearly read incorporated several of the following ideas into their statements: the impact of the end of the last ice age c. 12,000 years ago, the shift from nomadism to sedentism, class stratification that occurred with larger agrarian populations, technological innovation and specialization (many referencing Sumerian society as an example), changed labor conditions, and farming’s impact on gender roles. This showed me not only that the students read, but that they read carefully and put together ideas in support of or in opposition to an argument.

Second, for every quiz I anticipated certain answers but some students went far beyond and made historical connections to previous classes. For instance, when drafting “For and Against” replies for the following statement, “Hitler and the Nazis were mostly to blame for the start of World War II,” I expected a few standard answers in their against statements (e.g. the failed policy of *appeasement*, the USSR’s role in the Nazi-Soviet pact, and Japan’s aggressive actions in the Pacific). But a wonderful surprise was to see students also refer back to a discussion from two weeks earlier in arguing that the actions of 1939 were impacted by inactions in 1919, namely the U.S.’s refusal to join the League of Nations, which ultimately helped doom the idea of “Collective Security” as a deterrent to another global war. One of my former reading quizzes would have never allowed the students to demonstrate such connections.

I also worried that students would not have enough to say, since our principal textbook was not designed for the “For and Against” statements, and I feared that the “For” and “Against” statements would just be generic mirror images, or “flip-flops,” of one another. Instead, on the whole students took about 5-10 minutes longer to complete the quizzes than I anticipated, not because they had nothing to say, but because they had *so much* they wanted to include (to be sure, some students who did not read stared at a blank paper). Yet because the statements ask students to defend a position, the material had to be incorporated logically, and generally I did not have a laundry list of facts without logical organization.

Finally, perhaps the most unforeseen and satisfying development related to the project came from my honors course. This small seminar class was perhaps my favorite group in all my time at HCCC, mainly because of the strength of our discussions. During one of these discussions, and during a week that we did *not* have a quiz, one student named Jose (I am using pseudonyms) disagreed with a point made by another student named Melissa, saying that another classmate named Jackie’s earlier argument had convinced him otherwise. I thought he made a good point, but then realized that Jackie had not yet spoken during that session. When I said, “Jackie didn’t say that,” he replied that indeed she had – at their weekly meeting before class to discuss the “For and Against” statements. I chuckled because I thought this sometimes-sarcastic student was joking about such a voluntary weekly review session, until the students looked at me with stone-cold expressions, insisting on the veracity of Jose’s claim. When I asked, “Who attends these sessions?” about eight students raised their hands. This type of engaged and

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committed learning is what many educators might only imagine, especially at a community college – so much so that I thought the students were joking with me!

Weaknesses:

While the overall results of the project were quite pleasing, there were several shortcomings on my part and some cases of utter failure. First, because there were only five actual quizzes, in my non-honors classes it felt as though the project became a forgotten enterprise during stretches where there was not a quiz for two or three weeks. Then, when we had two quiz weeks in a row after not having one for some time, I felt that students were beginning to view the quizzes as a nuisance to merely get out of the way. What became clear is that the project needs to be thoroughly embedded in the course curriculum on a weekly basis, whether or not there is a quiz.

Second, the simple truth was that while many of the students lucidly explained their ideas and offered insightful arguments that reflected careful reading, those who failed failed quite miserably. This, I suppose, could be good and bad. With a multiple-choice quiz there is always the possibility of sheer luck boosting a student's score, making it look as if they had done more work than they truly had. This is not the case with the new quiz format. If students did not read, as some continued not to do so, their paragraphs were either grossly inaccurate, far too vague, or, worse, incomplete or not handed in at all. Students can hide behind a quiz worksheet; it feels almost less personal when they fail a multiple-choice quiz. But the dejected look of those students who wrote nothing struck a nerve with me. I will have to ask, "why did students not turn in a quiz?" Was it truly because they did not read, or is there something else at play? In the end, though, I realized that this could be a good thing. This is college and college-level work is required of the students. They learned a valuable but difficult lesson: a total lack of preparation and participation will cause you to perform poorly in this class. Yet if it turns out that students *are* preparing and performing poorly, I will have to carefully consider adjustments that might be made.

Finally, one further area of weakness was that sometimes in an effort to write a convincing argument a few students ventured into ahistorical relativism. For instance, one "For and Against" statement was, "Compared to the Black Death, the other crises of the Later Middle Ages were not that significant." Perhaps this was a poorly crafted statement, but I created it with the hope that students could tell me how and why (For) the Black Death had such an important social, economic, and environmental impact while also hoping that students could (Against) briefly describe how some of the other late medieval crises in Europe (religious schism, environmental changes, famine, social unrest, the 100 Years' War) were significant in their own right. Students answered the "For" statement well, but in their "Against" statements too many students – even those who read carefully – inaccurately argued, "The Black Death was not really that big of a deal compared to the other disasters." While their intentions were pure, this statement is plain false. In that it took between one-third to one-half of the population in Europe and other parts of AfroEurasia in a relatively short amount of time, nobody could reasonably argue that the Black Death "was not that big of a deal." This speaks to the importance of my crafting statements that are answerable given the assigned readings and yet encourage the students to remain historically accurate.

Plans for Improvement

Going forward, I plan to continue to find ways to encourage students to think analytically and creatively. In order for the project to work fruitfully on a continued basis, the following changes will be made:

- I will start each and every class by putting the students in permanent groups to discuss the “For and Against” statements for about 15 minutes and I will go around the room to monitor their discussions. This means that I will have less time to cover content, which is ok in this case. I believe this will make students accountable not just to me for completing the readings, but also to one another in a group setting. I also believe this will work to improve quiz scores on the days when we actually do have quizzes, where students will not be allowed to work in groups but where they will have been in the weekly practice of thinking about and responding to the statements.
- I might also ask students to create their own “For and Against” statements and try to utilize those in class. I’m not entirely sure how to best incorporate this idea, but Liza Bolitzer (MetroCITI Project Manager) recommended this and I think it is a wonderful idea. I also think that asking students to create parallel “For and Against” statements for historical and current periods might help students make historical connections between the past and their contemporary world.
- Instead of using “For and Against” statements for the general reading of the course textbook, which is essentially a tertiary source, I might assign special primary source readings for which the students will need to develop “For and Against” responses. We make frequent use of primary sources in class, and students are required to incorporate them into their essays, but perhaps thinking analytically about first-hand historical accounts in creative ways will help students when they write their essays.
- I might also use excerpts of “For” and “Against” historiographical arguments by two different historians on a given topic. This will show how practitioners of the discipline engage in scholarly debate, sometimes using the same sources of evidence but with different interpretations.