TEACHING HISTORY

History 560
Mon. 2:00–4:50pm
Graduate seminar
Winter 2017, Harris L40

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed to introduce graduate students to the main issues that they will confront as history teachers. It is not designed as TA training, but as an opportunity to engage with the most substantive questions that arise in teaching history and to acquire the skills necessary for teaching standalone courses, including designing syllabi and giving lectures. Compared to other graduate seminars, the footprint of this course will be light: meetings only every other week and short assignments. This course is recommended for students to take in their third years and is ideal preparation for teaching seminars and for the job market.

This course is graded pass–not pass.

ASSIGNMENTS

The bulk of this course will consist of (light) reading and discussion. But you’ll have two assignments, both of which, I hope, will help you in your future career as a historian.

The first, due March 6, is to design the syllabus for an undergraduate course. It can be a lecture, a seminar, or some hybrid, though let me counsel you that you’re better served designing a course that you might realistically teach at Northwestern or elsewhere. If you go on the academic job market, you’ll almost certainly be asked to supply a sample syllabus, so this is your chance to draft one.

The second assignment, due March 13, is to write a 40–50 minute undergraduate lecture. You won’t have a chance to deliver the entire thing in this course, but we will workshop some ten-minute portion of it on February 20 or March 6. You may write out the entire lecture or submit a full outline, containing all the points you wish to make if not the exact sentences in which they will be expressed. Please also submit any image files you’d use to accompany the talk, if any.

The object of this exercise is not to show off your command of historiographical nuance or to cram your lecture with as much information as possible but to reflect upon the big picture and figure out a way to communicate that to undergraduates. That will involve having a clear argument and finding a way to present it simply and dramatically, in a way that undergraduates will be able to remember.

The requirements of a lecture are different from those of an academic paper and take some getting used to. I caution against delving into the historiography, unless that serves some pedagogical function. Other things to be wary of:
taxonomies, long lists, lengthy “background” sections, and ground-covering of any sort. The ideal lecture is an aerodynamic machine, with a comprehensible main argument, a clear structure, just the right amount of detail (be especially careful to avoid laying it on too thick, Goldilocks), narrative hooks, and a strict subordination of auxiliary material to the main points. Your audience should know, at every point in the lecture, why they are hearing what they are hearing and how it fits into the larger structure. Feel free to signpost like crazy (e.g., “That story I just told you was a way of illustrating x. Now I’m going to argue y. Remember: these both relate to my big point A in the following way…”).

Another important distinction between the lecture and the academic paper is the requirements for originality in each. When you write an academic paper, your task is to produce an original analysis and you are rightly expected to rigorously document any words, facts, or ideas that you have taken from others. The lecture, however, is essentially a derivative genre and you are encouraged to take others’ ideas, anecdotes, narrative devices, main theses, and categorical distinctions without cluing your students into where you got it all from (unless that attribution is pedagogically useful). As a lecturer, you are not performing your original compositions, but covering the classic songbook and adding your own flourishes to your favorite tunes.

Another possible metaphor: you’re not an author, you’re a translator. Your assignment is to translate the findings of our field into undergraduates.

Remember all of those lectures you’ve heard that made you want to die from boredom? Don’t write one of those! Remember the lecture that made you want to go to grad school? Write that lecture.

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS, READINGS, AND ASSIGNMENTS

January 9: Us

January 23: Them

February 6: The Gentle Art of Lecturing
- Read lecture notes on Canvas
- Observe a history lecture and write a short report about what worked and didn’t.
- Prepare a 10-minute lecture (or introduction) to a lecture, as scheduled.
February 20: Designing Your Course
- Read syllabi on Canvas.
- Prepare a 10-minute lecture (or introduction to a lecture) if you haven’t already gone last week.

March 6: Beyond Harris Hall
- Write a syllabus for one undergraduate course, lecture or seminar.

DUE MARCH 13: A copy of your lecture, accompanied by any slides you like.

MAY 22: Sam Wineburg will speak in Harris 108, 12:30–1:50, lunch beforehand