Collaboratively Reforming General Education History Teaching and Learning: A Roadmap for the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the most challenging history courses taught at institutions of higher education in the United States: introductory world history courses, required of undergraduates as part of comprehensive liberal arts degrees. It summarizes conclusions made by recent scholars of teaching and learning and identifies significant gaps between their recommendations and the realities facing faculty assigned to teach these classes. The authors present a vision for a collaborative faculty-led project that aims to ameliorate some of these challenges by centering student engagement and meaning making in their learning experiences. The article also offers evidence drawn from student feedback on educational materials used in the authors’ own introductory world history courses, which reveals that student ownership of learning increased when they could see themselves reflected in the topics they studied and when they had opportunities to better understand and recognize the views and experiences of other people related to those same topics.
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Brenna Miller and Jesse Spohnholz

A fundamental goal of college general education history courses is to help students see themselves within a longer story of the human past and develop skills in information literacy, historical thinking, and communication that they can use throughout their lives. And yet many of us have had the experience of finding that some students may feel disconnected from the material, disengaged with their assignments, and left wondering if history has any relevance to them at all. In recent years, scholars have provided a variety of pedagogical strategies to help educators facing such skepticism, including encouraging student ownership of learning, diversifying the content of courses, and providing opportunities for students to connect with and make meaning of their studies for themselves. However, limited faculty bandwidth and institutional structures often pose obstacles to effectively adopting these reforms. There are a lot of high-minded vision statements we could offer. But practically speaking, how can we build a model of history education that meaningfully supports faculty to engage students in general education history courses? In this article, we offer our thoughts on how, as a teaching community, we can work together on this question, rather than leaving each of us to figure it out for ourselves. We lay out a vision for a collaborative faculty-led project, called History for the 21st Century, that seeks to build a community of practice to support one another and create teaching materials that draw on students’ interests to increase engagement and leverage that engagement to help students see how essential studying the past will be for building our future.

The Challenges of Teaching General Education History

As research has shown, among the most powerful ways we can support student learning at the introductory college level is by facilitating student ownership of it. Students with a strong sense of ownership of their learning have higher motivation to achieve goals, a stronger belief in their ability to succeed, an increased ability to reflect on the effectiveness of their learning strategies, and a willingness to persist in the face of obstacles.\(^1\) The educational researcher Kristall J. Graham-Day and her research team at The Ohio State University have offered four useful practices proven to increase ownership of learning: be clear about expectations, have mechanisms for students to track progress, provide opportunities for students to give and get feedback, and meet with students one on one.\(^2\) These are useful tips for any educator at any level, and the first three, at least, can also be used in large classes without significant burdens.

However, those of us teaching general education history classes face some additional challenges: first, history is among the least popular subjects among students coming out of high school, even as many are required to take such courses in college.\(^3\) If we know that students feel connected, engaged, and meaningfully involved in their own learning when they are studying topics that reflect their own interests, passions, and identities, how might we be able to tap into students’ own senses of self and allow them to use that to drive their studies in ways that can help get them invested in learning history?

The most important part of this process, in our view, is not for us to explain to students that

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history is critical to them to better understand their interests, passions, and identities but for them to discover it for themselves. Once they do so, they can begin to appreciate how they can use knowledge of the past to guide them to make wiser, more ethical, and more realistic decisions. Over the last twenty-five years, there has been a seismic shift in higher education toward student-centered learning and efforts to facilitate student ownership and agency through the expansion of tutoring and learning centers, as well as the adoption of more explicit student learning outcomes by colleges and universities, departments, and individual faculty. Most faculty will have seen, in some form, the kinds of transparent instruction design advocated by scholars of teaching and learning in higher education like Mary-Ann Winkelmes, which have been shown to greatly improve educational outcomes across diverse student populations. An emphasis on clear communication, including on syllabi, assignments, and rubrics, helps demystify what it takes to succeed and can facilitate student self-evaluation. These initiatives help reduce obstacles to engagement and clarify paths that enable students to pursue future growth.

Likewise, many faculty and departments have begun to place greater focus on transferable skills that students can apply to a variety of contexts throughout their lives, rather than strictly content-based knowledge, which often does not get retained in the long term. As a result, there have been recent efforts pushing against the coverage model of introductory courses, or what some educators have called “uncoverage.” Popular frameworks like Bloom’s taxonomy put acquiring knowledge as the first building block to learning, with higher level skills like analysis and evaluation being saved for later in the learning process. In college, this content-first approach is typically accomplished through lecture and textbook-based transfers of largely factual information from professor to student in broad survey courses. “Uncoverage,” by contrast, suggests upending this standard approach with focused, deep dives into select content. This method of teaching history accepts the impossibility of covering everything and aims instead to provide examples of historical thinking alongside opportunities to practice it. Unless students can reapply what they learn, they are likely to forget it. To address this, “uncoverage” emphasizes routine exercises that help to develop key skills and create habits of historical thought. In a useful contribution to this discussion, historians Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker suggest that an effective means to stress depth of historical thinking above preserving breadth of coverage is backward design. By first defining what students should know or take away from their history course and what skills they should be able to demonstrate upon its conclusion, instructors design their class around sets of learning experiences that move students toward that goal. In today’s digital age, core skills in research, critical thinking, source analysis, and information literacy require history educators both to think beyond their classrooms and the familiar “textbook and test” model and to rethink their learning goals and the design of their courses.

To be sure, many instructors and departments, as well as university offices that provide instructional support services, are familiar with the new demands of higher education and have advocated for these transformations. We, and we’re sure many readers, have either adopted or attempted to adopt at least some of these measures into our classrooms. But, as Samuel Wineburg, an educational and cognitive psychologist who specializes in historical learning, observed in 2018, “Despite today’s hype over flipped classrooms and blended instruction, history class, it seems, hasn’t changed that much.” At Washington State University, we have worked...
with a talented team of faculty who share a sincere commitment to active learning and student-centered education at the introductory level. We and many of our colleagues have worked to design lessons that offer only short lectures (fifteen minutes), followed by inquiry-based activities in small groups. We have seen colleagues positively transform their classrooms using these methods. Still, our personal experience is that the coverage and content trap is our greatest challenge. We have experienced our lectures ballooning from fifteen to forty minutes or have had to abandon class activities in the face of time constraints. We know that we are not alone in falling into such a habit of teaching. With so many decades of scholarship, and so much enthusiasm for change, why does it prove so hard to reform our classes?

In our view, the persistence of the “content dump” in introductory history courses and the inertia to reform stem from faculty centeredness and the myriad structural factors that reinforce it. For both faculty and students, the durability of the “survey” course model and reliance on textbooks both create and reinforce the assumption that the first step of learning is the broad transfer of knowledge, delivered by experts. The temptation for faculty (who often fear that students will never encounter history again) is to cover as much as one can, or at least the “greatest hits” (often simplified), in class. However, this leaves students with the impression that the textbook and the professor are the alpha and omega of what they learn. Meanwhile, in upper-division courses we challenge history majors to practice advanced exercises in historical thinking that we as historians know are important for cultivating critically thinking, engaged, and independently minded citizens, and through this they often find that the simplified version of events they learned in their intro courses were imprecise or even inaccurate.

Many history faculty are familiar with the challenges of teaching general education history courses. At some point, most faculty we know have been in the position of wanting to transform students’ lives but, facing the realities of limited bandwidth and resources, are left scrambling to put together lesson plans. But we do not all face these challenges equally. Under the present model, it is little surprise that faculty with a choice sometimes avoid large introductory classes, so that they can teach courses with eager history majors on specialized topics more closely related to their areas of research. One by-product of this response, however, is that departments sometimes shift the challenges of teaching introductory courses onto faculty with fewer resources or training to deal with the challenges of teaching these classes. Further, our culture of treating our classrooms as “our space,” autonomous from colleagues in our departments, to say nothing of educators around our region, our country, or beyond, tends to leave individual instructors solely responsible for the teaching and learning that goes on in their classes. Of course, individual instructors are the most important agents in shaping the quality of learning that takes place in their classrooms. But the stress on individual autonomy in our classrooms is sometimes framed in terms of our specific areas of content expertise and academic freedom, even if few of us have significant training in how people actually learn. It also can leave faculty alone to solve the challenges of teaching general education courses. There are, of course, many institutional initiatives aimed to support faculty facing such challenges. Yet these challenges are rarely discipline specific, often do not reach the faculty who need them most, or are limited by insufficient resources.

In short, general education history courses face a dual challenge that makes them especially daunting: sometimes skeptical or uninterested students, combined with faculty with insufficient

7. Sam Wineburg, Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 83.
12. Nunn, College Belonging, 35.
resources, training, or time who often are teaching well outside their area of research expertise. The challenges to curricular reform are not rooted in a lack of options for new instructional models, the availability of evidence-based scholarship, or instructors’ will or desire to best serve students. Rather, the central challenge to teaching these history courses stems from structural conditions shaping teaching and learning in such classes. Thus, we need to build better structural conditions for ourselves. With this in mind, the question becomes: how can we help one another adjust our courses in ways that help students connect their interests, passions, and identities to their general education history classes?

A Roadmap for Solutions in the Twenty-First Century

This question has inspired us and a group of faculty members with a shared vision to establish History for the 21st Century (or H/21, as we sometimes shorten it), a collaborative, faculty-led nonprofit initiative associated with the World History Association that aims to share student-centered, inquiry-driven, and active learning teaching resources—for free—with students and faculty across institutions. By creating collaborative relationships that are based on the real, lived experience of diverse kinds of faculty (and the support networks and professional development resources they have) and that center students based on who they really are (not who we wish they were), we hope to provide and continuously develop usable, adoptable, and adaptable teaching resources for introductory history courses.

We have devised a set of five principles guiding our collaboration. First, we promote learning that is inquiry driven. We want students to own their learning, to ask questions, to engage in the process of finding answers, and to self-consciously reflect on how that learning has improved their understanding of the world they inhabit. We promote learning centered on questions that inspire curiosity and invite students to take agency in their education. Second, we are working to support learning that is student centered. To spark inspiration, we design lessons to reach out to students not by starting with asking them to think more like us but by considering where they are starting from and where they are headed. Third, we aim to facilitate classroom cultures that are inspiring and intellectually energetic using active learning. While learning does sometimes require explanations, in general, we promote a flipped classroom using lessons created through backward design. Students prepare for class on their own and come together to practice skills that facilitate deeper understanding and analysis. Fourth, we aim to make course materials free for students. We think of it as lowering barriers but also as opening doors and inviting students into the world of historical thinking, no matter their financial consideration or the kinds of institutional support for learning that their college or university provides. And finally, we aim to make teaching materials open to all faculty, too. In this sense, we hope to promote cultures of collaboration among faculty that begin with the premise that we all share a commitment to helping one another, regardless of rank or faculty position.

H/21’s first round of materials, Modules Ready to Educate (MREs), includes readings produced by experts on the topic, primary sources for engaging in class activities, slide decks for in-class presentations, and instructor guides and suggestions for activities and assignments. Leveraging the interests and expertise of faculty, our process starts with a historian writing a set of lesson plans, often from creative or successful lessons they have already used in their classes. Each
lesson includes readings, primary sources, activities, and instructor guides that are peer reviewed by both content experts and experienced educators with training in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

After the peer review process, lessons are then shared with faculty in a variety of classroom settings to be tested. The testing process helps ensure that all H/21 lessons are appropriate for general education courses and involves soliciting feedback from students, to help us understand what they found most engaging and inspiring, as well as whether they found any materials confusing, tedious, or otherwise unengaging. Once the editing process is complete, MREs are made available for both instructors and students alike on our website at www.history21.com. The first MREs have been published, and many more are being written, tested, and designed.

In fall 2022, we tested a series of H/21 modules in our classrooms at Washington State University. For context, the Pullman campus of Washington State University currently has about sixteen thousand undergraduate students, 78 percent from in-state, 29 percent non-white, and 35 percent first-generation college students. Brenna Miller taught multiple 75- or 50-student sections (with and without a teaching assistant, respectively), while Jesse Spohnholz taught one 260-student class (with four teaching assistants). For each, they taught five H/21 MREs, two that were the same and three that were different. In what follows, we will describe two that proved particularly effective at leveraging student ownership of learning and to which students self-reported the strongest connections.

The first of these, “Hunting, Wilderness, and Imperialism,” by Erica Mukherjee, aims to help students explore the dynamics of imperialism through case studies of elite hunting and early conservation efforts in nineteenth-century East Africa, North America, and India. The module begins by asking students to define their own understanding of “wilderness.” The exercise provides an opportunity for them to establish a personal connection to the topic and the module and to begin to appreciate that ideas about the meanings of nature and the wilderness are diverse and historically constructed. From there, the module provides an opportunity to learn about nineteenth-century imperialism by exploring the social dynamics at play in three case studies associated with hunting and wilderness. Students first interrogate Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) to define masculine imperial mentalities. They then examine these dynamics in practice in British East Africa using imperial official J. H. Patterson’s account of hunting the “Man Eaters of Tsavo”—a pair of lions that preyed on railroad workers. Students examine how Patterson portrayed himself but also learn the skill of reading against the grain to better understand the experiences of African and Indian colonial subjects. For North America and British India, students examine parallel dynamics, as well as elite white imperialists’ definitions of what counts as wilderness and their beliefs in appreciating and preserving it. For North America, students examine excerpts of George Catlin’s Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of North American Indians (1841), illustrating his views about buffalo hunting by colonial white people and the Sioux alongside his articulations of a sublime nature, which informed his proposal to establish national parks. Students thus work to uncover the imperialist mentalities that undergirded early conservation movements and the establishment of national parks, the removal of peoples from those landscapes, and the development of ideas about some of the hunting practices with which some of them are familiar. At the end of the module, students use these “deep dives” into history to reflect in writing on the relationships between imperialism,
hunting, and early conservation, as well as the durability of these historical trends today.

After finishing the lesson, we conducted a survey of 312 students, asking them what they found engaging, inspiring, or thought provoking, or (conversely) confusing, boring, or tedious. Student survey responses to this lesson were nearly universally positive, which is why we are highlighting these lessons. Students found the most meaning when lessons expressly connected to how they understand their families, values, and beliefs. For instance, of the 38 percent of those who connected with this teaching module more than the other four they studied that semester, more than half indicated that it was because they felt a familial or personal connection to the topic (usually family connections to hunting, camping, or hiking). One wrote, "I learned the most from [the] Hunting module because I am an avid outdoorsman in hunting/fishing so this interested me the most and I learned more about history even if in areas other than the US." Another explained, "I originally come from India, so I could relate to several stories I heard back in my village about bravery and fights with animals." When students found a personal connection to the material, it opened an interest in the broader global and historical picture of hunting practices and facilitated engagement with history and learning. Even among students who did not see the module as their "favorite," they also expressed personal connections to hunting or outdoor recreation, as well as interests in the politics of conservation and hunting and/or their pursuit of careers involving the environment (49 of 312). "Due to my increased interest level in the topic, I learned the most from [this module]... I have been surrounded by people who hunt for sport for a large amount of my life.... I have never been so interested in a history class in my life than during this module." As these quotes illustrate, students reported engagement because the lessons explicitly connected to their sense of self.

However, students were most engaged not just because this lesson plan told them about themselves or reinforced their existing beliefs but also because they learned about people who were different from themselves, causing them to change their former beliefs. Many expressed interest in learning about global Indigenous hunting practices or ways of hunting they were unfamiliar with (41 of the 312). Many others (55) felt engaged by the narrative structures of specific primary sources—and often also expressed enthusiasm for learning to critique those narrative structures by practicing reading against the grain. Many students expressed that they were more interested in learning the history of nineteenth-century imperialism because it helped them change their views about wilderness and nature: "In my mind," one wrote, "I have always viewed nature with sanctity and something special—this module allowed me to see the different way in which the nature I see today has evolved." Thus, we found that the most engaging history lessons both connected to students' preexisting sense of self and helped them change some element of that sense of self.

Encouraging students to connect with broad themes and ideas and to make meaning of history for themselves was also crucial to the efficacy of a second module we tested in our classrooms: "Refugees in the Early Modern Atlantic World," by Spohnholz. In this case, students examine the early modern Atlantic world not through standard narratives of colonial expansion but rather through an examination of the push and pull factors that drove the movement of refugees in Europe, West Africa, and the Americas between the 1670s and the 1720s. To help students establish a personal connection to the lesson, they begin by considering what resources they would need to escape to a new place in the present day. They engage in a discussion about
how their preexisting skills, connections, understandings of the world, and resources would fundamentally shape the opportunities and constraints of their flights. They then compare the experiences of Huguenot refugees from France and Jewish refugees from Spain, both fleeing to the Dutch Republic. They learn that such well-educated refugees were able to self-consciously craft narratives of their hardships. While the Dutch look like generous hosts in the first lesson, in the second lesson students learn that some were also heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade, which had politically and socially destabilizing effects on the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin. As new regional powers such as the Akwamu, Asante, and Dahomey rose, many Akan-speaking people fled war, violence, and enslavement as refugees. Here, students address the challenges of limited sources and again practice reading against the grain by looking at slavers’ accounts to determine how they can be used to identify the push/pull factors that shaped refugees’ flight, apart from the narratives the slave traders provided. The final lesson considers refugees in the Americas, including maroons and Indigenous peoples, whose experiences parallel those of the Akan-speaking West Africans from the previous lesson. Students also consider Huguenots who moved to the Americas, who presented themselves as refugees from Europe, though this move was driven by pull factors, like offers of free land, more than push factors, and they often enslaved others, even hiring hunters to track down refugees from slavery. Students end the module by considering how refugees tell their stories and how this informs historical memories of them to help us consider why we think of some people as “refugees” but not others.

After we were done, we asked 229 students about their experiences learning with this lesson. To explain why this module was their favorite, 67 percent of students identified a familial connection with these lessons and 27 percent identified a personal connection to migration. One wrote, “I feel that these lessons helped me understand my own family’s experience more, as both my grandfather and father came to this country as refugees.” Another explained, “I learned more about my Jewish heritage in this lesson, which was very thought provoking for me.” Even for students who did not self-identify a family or personal connection with the content, 13 percent reported appreciating connections to the politics of refugees and migration in the world today. A total of 23 percent noted that the lesson cultivated senses of personal sympathy or empathy with refugees: “I liked this lesson because I felt like I was able to put myself into their shoes and see from their perspective.” “My favorite part,” another wrote, “was the specific struggles and factors that made the refugees want to leave in order to find a better life.”

As with the “Hunting, Wilderness, and Imperialism” module, students reported feeling engaged not only because the lessons connected to their sense of self but also because they encouraged them to see beyond their sense of self. Among the 229 responses, 17 percent self-reported enjoying learning about the diversity of refugees, as well as seeing history from a different perspective than they had experienced before: “Typically when teaching a lesson you focus on only one or two super famous/well-known people who a lot of the time I’ve heard a bit about already…. In this unit there were so many people we read and talked about who I had never heard of, which was more intriguing because the information was all new. I also liked how these refugee stories connected to the US and shows why and how the US is so diverse today.” Here, too, what engaged students the most was both a connection to self and a self-consciousness about moving beyond themselves.
For both teaching modules, students also self-reported that their interest in the topic facilitated engagement with skill development. They really enjoyed the process of learning to read sources critically. “I liked that the focus was on analyzing primary sources,” one student wrote. “It was very engaging to think about how the future’s interpretation of the past can be influenced by how we write about it in the present, and digging for the truth in a passage of biases feels like a puzzle that paints a picture of the lives we’re reading about.” “One thing I liked about this unit is researching the people who published and translated the primary sources and determining why they did it. I found that really interesting and it helped me further my understanding on how sources are passed on throughout history.” Students also found these skills of source analysis applicable to their future studies: “I learned from this lesson how to look deeper into the motive behind the source and what could be missing… I hadn’t really considered that before this lesson, but I will for future references and research.” Students reported most engagement when they could see how they could use the skills they were learning to better understand the world around them.

We stress that these surveys do not offer direct proof of an unequivocally effective teaching technique. While the responses to these two lessons were nearly entirely positive, some did identify that they thought there was too much reading, among other things. But we do contend that such surveys help us understand how our students make meaning from world history, as well as offer practice places for them to make more of that meaning for themselves. This is important because students who gain a genuine sense of ownership of their learning demonstrate greater intellectual and personal resilience and a greater commitment to lifelong education. In thinking through questions about how to engage students in history courses many of them enter resentful of being forced to take, we can benefit from asking them about themselves and leveraging what we learn to help them start thinking about the deep and diverse history of our world rather than starting by debating among ourselves questions that lure us back to the content trap.

Of course, we don’t just listen to students, who are often not expert judges of their own learning. We also collaborate to share information about student learning based on faculty experiences using a specific lesson plan, guiding discussions and other activities, and grading assignments. In the case of these modules and others, testing lessons in real classroom environments allowed us to collaborate, looking for what works for students and soliciting feedback from colleagues, and identifying where we are or are not meeting learning objectives. During the revision process of these modules, we have simplified aspects of the lessons and readings, improved assignment prompts, and incorporated unexpected student responses and insights into teacher guides. In addition to seeing students connect to and own more of their learning, the “community of practice” we engaged in during testing and revision provided us with opportunities to meet with colleagues to discuss how things were going, plan teaching strategies, and brainstorm new ideas. The ability to work collaboratively with peers lifted our senses of individual responsibility and made experimentation easier, success feel more shared, and struggles feel less personal. The modules (even in “beta phase”) provided sound pedagogical lessons that targeted key skills in historical thinking and analysis, while also alleviating much of the mental stress of having to “figure it out” under pressure as the term unfolded. It also freed up time to focus on core skills and engage with students about topics that are relevant to them.
Going forward, it is clear to us that the “communities of practice” we engaged in during the testing of our first modules helped us share our ideas and continue to improve our teaching tool kits—and we invite others to join us. We see these modules as living documents that communities of engaged educators can help continue to improve by providing their colleagues and us with feedback, revisions, adaptations, and suggestions for even greater efficacy over many years into the future. The materials H/21 produces are available for download on our website at www.history21.com and free to adopt as either complete two-week lessons or individual select content (specific readings, sources, or exercises) independent of the rest of the module. Faculty wanting to alter, improve, or experiment are also welcome to modify our editable versions as they like. Our goal is to continue to use evidence about faculty and student experiences to adjust not only the lessons we are producing now but also the range, scope, and format of future materials we might produce to help one another in the future. We also hope that you become part of this broader “community of practice” by sharing your insights and support with us and fellow educators.
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Jesse Spohnholz is director of History for the 21st Century and professor of history at Washington State University, where he has been recognized with multiple awards for his teaching. For nine years, he was also director of the Roots of Contemporary Issues program at Washington State, a general education program that introduces first-year students to historical thinking and offers them tools to respond to some of the most controversial and pressing issues facing the world today. He is the author of many articles and has published six books, including one textbook, Ruptured Lives: Refugee Crises in Historical Perspective (2021). He has also presented on teaching and learning in world history and general education courses at conferences of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, American Historical Association, and World History Association.

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