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Year-End Reflection

When I began the year as a Faculty Writing Fellow, I planned to workshop a four-part series of writing assignments that sought to build historical research and writing skills. In the first, I provided students with a primary source and a prompt. For the second, I gave them a source, but no prompt. The third followed suit but students had to find an additional primary source, and in the fourth, a primary source and a scholarly secondary source. The idea was for students to use each assignment to build on the research skills of the one prior, and to prepare students for a culminating final research paper.

These assignments emphasized argument and analysis, well supported by evidence, over description and summary. I asked students to critically engage with sources, develop their own interpretive claims that were both rooted in, and supported by, specific evidence from an array of source types. This requires empathetic investigation that views issues from multiple perspectives, but also asks what perspectives are not present. In other words, to see how history works as a dynamic form of meaning making that can re-evaluate the past and respond to the present. When we discussed a reading's "argument," I wanted students not just to understand the argument and its significance for our historical understanding but also to see the component pieces of the assertion and how the author assembled them. Ultimately, I hoped students would leave the course more aware of how history is made and is used in the world around them. I also sought to hone widely applicable skills of communication and analysis so that they could develop well-rounded perspectives and be more responsible citizens of whatever communities they called home.

My fundamental mistake, however, was assuming that these goals were just about skills or methods. They were, but they also demanded a fundamental shift in how students understand themselves, their ideas, and their education. In order to do this kind of analysis, students have to feel empowered to develop and support their own interpretations of the past, taking an active role in their own learning rather than waiting for an instructor to distribute knowledge from on high.

Recognizing the extent to which successful completing of this assignment suite requires reorienting student relationships to knowledge has influenced the way I teach in two main categories. First, I now put more onus on students to direct the course of study, within certain guidelines that keep the class moving on my overall trajectory. Second, I think of their development as gradual and incremental, relying on repeated exposure over the course of the semester, and more importantly, over the course of their lives as students and beyond. Without thinking I need to get students all the way from zero to one hundred percent, it takes a little pressure off and means I can spend more times getting into specific details of the material or assignments and how they relate to the broader goal. It also means I can set more reasonable expectations for me and my students, so we are all at less risk of getting frustrated with the progress made over a relatively short semester. The gradual nature of these goals, which are shared across faculty and disciplines, alerted me to the need for even more coordination—especially within the major—so we can all make sure to build on past experiences and exposure as students plot their own path through various graduation requirements. Thank you for the opportunity to learn and reflect on these ideas all year.