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Teaching statement

Perhaps the single biggest theme characterizing my development as a teacher has been a willingness to experiment: with the design of my courses, with the nature of the material I cover, and with the ways I encourage and assess student learning. I began my teaching career as a very traditional lecturer, standing in front of a class for ninety minutes at a time and relying on papers and exams to determine how much of the information students had retained. It was a very conventional style, one based on the courses I took as an undergraduate. And it was terribly unsuccessful. At the end of my first year, criticisms from Mason's official course evaluations confirmed what I already suspected from the ineffectual responses to writing assignments and the bored expressions during class. Students found both the material and the way I presented it dull, and their lack of interest prevented them from mastering the factual content and from developing much interest in the study of the past as an important and engaging exercise in its own right.

I should not have been too surprised. I had taken many similar courses as an undergraduate, and even I—someone who went on to dedicate his professional life to studying and teaching history—had found the format monotonous. Realizing that my courses were not working as well as they might, I set myself to redesigning them from the ground up. As a new teacher I had put a great deal of effort into the content I taught in those courses, but I had devoted much less effort to worrying about *how* I presented the material. Going in to my second year at Mason I aimed to address the problem head-on by reimagining the courses completely. I began by thinking very carefully about the kinds of outcomes I wanted to achieve during the semester. (I noted with embarrassment that I had never done this formally before; in early courses, I simply sat down and wrote a sequence of lectures for each class.) Generous mentors prodded me to think carefully about what had excited *me* and drawn me to the study of the past as a profession, and to share some of that genuine enthusiasm with the students.

That summer after my first year at Mason counts as a major turning point in my evolution as an instructor. After careful thought, I determined that I was most concerned with helping my students learn to *think* like historians. I wanted to cultivate an appreciation of the specific ways that historians use primary-source evidence to reconstruct and interpret the past, and to share with them the thrills of working with documents and objects produced by historical actors. As I discovered years later when I dived into the scholarship on historical pedagogy, this is a fairly common insight about historical learning. At the time, however, it felt incredibly novel to me. Concluding that the core of my courses should focus on training students to think like historians, I isolated a set of basic historical thinking skills—contextualizing documents, reading sources closely, and corroborating conflicting accounts—and determined that going forward, my courses would be built around an extensive and active analysis of primary sources, rather than around a prewritten interpretation I provided to students in the form of a lecture.

It was a profound change in my approach, and it recast my courses dramatically. Going forward, factual content would be the vehicle for mastering historical thinking skills rather than the end goal itself. I replaced my lectures with ambitious sets of primary sources—song lyrics from the Civil War, Einstein's personal letter to Franklin Roosevelt alerting him to the possibilities of nuclear fission, images of plates

and cups used by enslaved African-Americans in the nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson's handwritten draft of the Declaration of Independence complete with deletions and emendations—and began to explore ways to model what historians actually *do* with those sources in front of my classes. In my second year at Mason, I headed back to the classroom to try out what was, for me, an utterly new approach.

As a teacher, the first experiments were somewhat unnerving. As I quickly learned, I had grown very used to my position of authority in the classroom, and transferring the burden of directing some of the class to the students was intimidating. I could not anticipate with perfect foresight where the conversation might go, and had to prepare different sets of documents that would allow us to approach a key theme or idea from different directions. I discovered that some students had become accustomed to absorbing history passively, and bristled at the notion that they should be actively interpreting and analyzing documents on their own. Some of the first tentative experiments with group work failed to accomplish much. The new, much more active classroom required me to develop new crowd-control skills.

For the most part, however, the benefits of the new method were immediate, obvious, and significant, even in those early, unpolished class sessions. Most students had never thought carefully about where the history in their textbooks came from, or who had written it, or what alternative interpretations might exist for a given historical phenomenon. The opportunity to pull the curtain back on the process of writing history was one that appealed to majors and non-majors alike. Students seemed invigorated; there was a new energy in many classes as participants struggled to make sense of documents and sources that did not easily fit a prearranged pattern.

Recasting my courses around active analysis of primary sources also helped me address some of the persistent problems that I encountered during my first semesters in the classroom. Because most of my courses are listed as military history, I often find myself balancing two disparate groups of students. One group begins the semester assuming that military history principally concerns the study of battles, tactics, and the decisions of generals; these students have concluded that such a narrow field holds little of importance for them, and they have often decided before the semester even begins that they do not much care for military history. The other group really, *really* likes military history already—and for precisely the same reasons. They too imagine that the class will focus solely on wars, tactics, and the decisions of generals and, steeped in expectations fueled by popular history and cable documentaries, hope that the course will offer an exciting series of stories about famous battles and comparisons of various pieces of military hardware. One of the challenges professors teaching military history face is convincing *both* groups that their vision of military history is unnecessarily narrow: that the field encompasses not just wartime but peacetime as well, that it includes not just generals at the top but the men and women who fight and work and wait, and, most importantly, that America's history of thinking about war has urgent relevance to the problems of the twenty-first century.

Recasting the course around close analysis of primary sources provided a marvelous way to introduce this more expansive notion of military history in a very natural way. Dispensing with battle maps and schematics of tanks and airplanes, we delved into much richer and more complex sources. One class explored the differences between recruiting posters used in the South in 1862 and those that appeared in the North. A class on the years before the attack at Pearl Harbor transformed into an examination of a series of Dr. Seuss cartoons from 1940 urging America to intervene against Germany. Rather than simply tell the story of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, we examined telegrams, newspaper headlines, and public

warnings issued during the period of unrestricted submarine warfare during World War I. A class on nuclear brinkmanship during the early Cold War developed into a discussion built around clips from the Hollywood films *Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*, giving students a chance to practice watching popular movies actively rather than simply absorbing them uncritically. Using primary sources produced during the events we examined also afforded an easy way to connect the thorny issues of the past with contemporary questions ranging from the treatment of enemy combatants to the use of drones to the limitations of military power. The new format provided me with an elegant and sensible way to connect past and present in a crucial way, as students could watch historical actors struggle with their own challenges, inconsistencies, and paradoxes through the sources they left behind.

Injecting a sense of adventurousness and unpredictability into the classroom helped enliven my own in-class persona, as well. As I tried to prepare for the unanticipated comment or question, I found myself reinvigorated by the process of working with the documents. And while the transition to a new kind of teaching was not without missteps, it was clear that *I* was learning, too. I looked at familiar sources—documents I had explained to students dozens of times over the years—with fresh eyes as new classes pointed out things in the sources I had previously overlooked. A class on the propaganda posters of World War II remains the most memorable experience in this regard; I can still recall my surprise at having students point out details in images I had somehow not noticed before despite hours spent poring over the images, and the exhilaration I felt at having no prepared answer beyond “You know, I’ve never noticed that before—let’s see if we can figure it out together.” My authentic enthusiasm at working closely with the documents, in turn, helped the students embrace their own inquisitiveness. The change in the tone of my classrooms was palpable.

I began to see results immediately: students displayed a better understanding of basic concepts in their writing assignments, and exhibited concrete evidence of engagement during our in-class discussions. Being able to analyze sources critically required students to master a good deal of factual material, and I was encouraged to see that students’ retention of that content improved as well. Students who *wanted* to master information because the details were necessary to solve a puzzle they had identified themselves retained it vastly better than students I *forced* to memorize details so they could repeat them on a test. Presenting tasks that rewarded those who tried to think historically was unquestionably the biggest change I have made in my teaching in the past decade.

A second important change in my courses came a year after I redesigned them around primary-source teaching. While the improvement in students’ historical thinking skills appeared clear from both the caliber of their in-class questions and responses and from the substance of their written work, I continued to detect some grumbling about the nature of the course assignments. Many complaints about the nature and amount of coursework are simply intrinsic to college students, but my success in re-imagining the format of the classes encouraged me to undertake a similar effort with my assignments and assessments.

Many of the more sincere complaints about the assignments focused on the fact that writing a five-page essay in a history course appeared a somewhat artificial exercise. As a firm believer in the centrality of writing to history classes, I was unwilling to jettison the five-page essay format. But I looked for ways to change my essay prompts so that the assignments reflected more real-world tasks: the kinds of things that working historians might actually be called to do in the course of their professional work. That small insight led to a more substantial change in the essays I assigned.

Unlike my approach to class discussions, my changes to the course assignments were not a fundamental re-imagining of the substance of the essays themselves. The modifications to the writing assignments were slightly more superficial: I changed the presentation of the assignments, rather than their essence. In every case, however, I attempted to ask the students to do something a real historian might actually be called to do: design a museum exhibit, offer policy advice, write a newspaper editorial, draft a magazine profile. An old assignment asking students to evaluate the Confederacy's chances at the outset of the Civil War transformed into one in which they took on the role of Confederate Secretary of War in 1861 and drafted a policy memo to President Jefferson Davis recommending and justifying a particular military strategy. An old assignment asking students to discuss U.S. intervention in World War I became one in which they were to write a pair of opposing 1917 editorials arguing both for and against American intervention. Each new assignment required students to employ historical thinking skills, to marshal evidence, and to craft arguments in support of their interpretations. The main difference was that those skills were now deployed in the service of a real-world task.

To my delight, I discovered that the new assignments allowed me to keep courses as rigorous as an upper-level course at Mason should be without sacrificing student engagement. I maintained a policy I first embraced as a teaching assistant, eschewing marginalia on papers in favor of a brief, 200-word typed mini-essay that identified specific strengths and weaknesses in the writing and recommended strategies for improving in the future. (This approach, borrowed from the Writing Center at my graduate institution, remains one of the most successful techniques I have incorporated.)

The changes in my undergraduate teaching continue to inform other courses, as well. My graduate reading seminars remain more traditional courses: we read a monograph each week and discuss its construction and arguments over the course of a three-hour discussion. But while those classes hew closely to the traditional seminar format, the themes I stress over the semester draw upon my broader classroom experience. No matter the subject, we emphasize mindfulness and an awareness of the process of writing history. The most successful part of my teaching and mentorship at the graduate level is maintaining rigorous expectations in students' writing: I evaluate their written assignments with the same thorough attention a journal referee would apply, and provide each student with a comprehensive write-up of their work at semester's end. Though that feedback is often demanding, students report that its detailed nature places it among the most valuable learning experiences they receive in graduate school.

I continue to look for ways to gather more information about how my classes look from the students' perspective. An anonymous, unofficial midterm evaluation I circulate during the seventh week of the semester gives me a chance to see what is working well and less well during the semester, rather than wait for the postmortem of official end-of-semester evaluations. Even the simple act of soliciting this feedback has had a positive effect on the tenor of classes; students seem to sense that I take their insights seriously, and they have given me a great deal of extremely useful advice about the way the course appears to them (along with plenty of wardrobe recommendations, which are somewhat less useful.) And the informal midterm evaluations afford me an opportunity to talk a little with students about course design, explaining why I made some of the choices I did in assembling the course and what I hope to accomplish. Those conversations also help foster a sense that we're on the same team, working together to better understand the past. They represent a positive change from the adversarial relationship that often plagued my classes when I presented myself as the sole authority and evaluator.

Encouraged by the success of a more rigorous approach in the undergraduate classroom, I have worked with colleagues to explore ways to recreate similar experiences in other arenas. Co-creating Mason's annual *War on the Silver Screen* film festival is one example. The festival offers a chance for undergraduates, graduates, and members of the university community members to screen full-length war movies— given the time constraints, an unmanageable task in an undergraduate course—and to participate in a group discussion about the film's meaning and its insights as a primary source in its own right. Now in its fifth year, the film festival has demonstrated the success of transplanting the techniques of historical thinking outside the classroom as well.

I take a great deal of satisfaction in the way my teaching has evolved over time. I am also the first to admit that most of the innovations I have brought to my classroom over the past eight years are not solely my own invention. I have been unusually fortunate to fall in with people at George Mason—particularly in the Department of History and Art History and the Center for History and New Media—who have helped equip me with the tools and the feedback to help me improve my teaching dramatically. In particular, my work with the Teaching American History program in Virginia and Maryland has been a consistent source of new ideas for my teaching. The TAH program is aimed at public school teachers and aims to expose them to historical thinking skills and ways to incorporate primary sources in their own classrooms. As the project's Lead Historian, I am only one member of a team that plans, administers, and evaluates the intensive weeklong summer workshops and follows teachers into the classroom to help them assimilate the lessons. Minute-for-minute, I have learned more about my own teaching by leading the workshops than anything else I have done in the classroom. Having the chance to work intensively with a committed and experienced group of teachers has given me insights into my own course design and the ways students learn that I could not have gotten anywhere else.

Those experiences continue to affect my teaching in delightful and unanticipated ways. Approached two years ago by the Virginia Department of Education to help develop an online reaccreditation program for Virginia teachers, I accepted a task that I would have found far too intimidating ten years ago. Asked to design an online course that exposed teachers to historical thinking skills, furnished a thorough US history survey, and could be completed online in twenty hours, I came up with *Hidden in Plain Sight*, a set of everyday objects that each contribute a piece of some larger historical episode: a common dishwasher becomes a way to discuss the Marshall Plan and Cold War consumerism, while a mailbag from the 1830s offers entry to a discussion of antebellum abolitionist mail campaigns and the ways Southerners redefined slavery before the Civil War. Assembling such a project is far beyond the ability of any one person, and the staff at CHNM handled all of the support, testing, and revisions. The feedback from participants in the first *Hidden in Plain Sight* has been superlative, and it remains one of my proudest accomplishments as a teacher—particularly as so much of the content and course structure is so alien to my training as a military historian.

I am not certain if I am even halfway to where I want to be as a teacher. After nearly a decade in the college classroom, my teaching feels more like a work in progress than it ever has. Lately I seem to be acquiring new ideas faster than I have time to try them out in the classroom. I remain enormously grateful to George Mason for putting me in an environment that helped me discover a much more genuine and effective voice in the classroom, and I hope to continue refining my teaching over the rest of my career.