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Teaching World Civilizations Through World Literature Theory – Systems and Specifics

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Abstract: This article explores the approach taken in a course I helped create and develop, GHIST 100: World Civilization to 1500 CE. It will explain the method of teaching history as a series of competing narratives using World Literature Theory, allowing for a wider global perspective to be offered to students with a more inclusive approach to understanding history. The course was designed to be inquiry based, each week themed around a question with many possible answers. The course took an interdisciplinary approach that encouraged students to engage in the “detective work” of history to examine how historical narratives are constructed using all kinds of evidence. The article will also discuss some of the assignments and projects the course used to allow students to practice and demonstrate these skills as they developed.

Keywords: Teaching, World Civilization, Student, Higher Education.

What is the point of learning history? This is one of the starting questions I have always used when teaching the World Civilizations to 1500 CE course. The most frequent answer students would give is it is important to learn about the past to avoid making the same mistakes in the future. Students come to the subject with the understanding that the purpose of studying history is to learn from it, drawing on the past to inform decisions and actions in the present that may in turn shape the future. What exactly one learns from history depends on the history you are studying—a point I will return to shortly.

Another key question I would ask students in the first class is what they had enjoyed and not enjoyed about their past experiences studying history. They would frequently say they enjoyed hearing the stories of the past, but the focus on memorizing dates and names was boring and challenging. They would often comment on how history was taught from a textbook in high school, with the aim to memorize the content as the History of Canada (because Canadian History is the only mandatory history course in high school many don't get exposed to much other history). It is the students' interest in the stories of history that is the key to teaching it. History is always a a competing web of narratives, synthesized to give us the most accurate picture we can manage, but too often certain narratives are favoured in textbooks. Focusing on a particular narrative is never truly studying history comprehensively, no more than reading one novel could be called studying literature.

This returns us to considering the lessons one learns from studying history. In my dissertation I argued that all history is a form of mythmaking, in line with the work of Kerwin Lee Klein and Howard Zinn, and so the only way to find a more accurate picture is to look at the various competing narratives and try to hold this tangled web in view. This approach to teaching history is more of an inquiry-based one, where students focus less on memorizing details of one specific narrative and instead encourages them to explore how history is constructed. Students ultimately get to engage in the “detective work” of historical research and construct their own narratives and arguments. This is the approach I have taken in the designing the courses I have taught, which I will describe further throughout this article.

It may seem a complex and difficult idea to have students approach history through the construction of historical narratives, but student feedback has indicated they found my approach effective at helping them understand the complex ideas covered in the World Civilizations to 1500 CE course. My method was to root the study of history in stories, beginning with argument from Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* that “The truth about stories is that's all we are” (King, 2002, p. 2). King argues that stories are the one thing all human cultures have in common for how we learn and communicate information. It is this idea of focusing on narratives as the

access point to history led me to introduce students to ideas from World Literature Theory and to adapt it to how we would study world history.

The adaptation of World Literature Theory is an innovative interdisciplinary approach that came from my own research work for my interdisciplinary humanities PhD and graduate diploma in world literature I received from York University. I make most use of the ideas of David Damrosch that world literature is a mode and approach to reading literature, as opposed to a given canon too vast for any individual to master. This same approach can also be useful to help students manage studying world history to 1500 CE in a global perspective, not as all-encompassing on content to memorize but focused on how such history is constructed. I will explore the full methodology of the course in the following paragraphs.

Another argument Damrosch makes about world literature is that texts gain in translation across culture and time, which is also a practical approach to take to the study of World History. Many different forms of text are explored in the course, including artifacts, artworks, documents, and historians' constructed narratives of the past. To properly keep a global perspective, we must work with translations of primary sources, but all texts in History are translated through time and culture from their context of origin, and interpreted in a contemporary context.

The final key point of Damrosch's theories I adapt for world history is related to the process of reading the texts. While any given text comes from a specific cultural and historical context, the aim of the reading process is to look for universals of the human experience as well. This is equally applicable to world history, as any text has contexts that can be used to extract historical knowledge or construct historical narratives, but there can also be larger patterns and universals to find from texts across cultures and times. The constant challenge of working with materials of world history—or any history for that matter—is to maintain the balance between attention to systems (universals) and specifics (primary contexts). It is also this balancing act that will always lead to any one historical narrative acting in one degree or another as mythmaking.

Now that the theoretical underpinnings of my approach to teaching history have been explained, it is time to elaborate on how I structured my course and describe some assignments I have used to help my students both study the narratives of history and craft historical narratives of their own. As mentioned earlier, I took an inquiry-based approach to the structure of the course, which means that instead of covering a specific topic each week for students to absorb and memorize details of, it was framed around a question for which we would explore the various approaches that historians and historical texts have put forward to arrive at different answers.

Some examples of the guiding questions for each week are:

What are civilizations?

What are the environmental determinants for civilization?

How do beliefs shape civilizations? How is power established and maintained in civilizations?

What makes an empire successful?

What makes an empire collapse?

How do trade and technology impact/change civilizations?

How does popular culture make use of Ancient History?

Each of these would guide the lessons, materials, and activities for that week. I will choose one of these set questions as an example to describe how I would approach that week's class: "How is power established and maintained in civilizations?"

I begin by dividing the class into groups and ask them to imagine they are creating a civilization or society. I have them discuss how they would determine who should rule or lead this society, and how they would encourage or enforce the rules and norms they would want the society to follow. The groups will have time to discuss and then they will explain how their power structures function to the rest of the class. As each group presents, I point out any parallels to past real civilizations their plans resemble. Groups will often take different strategies for choosing a leader: including elections, contests, wealth, force, and justification by divine right. Some groups come up with plans for laws, while others decide they will have faith or religion present the customs they want society to follow. These would also often include various systems of punishment and reward for enforcement.

After they explain their ideas and how or why they believe they would work, I ask questions to probe further about the effectiveness of their ideas. For example, if a group pitches a democratic society that encourages diversity, equity, and peace through law, I will ask what they would do to maintain their norms or power if a larger and stronger civilization with different norms attacked them. I don't expect all the questions to be answered, but often will pose them as a way for students to contemplate the complexities of geopolitical power dynamics. This gets them to think about a diversity of perspectives and approaches, even before we dive into any historical case studies that week. For the case studies, I choose two ancient polytheistic civilizations to examine different approaches to power structures and how they are maintained. This helps build continuity from the previous week where we examine how beliefs shape civilizations.

The two civilizations I select to compare and contrast in the lesson for the week are Ancient Greece and Mesoamerica. While these two societies had no contact with each other, both were structured as city states with a shared pantheon and belief system but also differences between the city states. There was common culture and tradition in both civilizations, but also differing political structures and organizations of societal power across city states—particularly in Ancient Greece. This allows contrast between not only Mesoamerica and Ancient Greece, but also between

different Greek city states such as Athens and Sparta. Case studies like this allow a demonstration of the mode of examining world history to see the systems at play, exploring the various methods by which power has been justified.

I also have the students think about parallels between these power structures and those found in our contemporary context, helping them contemplate the connections between the past and present. This can set up an assignment where students reflect on the limits and challenges of different approaches to taking and maintaining power while drawing on historical examples to illustrate their thinking. Through engaging in such an analysis, they are actively beginning the process of creating a historical narrative, aiming to offer specific lessons about power tied to historical examples and evidence. The students are learning about world history while putting that learning into practice as constructors of a historical narrative simultaneously. A similar approach of combing in-class activities, comparing and contrasting historical case studies, and constructing historical narratives/arguments occur with each weekly theme.

This article will not exhaustively describe each week of the course in detail, but will explain some other activities and assignments to show more of this inquiry-based mode of engaging World Literature Theory to world history in practice. One that stood out to students according to their course feedback was a group assignment called “Engaging with Ancient Artifacts.” I had purchased several replicas of artifacts from various civilizations around the globe created by an artist in New Zealand, and would give each group a different artifact. These objects were unique to purchase and not widely available. They also took some financial investment on my part to acquire and were delicate, and I would tell this to the students before giving them out. This showed a level of trust that I think helped the students feel more responsibility and respected by me through getting to work so closely with these artifact replicas.

Without being given any context about the artifact, I would ask each group to develop theories as to where it was from, what its function may be, and what it could teach us about the civilization it originated from. I told them to make notes on their thinking process and deductions as they worked. They were not graded on whether their theories and guesses were correct, but instead on how well they explained and demonstrated their analysis based upon the details of the artifacts. This encouraged students not to fear making guesses and sharing them as there was no penalty for being incorrect.

As the groups worked on their analysis of the objects I would walk about the class observing the groups and listen to their theories. Students often got excited at the challenge of solving the puzzle and would keep guessing and working at it with the assurance getting the right answer was not connected to their grade. They would frequently be able to correctly

identify what civilizations the artifacts came from and offer good points on what it said about their society. The most challenging part of the exercise was often determining the function of the artifact in its time. Because this is the most specific piece of the puzzle to the original contexts of the civilization. At the end of the class I would have the groups present their theories and reasoning process, after which I would share the accurate details and information about each artifact with the class.

Students enjoyed collaborating and working with the replica artifact, and the sense of physical connection to the past through it, which fostered great energy in the classroom and gave them good experiential learning of how historians work with such objects. It also built more community both amongst the students and between the students and myself.

I also took a more unique approach to the final research assignment for the course. Instead of having a list of essay topics to choose from, I had each student engage in a more individual task based on a unique excerpt each received from a primary source document from a civilization or time period covered in the course, but one they were not previously given. These could be journals, law codes, stories, records, artwork, or poems. The final assignment had students engage in research to discover where and when their document was from, what purpose it had been created for in its original context, the impacts it had in its time, and contemporaneously relevant lessons we could extract from it. This assignment helped students demonstrate all the skills sets they had been developing over the course.

The questions to be answered in this assignment related directly to the use of World Literature Theory as adapted to world history. It has students directly engage in this mode of reading and analyzing primary sources and construct their own historical narratives and arguments, and also pushes students to consider the systems and specific contexts their given primary source was embedded in. I also encouraged them to speak to me about guesses or information they were discovering to check if they were on the right track. It was also open for students to submit their findings in video or podcast form instead of written, and allowed them more freedom on how they related their findings. Students were therefore often excited to have this project as something active to discover.

I have been told in course feedback and directly from previous students that they greatly enjoyed my course and that it was one of their most interesting first-semester classes. It was always very encouraging to see students interested and engaged in the complexity of world history instead of being intimidated or anxious about it. Many would admit to anxiousness about the size of the topic and content at the outset of the course, but then have their fears alleviated by the approach I took. After our first class in which I would explain the methodology of the course, students would often tell me they were looking forward to the course and no longer nervous about it.

The experiences of teaching this course over several years has helped further shape my approach to and ideas about teaching history to students. It has also shifted my approach to teaching other subjects more towards tackling complex and challenging ideas by finding ways to make them more accessible and exciting. I hope some of these ideas may be useful for others to incorporate into how they teach their subjects, and perhaps offer some inspiration on how to lead into complexity as a way to generate new forms of student engagement with course content.

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