

## Teaching Historical Literacy and Making World History Relevant in the Online Discussion Board

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**M**ANY STUDENTS, when asked why they have chosen to enroll in an introductory-level history class in World or Western Civilization, cite some variation of the popular (often-misquoted) dictum from George Santayana: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>1</sup> For most students in the introductory World Civilization I course that I teach online, this is likely their first (and perhaps only) university history course. Persuading students that history is valuable, even just for the skills they need in critical reading and writing, is a difficult task. It is harder still when they view ancient and medieval history either as useless textbook knowledge or as simple lessons for us “enlightened” modern people, as if one could learn from the mistakes of the past without empathizing with the actual historical actors.

Many instructors sidestep students’ solipsistic tendencies by focusing on primary sources, which is possible in a small, face-to-face classroom where an instructor can quickly redirect students away from tangential or anachronistic thinking. However, in the asynchronous online discussion board, where students often post at 11:30 pm or ten minutes before the close of the board, it can be much harder to correct the fundamental errors in primary source analysis, especially in larger classes. My solution for teaching the first half of the World Civilization survey course has been to use the discussion board to have the students gain what I call “historical

literacy,” leaving primary source analysis to my students’ short weekly formal writing assignments (where I can provide direct, individual feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their analytical skills).<sup>2</sup>

In teaching history, historical literacy falls under the broader consideration of developing a historical consciousness, defined as an awareness of the past in the present and the interconnection between them.<sup>3</sup> The development of this historical thinking relies upon the exploration of the procedural concepts of history: historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, evidence, and historical empathy.<sup>4</sup> Many students in the introductory history survey, having experienced “memory-history,” or fact-based history education in secondary school, have trouble with all of these skills. They often lack historical empathy for pre-modern peoples, seeing them through the lenses of barbarism or noble savagery, as part of the “Dark Ages” (a term anathema to medievalists), or as modern civics lessons dressed up in old clothes.

How then to foster this awareness of the past in the present moment, this historical literacy, in the online classroom? I have found that the asynchronous discussion board is actually an ideal place for such training. It comes in the form of weekly assignments (in addition to their standard textbook and primary source readings) that have students read a popular article or blog post, listen to a podcast, or watch a video that relates the course content that week to the modern world in some fashion. There is some really excellent long-form journalism, short blogs written by specialists, streaming video documentaries, TED talks, et cetera, on historical topics happening on the Internet right now, and an online class is perfectly poised to take advantage of this new literary output from the “golden age” of journalism’s new frontiers.<sup>5</sup> As *New York Times* journalist David Carr has put it, “I think that the ability to sit at your desk and check everything against history and narrative, it’s part of how newspapers ended up becoming... daily magazines. All the analytics are baked in because the reporters are able to check stuff as they go.”<sup>6</sup> Carr was speaking from the perspective of a journalist, but from the reverse position, instructors and students alike are able to utilize history and narrative to inject the necessary context into the fleeting opinions and observations that make up the virtual cloud of the public’s understanding of the past’s relevance to the present.

While these Internet sources could be used in a classroom course, they can actually be used far more naturally in their native digital environment, where the instructor can embed a YouTube video in a discussion prompt for individual student playback, or hypertext a link to an historian’s blog. These popular articles and media encourage student engagement with the historical material by demonstrating its “real-world” implications, while hopefully avoiding the traps of anachronism and false-equivalency. It also

trains students to engage in critical thinking while reading on the web, which many students raised on Wikipedia absolutely need. They also provide fodder for debate and discussion with *one another*.<sup>7</sup>

One problem that many students in introductory history courses have is that they direct all of their remarks to the professor when they do not feel qualified to have opinions on primary sources. On a discussion board, it is easier to remove the instructor from the center of the discussion, forcing students to hear and debate their colleagues' points-of-view. This is also easier when the students feel less daunted by the readings, as they are often intimidated by ancient sources, even when they surrounded by the comfortable apparatus of a source reader. By making the discussion board a place where students can evaluate how people use the past in the present moment, they critically engage with the uses of history in popular culture, where most feel more confident in their own power of analysis. This comfort in applying analytical rigor to their historical literacy on discussion boards often translates into a higher comfort level with critical writing in their weekly primary source analysis assignments, and the two kinds of writing often support one another both in content and in student responses. By showcasing three examples, I will demonstrate the uses and benefits of this "historical literacy" in online discussion boards.

In my World Civilization I class, I emphasize moments in which the disparate pre-modern global cultures we study actually came into contact with one another through the exchange of goods, technology, disease, and ideas. For example, I spend a week on the crusades in the Mediterranean, looking at these events from the various perspectives: from Europeans in France and England, Muslims in the Abbasid Caliphate, and Byzantine Christians in Constantinople to the Andalusian Christians, Jews, and Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula. There has been much digital and real ink spilled on the notions of "crusade" and "jihad" in the twenty-first century in an attempt to understand and contextualize the global "War on Terror", a conflict that former President George W. Bush called a "crusade" just days after the events of 9/11.<sup>8</sup> Most students have grown up in this war, and many of my online students have fought in it. In class, I focus on the theme of just war, a theory developed over time during the Middle Ages. It consisted of three main ideas: first, *jus ad bellum*, which concerns the justice of resorting to war in the first place; second, *jus in bello*, which concerns the justice of conduct within war, after it has begun; and third *jus post bellum*, which concerns the justice of peace agreements and the termination phase of war. For their weekly writing, students need to argue how the various authors of their assigned primary sources dealt with the concepts of just war, from Pope Urban II's speech at the Council of Clermont to Anna Komnena of Byzantium's tales of the Fourth Crusade in the *Alexiad*.<sup>9</sup>

After the students have read the primary sources and struggled with how historical figures dealt with just war in an ostensibly religious conflict, we turn to the discussion boards. Here, I have students read two short blog posts written by medieval historians to debate the subject.<sup>10</sup> We start out with the truism that holy war is not a new concept and that no one religion has a monopoly on it. From there, students are asked how the rhetoric to justify such behavior is maintained. Is war on religious grounds ever justified? How about war on other grounds (political, economic, etc.) that is merely clothed in the garments of religious rhetoric? Are there black and white answers to these questions? To further complicate the issues, I also embed and assign a video of President Barack Obama's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech from 2009.<sup>11</sup> In that speech, he dwells deeply on the idea of just war, referencing Late Antique and medieval sources, such as the work of St. Augustine of Hippo, widely considered the father of just war theory.<sup>12</sup> In order to help contextualize the speech, I also have them read another blog post by Virginia Tech medieval historian, Dr. Matthew Gabriele, which analyzes the speech in terms of the medieval concepts of just war.<sup>13</sup>

Each semester, this proves to be one of the liveliest discussion boards. The subject matter often resonates deeply with millennial students, most of whom were children when America's current wars began, or cast their first votes in presidential elections in 2008 or 2012. In terms of online instruction, this topic engages those students who are active-duty military, reserves, or veterans (a demographic whom online education serves extensively in most programs, including mine at the University of Memphis). These students, with their lived experiences in war, often bring their personal stories to the discussion voluntarily, though I do solicit them in the prompt in order to encourage students with those experiences to share what they are comfortable with. In an asynchronous environment, these military students have the ability to craft their responses thoughtfully, without being put on the spot in a classroom setting, where they might feel uncomfortable being asked point blank about their combat or wartime experiences.

In one semester, a student—who was both a devout Christian intending on going to seminary and an anti-war Obama supporter—wrote his initial weekly post with eye-popping black and white thinking, denouncing both the crusades and jihad as anathema while providing scriptural support from his own personal faith studies. He and his classmates, including a veteran who had been deployed to Afghanistan, got into a fascinating online discussion about the moral and practical issues of war, and the first student was forced to retrench some of his absolutist claims in light of his classmates' views and experiences. The veteran, who declined to share

specifics, did rely upon his authority as a person who had served in a war zone to argue for a moral “grey area” of war, though all the students agreed that holy wars (be they crusades, jihads, or other divine justifications) were categorically bad. The student who made the initial post would likely have said the same thing both in the classroom and online, based on his outgoing and brash personality; however, it is my view that the discussion that followed his initial post would have been far different in the classroom, as the thoughtful and measured responses to his inflammatory comments would have been easy to shut down, or never materialize, face-to-face. Over the course of several days of discussion, all of the students on the thread were able to be heard, which is one of the benefits of the online board, particularly when students are divided or passionate.

While the discussion board fosters lively discussion about topics introductory students care about, like just war and military might, it can also foster excellent discussion on topics students do not know they care about until the instructor introduces it, as I do in the first week when I start off World Civilization I with prehistoric humans. Since prehistory left no written records, it is a perfect opportunity to make use of visual materials as primary sources in a documentary about cave paintings, filmmaker Werner Herzog’s *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.<sup>14</sup>

There is much streaming video available for free on sites like YouTube, or hosted on servers owned by universities and other non-profits, although broken links, non-updated pages, or overhauled websites are often a problem with free sites.<sup>15</sup> An alternative is to require online students to subscribe to Netflix, which is very affordable and is analogous to purchasing another “textbook” or paying a course materials fee.<sup>16</sup> During the first week of class (when students are often still acquiring the necessary books), I have my students sign up for Netflix and watch the ninety-minute documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. Herzog’s film documents the art of the Chauvet Caves in southern France, discovered in 1994, and estimated to be 30,000-32,000 years old, making them the oldest cave paintings found to date.

My questions for students on the discussion board echo some of the questions that Herzog asks in his film—that is, what does this early art tell us about the development of human beings? What can the art of our most ancient human ancestors teach us about the prehistorical and pre-modern world? What can it teach us about ourselves? I ask the students what answers Herzog provides, and whether they agree or disagree with his profound and esoteric ideas. As a visual source, the cave paintings are evidence of human thought long before any written language was developed—our knowledge about this prehistory comes from the artifacts of material culture, such as archaeological sources like potsherds and tool

fragments; genetics, morphology, and disease from human remains; climate and ecology, including tree-ring dating; and, of course, visual sources such as these cave paintings, all of which are sources that historian Daniel Lord Smail has called the stuff of “deep history.”<sup>17</sup>

Students are usually awed and delighted by the film; the art is stunning and sophisticated, and the visual connection to a past of scientifically measurable, but almost unimaginable, antiquity gives students a tangible foothold in prehistory. This is in no small part because of Herzog’s artistry as a filmmaker, as he offers viewers the opportunity to gaze inwards to themselves and backwards into the great vistas of the past by placing them in the middle of one of oldest known works of art. Great art provokes a response in the viewer—sometimes that is awe, or sadness, or disgust, or an ecstasy of religious feeling. The art of the Chauvet Caves evokes something for modern viewers, and it evoked something in their original creators, in their original audience, and in prehistoric audiences 5,000 years after them (a scientist observes that two overlapping paintings are 5,000 years apart, and yet the later one seems to respond or fit in with the earlier one).

Herzog’s argument in the film, which most students grasp, or do once discussion gets going, is that we cannot know for certain the responses this art evoked in the deep past, nor the uses to which the cave was put. But the fact that we can imagine them, based on our own scientific observations and our own mental landscapes as fellow human beings, is the essence of *homo sapiens sapiens*. The enormous capacity of human beings for questioning, for art, for science, for observation and intellect, for spiritual feeling, for empathy and creativity in every aspect of earthly life is what makes us people. It is a great way to start the semester because the point of the discussion is not actually the answers, it is the ability to ask the questions.

By the end point of the course, the students have learned the significance of primary and secondary sources, asking critical and in-depth questions about authorship, bias, and reliability. In the final discussion prompt of the term, I have my students read a single online essay, “The Gulf of Time,” by Lewis Lapham, the distinguished literary and cultural critic, editor of *Harper’s Magazine* from 1976 to 2006, and founder of *Lapham’s Quarterly*, an erudite journal of history and ideas.<sup>18</sup> Lapham is not an easy writer (hence the article’s place at the end of the term); he wears his education and reading a bit heavily, relying on the reader’s cultural literacy to catch the many uncited references to historical events, great literature, art, and scientific ideas that are embedded in his writing. With the article, I also assign a worksheet, “How to Use Wikipedia for Critical Reading.”

Lapham’s essay about the role of history in contemporary society argues for the “big picture” relevance of historical thinking. The accompanying Wikipedia assignment demonstrates the importance of the evidence upon

which this argument is based; students answer a series of factual questions culled from the various details used to illustrate his point, as well as few interpretative questions that require more depth. This worksheet demonstrates the utility (and limitations) of Wikipedia to the students. The fine points can always be looked up; mere coverage of historical facts is not enough.<sup>19</sup> In order to be a critical reader, a student must be able to use his/her reference skills and analytical skills together in order to understand an unfamiliar or sophisticated text.

Students use Wikipedia because an online encyclopedia is inherently useful and convenient. It is useful as a quick stop or second opinion and many scholars use it in just this way. In the assignment prompt, I lay out various *caveat lector* warnings and common sense guidelines, including the most important one: Wikipedia is not reliable because the authorship is questionable. However, it is true that Wikipedia is often quite good on non-controversial information (e.g., When was Charlemagne crowned emperor?) However, it is very bad at collating current research trends, as editors are often reliant upon free, out-of-date books in the public domain; it is also quite bad on matters that have any political controversy in them at all. Having worked all semester to give students the mental tools to critically evaluate the quality of texts for themselves, I ask them to demonstrate this competency in the final discussion assignment, hopeful that they can separate the wheat from the chaff when reading Wikipedia or any other text, online or on paper, in their future endeavors.

In the discussion boards over the course of the term, I attempt to display the variety and the utility of historical themes from pre-modern world history that touch our lives at the present moment in the twenty-first century. In my first lecture of the course, I ask the question, “Why history?” and discuss the skills students will gain in critical reading and writing, and historical literacy. In the final discussion board, students are invited to share their own response to the question, to remember my first lecture and my answer, and to read Lapham’s piece, which provides his answer to “Why history?” As Lapham puts it, we must “acknowledge the truth of the old Arab proverb that says we have less reason to fear what might happen tomorrow than to beware of what happened yesterday. I know of no better reason to read history. Construed as a *means* instead of an end, history is the weapon with which we defend the future against the past.”<sup>20</sup> Many students leave the class with their own answers; one of my brightest said in his final post, “Why history? Without history, we cannot study ourselves, much less others. To know where we are going, we must see where we have been, and that is impossible to do without history.”

Teaching online certainly requires instructors to expand their competencies in the practical skills of digital technology and think

creatively about course development and pedagogy, as student interaction on discussion boards is quite different from their face-to-face interactions in the classroom, the latter of which has the advantage of being synchronous, as well as informed by body language and verbal tone. However, instead of focusing on what online lacks, I try to focus on its advantages; the things one can do easily and fluidly online. My work with my introductory students on their “historical literacy” is one such example of a teaching technique that is actually better online. While the pedagogical ideas discussed here can be used in a classroom seminar or discussion section, using online video (or other online media) in an online discussion stays within the established rhythm of the Web 2.0 medium, where it is common to read text, watch a video, read a few comments, and post a response or comment of one’s own. This is a rhythm that I have found makes the video and other hyperlinked sources work even better online they do in person.

While it is important to develop a pedagogy that is appropriate to online learning, in my experience teaching university students online at all levels (lower-division introductory courses, upper-division specialist courses for majors, as well as graduate seminars), it is also important to remember that teaching online is just a mode of delivery—it is the habits of mind that the study of history can bring that are key. For students in our introductory survey courses, whether online or traditional classroom courses, we should emphasize the process of questioning received wisdom about the past, connecting the past to the present, and thinking and writing critically about those ideas.

## Notes

Thanks to my colleagues at the University of Memphis for their feedback on this article, Dr. Sarah Potter, Dr. Steve Stein, Dr. Catherine Phipps, and Ms. Amanda Lee Savage. Thanks also to my friends, Dr. Amber Handy for her encouragement in formulating the topic, and Dr. Julianne Bruneau for her teaching mentorship.

1. George Santayana, *Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Scribner’s, 1905), 284.

2. Historical literacy and historical thinking have been fruitful areas of research in the past decade, including Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Peter Seixas and Carla Peck, “Teaching Historical Thinking” in *Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies*, ed. Alan Sears and Ian Wright (Vancouver, Canada: Pacific Educational Press, 2004), 109-117.

3. Philip Roberts, “From Historical Literacy to a Pedagogy of History,” discussion

paper for the Australian National Symposium 2011, *Building Bridges for Historical Learning*, University of Canberra, p. 5, <[http://www.canberra.edu.au/faculties/education/service-and-engagement/historical\\_learning](http://www.canberra.edu.au/faculties/education/service-and-engagement/historical_learning)>. Dr. Roberts has explored historical literacy, and the pedagogy to support it further, in “Re-Visiting Historical Literacy: Towards a Disciplinary Pedagogy,” *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years* 21, no. 1 (February 2013): 15-24.

4. Lévesque, 17.

5. David Carr, Interview with Terry Gross, “David Carr: Diet of News Media Omnivore,” *Fresh Air*, NPR, WHYY (27 October 2011): “We are entering a golden age of journalism. I do think there has been horrible frictional costs, but I think when we look back at what has happened, I look at my backpack that is sitting here, and it contains more journalistic firepower than the entire newsroom that I walked into 30 to 40 years ago.”

6. Ibid.

7. Student learning is considerably enhanced by involvement in effective learning communities. See for example John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, eds., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000) and David Boud, Ruth Cohen, and Jane Sampson, eds., *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning From and With Each Other* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

8. George W. Bush, “Interview at White House Press Conference, September 16, 2001,” YouTube video, 1:55, posted by glenrose2008 (12 March 2008), <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsjgJM56HRw>>. As an example, *The New York Times* Op-Ed page explored crusading language on the eve of the Iraq War in Jackson Lears, “How a War Became a Crusade,” *The New York Times* (11 March 2003), <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/11/opinion/how-a-war-became-a-crusade.html>>.

9. Andrea Overfield, ed., *The Human Record: Sources of Global History, Vol. 1*, seventh ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2012), 324-334, “Multiple Voices VII: Byzantium and the West in the Age of the Crusades.”

10. Mario Meschini, “On Wars Thought Holy,” Interview on his book *Il Jihad e La Crociata* (The Jihad and the Crusade), (Milan, Italy: Ares, 2007); Interview with Zenit, a Catholic news site (5 June 2007), <<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/on-wars-thought-holy>>. Prof. Manchini is a medieval historian at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. Prof. Matthew Gabriele of Virginia Tech provided a spirited rebuttal to Prof. Meschini in his blog post, “The Problematic Crusades,” *Modern Medieval Blog* (7 June 2007), <<http://modernmedieval.blogspot.com/2007/06/problematic-crusades.html>>.

11. Barack H. Obama, “2009 Nobel Peace Prize Lecture by Barack Obama, Oslo, Norway, 10 December 2009,” YouTube video, 37:03, posted by Nobel Prize (17 December 2009), <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AORo-YEXxNQ>>.

12. Augustine’s sole authorship of just war doctrine has recently been challenged by Phillip Wynn in *Augustine on War and Military Service* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

13. Matthew Gabriele, “On ‘Just War’: Understanding Pres. Barack Obama and his Nobel speech,” *Modern Medieval Blog* (10 December 2009), <<http://modernmedieval.blogspot.com/2009/12/on-just-war-understanding-pres-barack.html>>.

14. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, dir. Werner Herzog (Orland Park, IL: MPI Home Video, 2011), DVD/Netflix streaming video.

15. For example, Virginia Military Institute had its PBS documentary collection available as streaming video, but it has recently gone behind a login. Virginia Military Institute, Preston Library, PBS Video Collection, <<http://www.vmi.edu/content.aspx?id=16597>>.

16. Netflix, Inc., <<https://signup.netflix.com>>.
17. Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 2008).
18. Lewis Lapham, "The Gulf of Time," *Lapham's Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 11-17., <<http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/preamble/the-gulf-of-time.php>>.
19. Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1358-1369.
20. Lapham, 17.