Integrating Teaching, Research, and Community Engagement

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WHILE HISTORIANS sometimes view teaching and community engagement as peripheral to our research, they have been the focus of my career at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Teaching and outreach help me clarify research questions, consider the best format for dissemination or publication, and establish interdisciplinary connections. Incorporating inquiry-based teaching techniques into my history courses at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock has helped my students to practice doing history—analyzing the relationships among culture, history, economics, and power in their communities and in the world. Assignments are more meaningful when they require students to apply knowledge and skills to a real-world issue or project, build student and community engagement, and develop skills in communication, research, information literacy, and collaboration.[1] They prompt students to investigate their relationships to the past and their communities. I have connected my teaching to research and public service in several assignments, which were memorable for students and energizing for me: examining timely big questions; partnering to create exhibit text panels; and critiquing information from Wikipedia or large language models such as ChatGPT.

Although teaching receives much less emphasis in academia than the production of traditional peer-reviewed research, it is by far the endeavor in which I spend most of my time. I have discovered that integrating my research, writing, teaching, and community involvement feeds my energy and enthusiasm, which spills over into my students' experiences. Unsurprisingly, this is supported by research on effective teaching in K-12 and higher education. In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain emphasized that active engagement in research and scholarship is one of the most important qualities of effective college teaching. A deep and broad understanding and curiosity allows faculty to explain complex concepts and evaluate their own thinking, research, and pedagogies metacognitively.[2]

Considering our pedagogical practice in higher education humanities courses is not new, but because many higher education faculty lack formal teaching training, and even fewer research and write about their teaching practices, dissemination of the literature is less robust than our historical scholarship.[3] Research in secondary history and social studies classrooms shows the impact of inquiry-based learning, but little research has been conducted on this subject at the college level.[4] Real-world inquiries encourage group interaction, provide checkpoints with instructor or stakeholder feedback, and require active participation in learning. None of these techniques are intended to reduce the rigor of our courses; instead, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), first administered in 2000, shows that student persistence and performance rise in courses that encourage critical thinking and involve challenging reading and writing. Survey results highlight the importance of public-facing assignments, including service learning, research, and internship opportunities. Ninety-five percent of arts and humanities majors said these practices helped them understand course concepts, and eighty-one percent responded that these practices challenged them to do their best work.[5]

Examining Timely Big Questions

My pedagogical practice includes structuring courses using relevant, big-picture questions, a strategy learned during my training as a high school social studies teacher.[6] I divide my courses into units, each focused around one or more large questions. This strategy works

for both lower-division core courses in U.S. and world history, as well as upper-division courses in my areas of specialty—Latin America and the U.S. West. Each week or class period tackles a smaller portion of the large question. For example, we examine "What happened when cultures met?" during our unit of study on the first generations of encounters among different cultural groups in U.S., world, and Latin American history. An individual week might focus more specifically on the encounters of Andeans and Spaniards in the sixteenth century, or on encounters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century New Mexico. Then, I select primary and secondary sources that speak to these questions, and we spend time discussing them. Sometimes I score a written or oral discussion, sometimes a short essay that incorporates evidence from the primary sources. Students quickly realize the difficulty of answering questions about colonial encounters due to the nature and unequal representation of the primary source materials, something that I also find problematic in my own research. This leads to further questions about how we know what we know about interactions between colonial groups, as well as to discussions of research methodology and the role of theory.

Teaching students how to analyze primary sources so that they can answer a captivating and relevant question gives them a specific purpose for learning content. Recent public discussions about statues in public places, including statues of Fray Junípero Serra, the head of the Alta California missions, provided a hook for an assignment I created based around the question, "How should we characterize the missions of Northern New Spain?"[7] This question is one I examine in my "Colonial Latin American History" and "History of the American West" courses when we discuss interactions between Native groups, Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries, and Spanish soldiers and settler-colonists in the seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries in the northern borderlands of the lands claimed by Spain. The question is also at the heart of my research on music, dance, and sounds in the northern frontier regions claimed by Spain in the period from 1590-1821.[8]

While this question has a rich historiography dating back to the nineteenth century, a balanced exploration of colonial frontiers is complicated by the lack of indigenous-language sources.[9] This problem prompted me to investigate musical instruments and songs, as well as dances and celebrations (and written descriptions of these

performances) from the colonial period through the present. I use a variety of non-written sources alongside Spanish written sources to attempt to understand cultural and religious change and the ways in which individuals and groups interacted with each other. I created learning experiences for students with the goal of introducing them to non-traditional sources, reading against the grain of colonial sources, and promoting an appreciation of the complexity of researching and analyzing colonial encounters.

Students begin their consideration of the nature of Spanish colonial missions by examining news accounts of protests surrounding statues and objects commemorating missionaries, Spanish soldiers, and replica mission bells. This connection to the present invites students to consider what they know about the ways in which missions have been characterized over time. A second task, which helps build background knowledge, involves comparison and analysis of textbook narratives about colonial missions from historic and current history textbooks published in Mexico and the United States.

After students compile a list of words and phrases used to describe the people who interacted with one another in mission communities of the northern borderlands, they begin formulating questions about the processes of encounter and colonization. Then, they work through a set of primary sources, beginning with missionaries' reports, then moving to music, archaeological data, interviews and video from indigenous communities, drawings, and photographs of the built environment and musical instruments. Providing students with a wider and more inclusive range of sources than Spanish government and religious records echoes the ways in which ethnohistorians attempt to fill in the silences of colonial records.[10] Non-traditional and ethnographic sources also highlight the difficulties inherent in researching and teaching about colonial encounters. They are incomplete records of human activity and emotion in the past, but for cultures that recorded their histories in oral forms, songs, dances, objects, and the built environment, these sources help us to imagine multiple versions of the history of encounters and exchanges. For example, fragments of bells unearthed in archaeological investigations, with axe marks indicating their purposeful destruction, show us that the intentional colonization of time systematically introduced by bells into the soundscape did not go uncontested.[11]

The materials can be used in a variety of ways—each source or set of sources can stand alone, and students could complete only the analysis of textbook passages or the analysis of primary sources. An instructor could also choose to focus on the current controversy over commemoration of the missions and associated individuals and objects, using the assembled sources as they are relevant in the conversation. I created a Spotify playlist with audio examples of modern performances of music coming out of the mission context— liturgical music that is part of the liturgy, spiritual songs, and dance-dramas from indigenous and mestizo communities in Mexico and the United States—which can be used along with the visual and written sources. The primary assignment asks students to answer the question, "How should we characterize the missions of Northern New Spain?" by incorporating evidence from the primary sources in a format of their choice. Students practice historical analysis and synthesis instead of merely recalling or demonstrating comprehension of content.[12] My colleague recently used this assignment with his "History of the Atlantic World" students. They discussed each group of sources—archaeology, daily schedules, instruments, drawings, and oral histories—in an online discussion board in preparation for a class meeting. Students appreciated the variety of sources, particularly those that helped them understand the "soft power" used by the missionaries, and they noted the dynamic cultural interactions in the short and long terms. Teaching with inquiries based on relevant historical questions provides a purpose for reading. While it takes time to prepare sets of primary sources, they can be used in a variety of ways for discussion, in writing, or to stimulate additional research.

Partnering to Create Community Exhibits

Another way to model research and inquiry with students is to collaborate on community projects. Our university, which reflects the demographics of our capital city, actively searches for ways to connect students to the city, as well as to invite our neighbors into the campus. The Consulate of Mexico in Little Rock, which serves Arkansas and Eastern Oklahoma, is across the street from our midtown campus. In August 2018, the then-consul's spouse, educator Patricia Quilantán, contacted the university about constructing a *Día de Muertos ofrenda* on our campus during the fall semester. A small group of interested

collaborators, including Ms. Quilantán, consulate staff who worked on education and outreach, and the UA Little Rock Fine Arts gallery director met to discuss the project. We secured space in a first-floor, centrally located small gallery space for a large *ofrenda*, which Ms. Quilantán would design and build with members of the consulate staff and assistance from myself and our students. I agreed to work with students in my "Historian's Craft" class, which is our methods course for students in the History major, to turn our normal research project (twenty percent of the course grade) into one that would examine the history and cultural traditions of *Día de Muertos*. I committed to having our students work in groups to research and produce illustrated exhibit text panels. We secured funding for printing on foam core.

Construction of the exhibit occurred for four weeks in September and October. Ms. Quilantán met with our class and explained her concept for the altar, which honored migrants, a politically charged topic in our conservative southern state. We made a list of questions that students and the general public would have about the holiday, celebrations, and the altar. Then, we divided them into broad categories and students split into groups to begin their research in the library and online archives. We created a class Google Drive folder to share research articles and notes, as well as drafts of exhibit text. We settled on six panels featuring: (1) an introduction, (2) *Día de Muertos*, (3) Celebrations, (4) Ofrendas, (5) Skeletons, and (6) the consulate and Mexico-Arkansas relations. We debated writing a separate panel on historic and current migrants from Mexico to Arkansas and wondered whether the exhibit contained political content that might be controversial.

After a week of researching, we searched for images in the public domain that could complement the text and exhibit. I facilitated discussions about what to include in the text panels. Teaching students to draft succinct exhibit text had an additional benefit—it exposed them to a genre of writing specific to our field. We looked at the text panels of online and physical exhibits as examples of length and writing style. Polishing the writing so that it read in a consistent voice, in appropriate verb tense, took up half of one class session, and we then shared our drafts with Ms. Quilantán and incorporated her feedback. After editing and approval, we printed the text panels and borrowed easels to display them. I solicited visits (conducted in either English or Spanish) from classes on campus and nearby

Figure 1: Student *Día de Muertos* exhibit for the "Historian's Craft" course.

high schools and community groups, scheduling them around the availability of students and Ms. Quilantán. The consulate organized an exhibit opening celebration and the project received recognition in the local press (**Figure 1**).

After the exhibit concluded, we helped disassemble the *ofrenda*. The students' text panels continue to be displayed each year on campus when student organizations build a display for the holiday. The rather last-minute addition to my syllabus in Fall 2018 has had a lasting impact on the students and the campus community, and the experience of collaboration and connecting with colleagues in the consulate was a highlight of my work at UA Little Rock.

This assignment, however, was not without problems. Creating an entire course around this collaboration would have allowed for much more depth in our examination of indigenous and colonial viewpoints, appropriation and commercialization, and current representations of Mexican culture in our city, state, and country. Students had little background information on Colonial Latin America prior to this project, and since the course in which we

completed it was a historical methods course, the focus was not on providing rich content that would have allowed students to more fully grapple with the historical and current interpretations of cultural practices and religious expressions. Some students contributed more than others. I created a rubric that scored individual contributions to the group project in research, writing, and revision. Reflecting on the assignment's weaknesses allows me to plan more carefully for a future collaboration; however, seizing the opportunity to collaborate provided a meaningful learning experience for students who had little exposure to the history and culture of Latin America.

Critiquing Wikipedia and ChatGPT

A third authentic, inquiry-based learning assignment, which I have used multiple times in my upper-level courses such as "U.S.-Latin American Relations" and "History of the American West," requires students to investigate the accuracy and depth of material in Wikipedia, as well as text generated by ChatGPT or other large language models.

In the 1990s, the availability of digital resources and personal computers caused changes in the way all of us, including students, located information. We had to adapt our methods for teaching research and writing, faced more often with student use of non-scholarly sources and copy-and-paste plagiarism. As material on the Internet became more widely available, our challenges grew. We needed to teach students to evaluate general web-based sources, which often lack the peer review of printed sources. Artificial intelligence (AI), including large language models such as ChatGPT and Gemini, similarly causes us to re-examine the types of assignments we design. What skills are necessary when AI can complete some tasks more efficiently than humans? How do we teach students to use digital resources, including Wikipedia and AI, ethically and critically?[13] These questions urge us to consider the ways in which our curriculum must constantly change to engage with emerging technologies and ideas. Technologies might increase the divide between the digital haves and have-nots, but they have the potential to lessen the gap if we teach students how they work, along with their strengths and limitations. Researchers like Ted Dintersmith have noted the existential questions raised by the rapidly-increasing

power of artificial intelligence, including for our democratic system of government.[14] Lively discussions on social media and on my university's faculty e-mail discussion list indicate that Dintersmith is not alone in his concerns about how artificial intelligence, like Wikipedia before it, might profoundly affect our work.

Beginning in Summer 2023, instead of assigning a traditional essay assignment or research paper in my upper-level history classes, I asked students to compare and analyze texts on a discrete topic covered in our course readings. For example, in my "U.S.-Latin American Relations" course, students chose topics such as the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Pancho Villa's Raid on Columbus, New Mexico, and the building of the Panama Canal. Using tools from the Wiki Education Foundation, students then evaluated the content of the Wikipedia page on the same topic (in English or Spanish, comparing the pages in different languages if they possessed language skills).[15] This process requires them to read the text, then examine the citations, revision history, and talk pages to see how the content was created, by whom, how it has changed over time, and whether there have been discussions about how to cover the topic. Students compare the Wikipedia pages with the course readings to look for similarities and differences, including content, coverage and treatment of subtopics, and source citations. In the second step, students use ChatGPT or another large language model and prompt it to generate a short essay with citations on the same topic. They determine whether the content is accurate, whether the citations are legitimate, and how the narration and analysis compare to the Wikipedia article and the course readings by annotating the response. The class then discusses how the sources compare. They submit their annotated conversation with the large language model, along with written answers to questions about sourcing, corroboration, accuracy, and readability. In the first two semesters I used this assignment, I also had students draft recommendations to our History Department and college faculty about the use of Wikipedia and large language models in academic research and writing.

After sharing this assignment with department colleagues, I organized a group of faculty and staff from across the university to create a learning module about large language models and to conduct a research study on student perceptions of the ethics of large language model use. We have engaged with community stakeholders,

including policy makers and employers, to discuss these issues. Students recommended the incorporation of learning tasks involving media literacy and large language models in their courses. They also asked for very clear guidelines about when and how they could use machine learning. Many were worried about being falsely accused of plagiarism if they used tools such as Grammarly or WordTune for revision. This authentic learning task led to ongoing conversations with internal and external stakeholders—professors, employers, state officials, and students—and my first forays into research and writing about teaching and learning. As a result of these conversations, I am working with the Composition faculty to embed a teaching module with a shortened, teacher-directed version of the critique of ChatGPT into our "Composition II" (RHET 1312) core courses.

Reflection

Connecting my teaching, research, and community engagement through implementing authentic learning experiences for my students has provided some of the most enjoyable moments in my career. Students and the public have benefited, too. Graduation surveys indicate that students enjoy completing assignments that differ from the essay writing they generally complete in other higher education history and humanities courses. They appreciate the opportunity to practice writing for different audiences. My experience with students on these assignments corroborates the research from the Meaningful Writing Project, which identified the characteristics of assignments that students found most significant in their college experiences. Meaningful assignments involve students with their peers, their community, and texts. They are relevant to students' experiences and future goals, and they are assigned in a variety of courses from undergraduate surveys through graduate seminars by professors who connect their research with their interests and their teaching.[16]

Self-reflection on the design of assignments, pedagogy techniques, and students' work aids us as we refine our teaching, and it can also inform our research questions and methods. Teaching, research, and community engagement do not have to be separate areas of our practice. Instead, combining them engages both students and ourselves in examining the limits and possibilities of the sources we use and the ways in which we write about the past.

Notes

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2.   Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 16.

3.   On the lack of emphasis on teaching in Ph.D. programs, see Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch, *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2021); Chris M. Golde and Timothy M. Dore, *At Cross Purposes: What the Experiences of Today's Graduate Students Reveal about Doctoral Education* (Philadelphia, PA: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2001); and Jody D. Nyquist et al., *The Development of Graduate Students as Prospective Teaching Scholars: A Four Year Longitudinal Study, Final Report* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 2001).

4.   S. G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

5.   National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), *Engagement Insights: Survey Findings on the Quality of Undergraduate Education—Annual Results 2022* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2022).

6.   Such questions, variously called "essential and guiding questions" or "compelling and supporting questions," are broad, have no correct answers, and have relevant and enduring issues at their center. See Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, *Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2013); and S. G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

7.   Kristin Dutcher Mann, "How Should We Characterize the Missions of Northern New Spain?" *Uncovering History*, Oxford Learning Cloud, 2021.

8.   Kristin Dutcher Mann, *The Power of Song: Music and Dance in the Missions of Northern New Spain, 1590-1810* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press and the Academy of American Franciscan History, 2010); Kristin Dutcher Mann, "Defining Time and Space: Franciscans and Bells in Northern New Spain," in *The Franciscans in Colonial Mexico*, ed. Thomas M. Cohen, Jay T. Harrison, and David Rex Galindo (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021), 259-286; and Kristin Dutcher Mann and Drew Edward Davies, "Musical Cultures of the Ibero-American Borderlands," in *Oxford Handbook of the Borderlands of the Iberian World*, ed. Danna A. Levin Rojo and Cynthia Radding (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 525-543.

9.   David J. Weber, "The Spanish Borderlands of North America: A Historiography," *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 5-11; David J. Weber, "The Spanish Borderlands: Historiography Redux," *The History*

Teacher 39, no. 1 (November 2005): 43-56; Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 2011): 338-361.

10.   On ethnohistorical approaches, see Kelly K. Chaves, "Ethnohistory: From Inception to Postmodernism and Beyond," *The Historian* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 486-513.

11.   David Hurst Thomas, "Native American Landscapes of St. Catherine's Island," *The Beads of St. Catherine's Island*, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, no. 89 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution American Museum of Natural History, 2009), 24, 28.

12.   Trevor Getz, ed., *Uncovering World History, Uncovering Western Civilization*, Oxford Learning Cloud, <https://learninglink.oup.com/access/uncovering-western-history-volume-2>.

13.   Daniel G. Krutka, Marie K. Heath, and Ryan M. Smits, "Toward a Civics of Technology," *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education* 30, no. 2 (August 2022): 229-237.

14.   Ted Dintersmith, interviewed by Rebecca Corbin, *Forward with NACCE*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PmKrdfm4Ys>. See also Sarah Kreps and Doug Kriner, "How AI Threatens Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 4 (October 2023): 122-131, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-ai-threatens-democracy/>.

15.   "Teach with Wikipedia," Wiki Education Foundation, 2024, <https://wikiedu.org/teach-with-wikipedia/>.

16.   Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Learner, *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2017).