

“I Can Do What I Want?”: Student Agency in a U.S. History Survey

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IN FEBRUARY 2020, I was offered a position as a postdoctoral teaching fellow at a large land-grant college in the American West. A couple weeks later, COVID-19 hit in full force. Universities and colleges shut down as administrators debated how to navigate the first pandemic in a century. Conferences were cancelled. And professors and students alike struggled with the realities of a contagious disease that disrupted teaching and learning. Developing quality asynchronous online courses became a necessity, especially in states with repeated shut downs or erratic vaccine mandates and testing rules.

As the newly hired postdoctoral teaching fellow, my department chair tasked me with a challenging assignment—to develop an asynchronous section of the survey course “HIST 1700: American History.” Historically, HIST 1700 has been a popular course. It is advertised for non-history majors to satisfy a state requirement in U.S. history, and it emphasizes “the nation’s economic, political, social, and cultural institutions.” Unlike the traditional U.S. history survey sequence, HIST 1700 must cover American history from colonization to the present day. Selecting the content and skills to teach in HIST 1700 can make experienced instructors question their pedagogical choices.

Initially, teaching the course in an asynchronous online setting seemed like an unenviable task. How would I satisfy the state mandate to teach such an expansive survey? What would happen if students—or their family members—contracted Covid and could not complete assignments? In such an unfair moment for students, how could an asynchronous online course be rigorous yet recognize that we were living through a once-in-a-century medical event? After some reflection and brainstorming, I recognized that I had an opportunity to rethink the introductory survey. In short, I designed a course to foster student agency.

Over the past two years, I have developed and refined a “choose your own grading adventure” for HIST 1700. In 2020, I conceived of and built an asynchronous course that employed zero-based grading. For the first semester I taught the course, I recorded thirty short, engaging lectures. I also created over 100 assessments from which students could pick and choose. These assignments included everything from low-stakes quizzes and online discussions to academic article analyses and an assessment where students could create and analyze a history meme.

I gave students a seemingly simple goal: to complete whatever assessments they wanted, but to earn over 93 points for an A. I did not assign a minimum number of points that students needed to earn from each week. Nor did I require students to complete assessments from each of the course’s essential questions, which focused on America’s role in the world, civil rights, labor and economics, and women and gender. But I did give students the choice to pursue the course as they wanted. The result has been rewarding, both for me and for students. Between 70-80% of students in any given semester earn an A in the course. Over two years later, though the grading scheme has changed, the course has nearly 300 assessments and a perennial wait list at the start of each semester.

In this article, I examine the theories of agency that underpin HIST 1700’s “choose your own grading adventure.” I argue that, although historians have stressed the importance of agency in academic articles and monographs for nearly sixty years, introductory surveys often provide little room for students to explore their own interests and to create their own path to an A. I then detail the range of assignments I have created to foster student agency in HIST 1700. This section of the article provides examples of low-stakes quizzes, as well

as overviews of high-point assignments such as academic article analyses and a history meme assignment. Last, I analyze the benefits and drawbacks to the “choose your own grading adventure.” Course evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive, but some comments reveal the challenges that some students confront when faced with an agentic history survey.

Agency in the College History Classroom

Agency is a defining theoretical concept in the historical discipline. Since the 1960s, historians have debated the extent to which people can shape their own lives. Pathbreaking historical monographs, including Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, and Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott’s *Women, Work, and Family*, challenged scholars to think about the way historically oppressed individuals and groups confronted hegemonic power.¹ By the turn of the twenty-first century, historians argued that agency was at work in even the most coercive of institutions. In *Soul by Soul*, for instance, Walter Johnson contended that enslaved men, women, and children exercised agency on the auction block.² Discussions *about* agency seemed to be everywhere, including upper-division electives, capstone courses, and graduate seminars. It was less clear where the concept fit in the introductory history survey, especially as it related to student agency.

Margaret Vaughn, an associate professor of literacy and curriculum and instruction at Washington State University, is a specialist on student agency. Vaughn defined agency in the classroom as “students’ desire, ability, and power to determine their own course of action (whether that means choosing a learning goal, a topic of study, an activity to pursue, or a means of pursuing it).”³ Vaughn’s scholarship builds on the research of Anne Haas Dyson, a professor of education policy and organization and leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Beginning in the 1980s, Dyson’s work focused on student agency in the elementary classroom. She stressed that allowing students to “interpret a task and (make decisions about what should be done when) in greatly differing ways” could foster student agency.⁴ Despite nearly forty years of scholarship of the concept, Vaughn stated that student agency has never been fully incorporated into teacher education programs or teacher professional development.⁵

In *Student Agency in the Classroom*, Vaughn outlined three broad dimensions of agency in educational settings. In the first, which Vaughn labeled the *dispositional* dimension of agency, students possess and act with purpose and intentionality. In this agentive dimension, students can act in response to opportunities. In the second dimension, which Vaughn called the *motivational* dimension, students can persist and act on choices and decisions to reshape the learning environment. In some ways, motivational agency mirrors self-directed learning, an educational concept that has fueled countless studies on how students make plans, regulate emotions and behaviors, and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as learners. Vaughn's concept of motivational agency best reflects Albert Bandura's concept of direct personal agency, in which individuals can shape their situations and environments to secure desired outcomes.⁶ Last, Vaughn outlined the *positional* dimension of agency. In this agentive dimension, individuals and groups must understand their social, cultural, and historic environments. According to Vaughn, crucial interactions and negotiations take place. Within these interactions and negotiations, students' identities as learners and the ways in which students are positioned in complex learning environments become clear.⁷

Most departments of history foster various levels of student agency, particularly in upper-division courses, capstone opportunities, and graduate-level seminars. History majors demonstrate dispositional agency, for example, when they sign up for specific courses and when they pursue a research topic for a capstone course. In seminars, students highlight their motivational agency when they shape class discussions around what they find most interesting in a primary or secondary source. And in a range of advanced courses, students demonstrate their positional agency through reflective exercises, probing the ways that racial, gendered, class-based, and sexualized identities influenced history and contemporary society. Since history, as a major, challenges students to research and write on topics of innate interest, students tend to have a fair number of opportunities to exercise agency in upper-division and graduate-level courses.

Introductory surveys, however, present fewer opportunities for students to understand and act on the dispositional, motivational, and positional dimensions of agency that Vaughn discussed. This was clear when I asked how other professors had taught HIST 1700 in the

past. My supportive department chair sent me several syllabi. Right away, I observed how each of these sample syllabi included little room for students to be agentive. I was struck by how many HIST 1700 instructors relied on exams for assessing student performance. Surely, I thought, there must be better examples of designing large surveys. But even a cursory examination of available syllabi from a Google search revealed the same pattern—exams, some discussion posts, and an occasional primary source or mapping assignment. No wonder so many students struggle in U.S. history surveys!⁸

When conceptualizing HIST 1700, I did not want to replicate the exam-based approach that my department had practiced in the past. Instead, I wanted students to exercise agency in some way. After reading more about student agency in the classroom, I recognized that I ended up structuring a course that harnessed Vaughn's ideas about dispositional, motivational, and positional dimensions of agency. I wanted students to act with purpose and intention (the dispositional dimension), to act on choices (the motivational dimension), and to understand power relations throughout history (the positional dimension). But how could I accomplish these tasks in an introductory survey, all while teaching online during a global pandemic?

Conceptualizing HIST 1700's "Choose Your Own Grading Adventure"

From the beginning, I recognized that two features of an asynchronous online course were necessary. First, I had to develop strong essential questions (EQs) that could form the core of the course. These EQs, though slightly different from the influential model suggested by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, would serve as anchors for the course's content. And second, I decided that with the disruptions to learning caused by the pandemic, a traditional grading scheme could not work in HIST 1700. Instead, I experimented with zero-based grading. In sum, students would build points over the course of the semester by completing a range of assignments. Although these central features of HIST 1700 have undergone revisions over the past two years, they have been essential for keeping the course rooted in the agentive principles proposed by curricular theorists like Vaughn.

EQ Topic	HIST 315L: U.S. History since Reconstruction	HIST 1700: American History
America's Role in the World	Determine how the United States' foreign policy changed and/or remained consistent from the Spanish-American War through the Cold War. How did the U.S. confront the challenges it faced around the globe? Are there core tenets (or beliefs) that have guided American foreign policy? If so, what are they? If not, how do foreign policy conflicts differ from each other?	Determine how the United States' foreign policy changed from the 1790s through September 11, 2001. Assess U.S. diplomatic and military power over time. How did the U.S. confront the challenges it faced around the globe? Are there core tenets (or beliefs) that have guided American foreign policy? If so, what are they? If not, how do foreign policy conflicts differ from each other?
Civil Rights	The continued fight for equality has, in many ways, defined the American experience. Compare and contrast the struggle for civil rights that <u>two</u> of the following segments of the population experienced: 1) African Americans; 2) women; 3) Mexican Americans; 4) Asian Americans; and/or 5) LGBTQ individuals. Are there commonalities that you see in the political rhetoric and tactics of these two groups? How would you describe the unique challenges these segments of the population faced? What are the arguments, agendas, challenges, etc. that have made coalitions difficult to form, both within and between different rights movements?	The continued fight for equality has defined the American experience. Compare and contrast the struggle for civil rights that the following segments of the population experienced: 1) African Americans; 2) Native Americans; 3) women; 4) Mexican Americans; 5) Asian Americans; and/or 6) LGBTQ+ individuals. Are there commonalities in the political rhetoric and tactics of these groups? How would you describe the unique challenges these segments of the population faced? What are the arguments, agendas, challenges, etc. that have made coalitions difficult to form, both within and between different rights movements?
Economics and Labor	Evaluate the ways the American economy has changed over the past 150 years. How did "big business" alter the landscape of U.S. industry? Why did Progressive Era and New Deal reformers pass the reforms they did? Have Americans found a way to balance economic growth and workers' rights in the post-World War II period?	Evaluate how the American economy has changed since the nation's founding. How did the market revolution and then "big business" alter the landscape of U.S. industry? Why did Progressive Era and New Deal reformers pass the legislation they did? Have Americans found a way to balance economic growth and workers' rights in the post-World War II period?

Figure 1: Essential Questions in Two U.S. History Surveys

EQ Topic	HIST 315L: U.S. History since Reconstruction	HIST 1700: American History
Women and Gender	Analyze the political and economic fight for women’s equality. To what extent has the role and status of women changed over the past 150 years? What have been landmark victories for women’s rights? Why have various political factions opposed women’s and feminist groups? Is there work left to be done?	Analyze the political, social, and economic fight for women’s equality. To what extent has the role and status of women changed over the past 250 years? What have been landmark victories for women’s rights? What roadblocks have women faced? Why have various political factions opposed women’s and feminist groups? What’s the status of women’s rights today? What work is left to be done?
Government and Power	N/A	Assess how various figures, from presidents to average citizens, have interpreted the nature of governmental power. At what level (local, state, federal) have different historical figures believed that most governmental decisions should (or should not) occur? How have American politicians and everyday citizens navigated the separation of powers between the different branches of the federal government? What are some of the reasons why the powers of the federal government grew over the course of the 20 th and 21 st centuries?

Figure 1 (cont’d.): Essential Questions in Two U.S. History Surveys

The first task was to create EQs. According to Wiggins and McTighe, an essential question is one that “is alive in a subject if students really engage with it, if it seems genuine and relevant to them, and if it helps them gain a more systematic and deep understanding of what they are learning.” In *Understanding by Design*, Wiggins and McTighe included a host of essential questions relevant to the teaching of history, such as:

- What is democracy?
- In what ways should government regulate the market system?
- What is the connection between a country’s form of government and the prosperity of its citizens?
- How important is it to listen to our ancestors?

Despite the guidance that Wiggins and McTighe offered about these “important questions that recur throughout all our lives,” I have noticed that in a college classroom, these kinds of open-ended questions sometimes elicit blank stares—or vague online discussion posts—from students. Because of this, I created my own scaffolded essential questions. They are not as open-ended as what Wiggins and McTighe suggested, but over the past five years, my EQs have helped students think about a range of questions that will recur throughout the rest of their lives.⁹

Fortunately, for HIST 1700, I did not have to develop my own essential questions from scratch because when I was a doctoral candidate at The University of Texas at Austin, I taught a section of the U.S. survey from Reconstruction to the present. For that course, I crafted questions that could be revisited by students throughout the semester. These questions focused on the following four topics: 1) America’s role in the world; 2) economics and labor; 3) women and gender; and 4) comparative civil rights. For HIST 1700, I changed my previous essential questions, which did not address the “first half” of U.S. history, to cover the totality of American history. You can see the changes I made in **Figure 1**, including the addition of an essential question on government and power.

Since HIST 1700 is an asynchronous online course, I wanted to provide students multiple opportunities to connect the course’s content to these essential questions. In each week’s Canvas page, I have a link to what I call an “Essential Question Cheat Sheet.” On these pages, I connect that week’s material to each of the course’s essential questions. The “cheat sheet” is meant to be a guide for students to make the connections between what they read and watch and the course’s EQs. Because we do not meet in person, I thought that the creation of these “cheat sheets” would scaffold the learning process, especially since many of the students who enroll in HIST 1700 are first-year students. In addition, the course’s higher-point assignments, which I cover in greater detail below, challenge students to answer the course’s essential questions. The “cheat sheets” are essential, then, for overall success in HIST 1700.

With the essential questions created, I moved on to conceptualizing not only the content, but also the layout of the asynchronous online course. The essential questions served as a guide about what might be included. If a possible lecture did not answer one of the essential

questions, I knew it was not necessary for inclusion in the course. The essential questions thus served another purpose—to help me streamline the course’s content coverage. Indeed, as Wiggins and McTighe noted, essential questions are one tool instructors can use to avoid “coverage-focused teaching,” which the two curricular theorists label as one of the two “sins” of course design.¹⁰ After teaching the course two times, I observed that the four essential question topics were not enough to address the content needs of the course. At that point, I added a fifth EQ topic on government and power.

Having outlined the course’s essential questions, I devised the zero-based scoring element of the course. I was new to this scoring approach, and I recognized that I might need to critically evaluate my grading scheme after one or two semesters. For the course’s first semester, I conceived of a 100-point grading scale. Students could earn up to 50 points from the course’s lower-stakes assessments, including the quizzes I made for lectures, primary sources, or TED Talks. But they would have to earn the remaining points by completing more difficult assignments, such as analyzing primary sources or academic articles. Some students in the early rendition of HIST 1700’s “choose your own grading adventure” selected to read and discuss historic monographs, such as Erica Armstrong Dunbar’s *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, in a Zoom meeting with me.¹¹ I did, however, tell students that they might need to complete many more of the lower-stakes assignments if they hoped to do well on these higher-point assignments.

Right away, I noticed a drawback with the 100-point grading scale. Most importantly, students could complete relatively little work in the course and still receive an A. Some students, for instance, only submitted work for two or three weeks of the course. They were strategic in their selection of material, satisfying the dispositional and motivational elements of agency that Vaughn outlined in her work. I was worried, though, that students were not engaging with a wide enough range of historical information. My institution’s overwhelming white student population, for example, could avoid any content connected to the essential question on civil rights. This meant that they might not understand the importance of the positional dimension that Vaughn saw as crucial for the development of student agency. I did not want to impose content coverage for the

sake of coverage alone, as that would betray the goal of essential questions. However, as a scholar of gender and sexuality, I wanted my students to better understand the power dynamics that have shaped the nation's history.

My solution was to expand the zero-based scoring scale. After some thought, I settled on a 300-point grading scheme, with 279 points representing the threshold for an A. In making this change, I also eliminated the maximum number of quiz points students could count toward their final grade. I have run the course with a 300-point grading scale for four semesters. This adjustment has ensured that students complete assignments across multiple essential questions, effectively gaining a better understanding of American history. The reworked grading scale has also challenged students to try a greater range of assignments. Since HIST 1700 is advertised as a course for non-majors, this experimentation prepares students for the kinds of assignments they might see throughout their college experience.

The Assignments

To this point, I have hinted at the kinds of assignments in HIST 1700's "choose your own grading adventure." In the following section, I provide an overview of the course's various assessments. These assignments include low-stakes quizzes attached to lectures, TED Talks, and primary sources; online discussion posts; virtual discussions via Zoom; academic article analyses; "book club" discussions; primary source reading grids; and an assignment where students can make, describe, and analyze a history-based meme. After a year of teaching the course, I eliminated discussions from the course, but added habits of mind exercises, which aim to build students' study, research, and writing skills. Below, I detail the thought process that went into my decisions to include—or exclude—an assignment type from HIST 1700's "choose your own grading adventure."

Quizzes

In *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education*, Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling wrote that "Course interactions that are designed to be as

barrier-free as possible allow learners to select how they want to engage with the material based on their learning needs.”¹² In creating quizzes for HIST 1700, I wanted to demystify the content delivered in the course *and* present students with many options to learn U.S. history. With these two pedagogical goals in mind, I attached low-stakes quizzes to lectures, primary sources, and short TED Talks.

Like most online instructors, I did not want to create a host of recorded lectures without offering students opportunities to earn points for watching my videos. I recognized that students could watch my lectures without a clear goal of what I wanted them to learn. From past teaching experience, I understood that students might not consult the course’s guiding questions on a regular basis. I also guessed that students would skim past the introductory parts of a lecture. No matter how much previewing I did in a recorded presentation, some students might be passive learners.

Attaching a low-stakes quiz to lectures, primary sources, and TED Talks provided another layer of guidance for me to help students understand what they should be watching, listening, and/or reading for. Initially, I assigned one point for each of the course’s quizzes, no matter how long it might take to watch a lecture or read a primary source. If students answered a range of true-and-false, multiple-choice, and fill-in-the-blank questions correctly, they could earn a full point toward their final grade. But after two semesters of teaching HIST 1700, I noted that students were completing the TED Talk and primary source quizzes at a much higher rate than they were submitting quizzes attached to my lectures. When I read course evaluations closely, I learned that students were looking to maximize their points in an intentional and strategic way. Short lectures (under 15 minutes) had a higher quiz completion rate. When there was a one-point quiz for a lecture over 30 minutes, students decided to look elsewhere for points. Students, in other words, exercised the dispositional and motivational dimensions of agency as they selected primary source and TED Talk quizzes over lecture quizzes.

To improve student engagement with my lectures, I reconceptualized the course’s scoring system. As I wrote above, I reworked the class to have a 300-point scale. This change offered greater flexibility with the number of points I could assign to various assessments. With the expanded point scale, I felt comfortable assigning a greater number

Quiz Topic	Quiz Questions (and Answers)
<p>Lecture Quiz:</p> <p><i>The Birth of the Modern LGBTQ+ Rights Movement</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the decades after World War II, many Americans believed that homosexual men had to “recruit” boys into what they called “the gay lifestyle.” (<i>True or False: True</i>) • The efforts to purge lesbians and gay men from the federal government and defense industries in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was called... (<i>Multiple Choice: The Lavender Scare</i>) • One of the earliest gay rights organizations—formed in 1951—was called... (<i>Multiple Choice: The Mattachine Society</i>) • _____ are often marked as the beginning of gay liberation. (<i>Fill-in-the-blank: The Stonewall Riots</i>) • The gay rights movement (broadly defined as rights for lesbians and gay men) was gaining momentum in the 1970s. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was a key and ongoing event throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s that stalled this initial momentum. (<i>True or False: True</i>)
<p>Primary Source Quiz:</p> <p><i>Statement of AIDS Patients (1983)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIV/AIDS was primarily associated with gay men in the early 1980s. (<i>True or False: True</i>) • New information about HIV/AIDS was quickly learned and disseminated to America’s gay population in the early years of the epidemic. (<i>True or False: False</i>) • Misinformation, such as HIV/AIDS could be spread by swimming in the same pool as someone, was a concern that some Americans had about the virus in the 1980s. (<i>True or False: True</i>) • According to one of the people in this source, large urban areas were much more welcoming of gay people than the suburbs and rural regions of the country. (<i>True or False: True</i>) • The federal government, through the Reagan administration, created a strong program to find out the cause, cure, and contagion of HIV/AIDS. (<i>True or False: False</i>)
<p>TED Talk Quiz:</p> <p><i>Harvey Milk’s Radical Vision of Equality</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harvey Milk believed the government should be involved in fostering safe and close-knit neighborhoods. (<i>True or False: True</i>) • Milk decided, at one point in time, to hide his sexual identity to appeal to a wider range of voters. (<i>True or False: False</i>) • What was the name of the proposition that would make it illegal for LGBTQ+ people to teach in California schools? (<i>Multiple Choice: Proposition 6</i>) • What did Milk encourage with his tapes? (<i>Select All That Apply: To continue fighting for rights; To break down closet doors; and To continue the movement</i>)

Figure 2: Sample Quizzes for HIST 1700

of points for longer lectures. Quizzes attached to lectures under 20 minutes remained worth one point. Quizzes for lectures between 20 and 30 minutes were bumped up to be worth two points. And the course's few lectures between 30 and 40 minutes had quizzes worth three points. In the first semester where I instituted this change, students engaged with and completed a greater number of quizzes attached to lectures.

The quizzes for primary sources, all of which come from *The American Yawp Reader*, have been popular options for students from the first semester of HIST 1700's "choose your own grading adventure." Over the past two years, I have been able to create a short quiz for each of the *Reader*'s primary sources. Many students view the primary source quizzes as an opportunity to learn historical content that had never been covered in their prior education. Female students, for instance, often note that they never learned anything about the history of women and gender before enrolling in HIST 1700. Informal messages, often sent through Canvas Inbox, highlight these students' recognition of the positional dimension of agency. The course has especially helped female students recognize their historic, cultural, and environmental positioning within the male-dominated state-imposed curriculum.

By far the most popular quiz type, however, has been tied to TED Talks. TED-Ed has a host of animated videos, most under seven minutes in length. Like the primary sources, I thought these videos provided an opportunity to educate students on the course's essential questions. Videos like "Ugly History: Japanese American Incarceration Camps" build on issues of civil rights that I discuss in lectures. Other TED Talks such as "What Causes an Economic Recession?" complement the content I address in lectures on the Gilded Age and the causes and consequences of the Great Depression.¹³ In course evaluations, students write that they like the content and the animated nature of the TED-Ed videos. But each TED Talk must answer part of an EQ to be incorporated into the course.

Currently, HIST 1700 has over 300 quizzes throughout the course's fourteen-week schedule (see **Figure 2** for three examples of the quizzes). Hypothetically, students can earn an A by only answering quizzes. But nearly every student completes other types of assignments throughout the semester on their path to earning a good grade in the course.

Discussions

For the first year I offered HIST 1700, about half of the students earned points by completing one of three kinds of discussions. The first type of discussion was the traditional online discussion board. In these discussions, students posed a question and provided a one- to two-paragraph response to explain why they thought their question was important for addressing the week's content. The second option was a virtual discussion on Zoom. These virtual discussions were also based around the week's content, though I came to these meetings with a list of questions I posed to students. And the third option, which I briefly mentioned above, consisted of one-on-one virtual meetings between me and a student. In these conversations, the student and I discussed the thesis, argument, and structure of a historical monograph. The books for these discussions changed from one semester to the next, depending on what other courses I was teaching. But they included several monographs, from Joseph Ellis' *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* and Dunbar's *Never Caught* to Taylor Petrey's *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism*.¹⁴

I eventually eliminated discussions from the course. There were several reasons for this. In the online discussion boards, students found it hard to have productive conversations with each other. The course's "choose your own grading adventure" meant that students were interacting with different sources. As a result, they often did not know how to build on or challenge the assertions made by their classmates. This was the same thing that happened in the virtual discussions I led. My participation was crucial for students to make connections across the range of sources included in the course. On a handful of occasions, we had excellent discussions. But I felt the discussions were too teacher-directed and, as such, offered few opportunities for students to exhibit the dispositional, motivational, and positional dimensions of student agency I wanted the course's "choose your own grading adventure" to foster.

The one-on-one conversations about historical monographs were much more successful, but with up to 200 students enrolled in the course in any given semester, this assessment option was too time-consuming for me. I split the book in half and asked students to schedule two meetings to discuss the work. Each meeting lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. We would review the historian's

argument, examine their source base, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the monograph. Most students who chose this option selected more than one book to read and discuss with me. It was professionally satisfying to meet between twelve and fifteen students each semester and to talk about historical scholarship.

As an early-career scholar, however, I recognized that these “book clubs” (the name I gave to this assessment option) were taking valuable time away from my research. I needed to find some other option that would help students build their critical reading and analysis skills *and* be more conducive to the publishing pressures facing a contingent faculty member like myself.

Habits of Mind Exercises

In the place of discussions, I created fourteen habits of mind exercises that have helped students succeed in their undergraduate education. Introduced over thirty years ago by Arthur L. Costa, a professor of education, habits of mind provide a framework for developing dispositions that leaders use when confronted with problems and situations to which an answer is not immediately apparent.¹⁵ The habits of mind framework overlaps with the dimensions of agency outlined in Vaughn’s work. Habits of mind dispositions like “thinking about your thinking,” “persisting,” and “managing impulsivity,” for instance, mirror the dispositional and motivational dimensions of student agency. Without being metacognitive and persisting throughout a course, a student will struggle to remain motivated and intentional about their learning. Habits of mind and student agency, though not necessarily the same educational concept, work together in HIST 1700’s “choose your own grading adventure.”

Since the pandemic robbed students of the time and space to work on their study skills, I focus on building these essential elements for student success from the beginning of HIST 1700. The first two habits of mind exercises, for example, ask students to submit Cornell notes on three primary source readings and outline notes on three of my lectures. These exercises introduce students to two different ways to take notes on course material. This helps students build their dispositional dimension of agency, since they will be able to act with greater purpose and intentionality when they take notes, both for HIST 1700 and in their other courses.

The next two habits of mind activities focus on reading for argument. This includes an exercise centered around reading for an argument in a primary source and another where students read for an argument in an academic article. These two habits of mind assignments help students build their dispositional and motivational dimensions of agency. Students can recognize their strengths and weaknesses as learners, which is important for improving their academic performance. But they also receive valuable feedback about how to read for argumentation. Most students have never read an academic article before enrolling in HIST 1700. If they complete the habits of mind assignment on reading for an argument in an academic article, they receive important coaching on how to complete a task that will be asked of them throughout their college careers.

The remaining habits of mind exercises build on these reading and study skills. One exercise, for instance, challenges students to answer one of the course's essential questions. This assignment prepares students for some of the higher-point assignments. Other habits of mind exercises increase students' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Reflective assignments about developing a growth mindset, visiting the Writing Center, finding relevance in a subject, and experimenting with the pomodoro study technique spotlight the range of habits of mind assignments included in HIST 1700.

These habits of mind activities provide important insight into how students engage with HIST 1700's "choose your own grading adventure." The exercises in the early part of the course show me if students understand the course's essential questions. The Cornell and outline note worksheets I created, for instance, ask students to write a two- or three-sentence explanation of how a lecture or primary source answers one of the course's essential questions. Later in the course, the habits of mind activities focus on building students' metacognitive skills. The pomodoro study technique exercise, for example, challenges students to think about which upcoming assignments—in HIST 1700 or another course—to employ this popular studying approach. Each of these habits of mind exercises is worth up to five points, a substantial incentive for students to improve their study, reading, and writing skills.

HIST 1700's habits of mind exercises foster dispositional, motivational, and positional agency. After learning about and experimenting with the pomodoro technique, most students write that

they have the confidence to complete their work for the remainder of the semester. In the exercise focused on developing a growth mindset, students come to understand how they have been positioned as “good” or “bad” students. Students of color, female students, and non-gender conforming students often write about how all-white and male-centric history courses from their secondary schools left them unsure about their ancestors’ histories. Some students even use the habits of mind exercises as an opportunity to tackle some of the course’s more difficult—and higher-point—assignments.

Academic Article Analyses

In *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)*, history educator Sam Wineburg stated what professional historians know. Wineburg wrote that “history is more than a collection of facts. It’s an intellectual enterprise that requires piecing together a cogent and accurate story from partial scraps of faded words.”¹⁶ Strong argumentation, however, is required to piece together these stories. As students investigate historical argumentation, particularly in academic articles, they not only develop critical reading and writing skills, they also gain a better understanding of the positional dimension of agency. More specifically, students explore the power dimensions that have shaped the present, especially in academic articles that probe the interactions and negotiations that have influenced foreign policy, economics and labor, and civil rights issues.

When I removed the “book club” discussions from HIST 1700, I determined that including many more academic article analysis options could serve as a suitable replacement to teach about historical argumentation. Currently, the course includes seventeen options for students to complete article analyses. Each article analysis can earn a student up to fifteen points. Some choices for academic article analyses include James Merrell’s “The Indians’ New World: The Catawba Experience”; T. H. Breen’s “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century”; Elaine Tyler May’s “Security Against Democracy: The Legacy of the Cold War at Home”; Edmund S. Morgan’s “Slavery and Freedom: An American Paradox”; Erika Lee’s “Enforcing the Borders: Chinese Exclusion along the U.S. Borders with Canada and Mexico, 1882-1924”; and Edward J. Escobar’s “The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles

Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971.”¹⁷ I wanted to provide a range of scholarship in a concerted effort to foster the dispositional and positional dimensions of student agency.

The course’s academic article analyses are relatively straightforward. The first question asks students to locate the scholar’s argument. For this question, students must type the argument in the scholar’s own words. If the scholar summarizes their argument at different points in the article, the student must locate these multiple locations of argumentation. The second question challenges students to paraphrase the scholar’s argument. This part of the assignment demonstrates a student’s ability to process the scholar’s contention(s). From there, students must identify the kinds of sources employed in the article. This challenges students to think about evidentiary strength when making an argument. And last, I task students with identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the academic article. For this question, I share that the length of an article or the use of difficult vocabulary are not grounds for critiquing an academic work. Instead, students should focus much more on whether a scholar proved their argument.

Students tend to submit a greater number of academic article analyses at the beginning and near the end of the semester. This demonstrates an element of motivational agency students feel as they navigate the course’s “choose your own grading adventure.” Students want to accumulate a great number of points at the start of the semester to ensure that they can earn a good grade in the course. Other students recognize that they might fall short of their goal to earn an A as the semester nears its end. To earn a fair number of points, these students act with purpose and intention by completing the higher-point academic article analyses. One student even completed all seventeen article analyses in a single semester. Curious, I messaged the student to ask why they focused on these assignments on their path to an A. The student wrote that they liked to read and write. This student exercised the motivational dimension of agency to shape their learning environment in HIST 1700’s “choose your own grading adventure.”

Primary Source Reading Grids

Students can earn up to thirty points when they complete a primary source reading grid. They have the option to submit a

primary source reading grid in Week 6, Week 12, and during finals. As one of HIST 1700's highest point assignments, this assessment is a relatively standard writing assignment for introductory history courses. Students download a worksheet where they answer historical thinking questions, all of which I have based off the Stanford History Education Group's Reading Like a Historian curricular framework. The worksheet is separated into five parts: identification; argument; audience; historical connections; and essential question. Students write responses between fifty and 500 words for the different parts of the worksheet.¹⁸

The primary source reading grid assignment has provided great insight into how students engage with HIST 1700. In the historical connections section, for instance, students must explain how the selected primary source reflects, confirms, challenges, or contradicts ideas expressed in other course sources. To receive a strong score on this part of the assignment, students must incorporate at least four sources from the course in a short essay. Since they have a great number of lectures, primary sources, TED Talks, and academic articles to choose from, students demonstrate their ability to construct meaning from the course content with which they engaged. In this way, students craft their own historical interpretations about the content they are learning. These short essays spotlight how students make meaning about the American past.

The same is true for the worksheet's section on the essential question. Students come to different conclusions about the historical development of America's role in the world, civil rights, economics and labor, government and power, and women and gender. When students demonstrate a strong understanding of course sources in this section of the primary source reading grid, they often show great attention to change over time. The structure of the course's EQs simplifies the writing process for students, too. Instead of asking one overarching question, as Wiggins and McTighe proposed, HIST 1700's multiple-part EQs provide students a roadmap to structure a written response. Usually, students write a decent paragraph that addresses each of the sub-parts of the EQ they select to answer. This approach to comprehending the course's "big ideas" is one way students succeed on high-point assignments in an asynchronous online course.

History Memes

Students can also earn thirty points if they complete a history meme assignment. Like the primary source reading grid, students have the option to create and explain a history meme in Week 6, Week 12, and during finals. The history meme challenges students to craft a meme based on the historical content they learn in HIST 1700. Similar to the primary source reading grid, the history meme assignment calls for students to write a short essay on the meme's historical connections and to relate the meme to one of the course's EQs. Unlike the primary source reading grid, though, the history meme assignment provides students the opportunity to apply their historical knowledge while being creative. Because of the assignment's open-ended nature, students who choose the history meme exercise a great deal of agency when they complete this assessment choice.

The history meme assignment has been popular from the first semester I taught HIST 1700. In the age of social media, students have grown accustomed to seeing memes on a regular basis. According to Constance Iloh, an anthropologist and qualitative methodologist, memes have not only become a part of everyday communication, expression, and explanation—these visual sources also serve as valuable cultural units and symbols while infusing agency, humor, and creativity into academic endeavors.¹⁹ When completing the history meme assignment for HIST 1700, students demonstrate the positional dimension of agency at a high rate. Female students, for instance, often create memes that address the inequalities and discrimination that women have faced throughout U.S. history. Indigenous students, on the other hand, make memes that highlight histories of settler colonialism and the genocide of Native Americans.

What Does the “Grading Adventure” Look Like for Most Students?

In the course's introductory materials, I suggest three ways students might choose to navigate HIST 1700's unique grading and assessment approach: the “tried and true” path to an A; the “I need to focus on study skills” path to an A; and the “I know lots of U.S. history already and need to be challenged” path to an A. As its name

suggests, most students complete something like the “tried and true” path to an A, though there is some variation in how students complete HIST 1700’s “choose your own grading adventure.”

The “tried and true” path involves students completing fifteen to twenty points each week, with a mixture of these points coming from lecture, primary source, and TED Talk quizzes. This path also encourages students to turn in two or three habits of mind exercises over the course of the semester and to turn in a primary source reading grid or a history meme in Week 6. The “tried and true” path suggests that students complete another primary source reading grid or history meme in Week 12. The combination of these assignments ensures that students spread out their work throughout the entire semester.

The “I need to focus on study skills” path to an A offers students a slightly different suggestion for how to approach HIST 1700. In this path, I propose that students earn between fourteen and sixteen points each week from lecture, primary source, and TED Talk quizzes. I encourage students to complete each weekly habits of mind exercise, though, and to turn in either a primary source reading grid or a history meme in Week 6. If students do not score high on the primary source reading grid or history meme, I suggest that they complete another one of these assignments in Week 12. That way, they can implement the feedback provided on Week 6’s primary source reading grid or history meme.

For the “I know lots of U.S. history already and need to be challenged” path, I acknowledge that there might be some avid history “buffs” in the course. For these students, I suggest that they earn only ten to twelve points each week from lecture and primary source quizzes, with specific attention to material that is new to them. Since these students are confident in their knowledge of basic U.S. history, I propose that they complete between ten and twelve academic article analyses to earn the rest of the points for an A. This way, they feel appropriately challenged and can work on improving their critical reading and writing skills.

In the course introductory materials, I stress to students that these are just three different ways to approach the course. Students can deviate from these potential paths in whatever way they want or need. Most students complete something close to the “tried and true” path as they navigate HIST 1700’s “choose your grading adventure.” But as they complete assignments, students demonstrate

Week 8: Race and Social Memory	
Lectures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chinese Exclusion Act (12 minutes 57 seconds) • Japanese Internment in World War II (24 minutes 57 seconds) • The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance (19 minutes 42 seconds) • African American Civil Rights before 1945 (29 minutes 37 seconds) • The “Classical” Civil Rights Movement (32 minutes 49 seconds) • From Black Power to #BLM (39 minutes 17 seconds)
Primary Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese Merchant Complains of Racist Abuse (1860) • Chinese Immigrants Confront Anti-Chinese Prejudice (1885 and 1903) • James D. Phelan, “Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded” (1901) • Marcus Garvey, “Explanation of the Objects of the Universal Negro Improvement Association” (1921) • Alain Locke on the “New Negro” (1925) • Hiram Evans on “The Klan’s Fight for Americanism” (1926) • A. Philip Randolph on the March on Washington (1941) • Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga on Japanese Internment (1942/1944) • <i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i> (1954) • <i>Hernandez v. Texas</i> (1954) • Rosa Parks on Life in Montgomery, Alabama (1956-1958) • Fannie Lou Hamer, Testimony at the Democratic National Convention (1964) • Lyndon Johnson on Voting Rights and the American Promise (1965) • Lyndon Johnson, Howard University Commencement Address (1965) • Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968) • Native Americans Occupy Alcatraz (1969) • Jesse Jackson on the Rainbow Coalition (1984)²⁰
TED Talks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Dark History of the Chinese Exclusion Act (5 minutes 57 seconds) • The Dark History of IQ Tests (6 minutes 9 seconds) • The Complicated History of Surfing (5 minutes 39 seconds) • The Movement That Inspired the Holocaust (4 minutes 56 seconds) • The Hidden Life of Rosa Parks (4 minutes 59 seconds) • An Unsung Hero of the Civil Rights Movement (4 minutes 29 seconds) • Notes of a Native Son: The World According to James Baldwin (4 min. 13 sec.) • Ugly History: The U.S. Syphilis Experiment (5 minutes 18 seconds) • The Chaotic Brilliance of Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (4 minutes 32 seconds)²¹
Academic Articles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” <i>The Journal of American History</i> 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263. • Troy Johnson, “The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Roots of American Indian Activism,” <i>Wicazo Sa Review</i> 10, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 63-79. • Edward J. Escobar, “The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971,” <i>The Journal of American History</i> 79, no. 4 (March 1993): 1483-1514.
Habits of Mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise and Resubmit Your Primary Source Reading Grid and/or History Meme Submitted from Week 6

Figure 3: Assessment Options for Week 8 of HIST 1700

the dispositional, motivational, and positional dimensions of agency by selecting assessments for the topics, themes, and issues they find most interesting. Students come to understand not only what interests them, but also how to play to their strengths and improve on their weaknesses. Their identities as learners develop and they start to comprehend how they are positioned in—and positioned by—the complex learning environment of college. To get a better sense of what assessment options look like, see **Figure 3** for the choices offered to students in Week 8, which focuses on issues related to civil rights.

Conclusion: The Benefits and Drawbacks of a “Choose Your Own Grading Adventure”

HIST 1700’s “choose your own grading adventure” has been popular with students. Over 900 students have enrolled in this course since I started my job as a postdoctoral teaching fellow. For many, their end-of-the-semester evaluations highlight the importance of flexibility when taking an online course. Student evaluations also demonstrate that the “choose your own grading adventure” has addressed the concerns I had when I first conceived of the course. The wide range of source material, from lectures and primary sources to TED Talks and academic articles, satisfies the state mandate to cover the totality of American history. In addition, the hundreds of assessments allow students to earn an A even if they or a loved one becomes ill. In fact, between 70-80% of students in any given semester earn an A. Only 5-10% of students receive a D, F, or withdraw from HIST 1700. These are benefits of the course’s “choose your own grading adventure.” But there are clearly some drawbacks to this assessment approach.

From the instructor’s perspective, it is time-consuming to create the range of assignments needed for students to *truly* choose a grading adventure. Because the pandemic closed opportunities for dining out and travel, I was able to devote a sizable amount of time to conceptualizing and building HIST 1700. Not everyone will be able to create hundreds of assignments for their students, even if most of these assignments are basic quizzes. But if an instructor knows that they will teach a survey on a semesterly (or even annual) basis, the “choose your own grading adventure” approach can be slowly implemented over time.

From an assessment perspective, there might be concerns with the amount of writing (or lack thereof) that students complete in this kind of course. Depending on one's perspective, an introductory survey can be a place where students learn about academic writing. Although HIST 1700 has ample opportunities for students to engage with academic articles, there are fewer assignments that challenge them to write academic prose. In a course evaluation, one student noted exactly this. They wrote: "If I was a history major, I would've wanted more written work." The student, however, followed up with the following: "But as someone who's not a history major, I was happy with how my whole grade wasn't from written assignments since I'm not the best writer."²² In making this comment, the student comprehended the motivational and positional dimensions of agency. Because they recognized that they are not "the best writer," this student understood their identity as a learner, shaped their educational environment, and secured their desired outcome by earning an A in a general education course.

From a student's perspective, the "choose your own grading adventure" can have drawbacks as well. Some students would rather not complete so many low-stakes assignments on a weekly basis. They may prefer to have a more traditional approach, including a midterm, a final, and a short paper. Others feel like the freedom of the grading adventure is paralyzing. With so many options, what should they do? They may want someone to be more hands-on and to tell them what to do. And other students procrastinate. They understand that they do not have to take quizzes, complete habits of mind exercises, and read and analyze academic articles in the first several weeks of the course. These students then find themselves with few points earned. They start to panic, and send frantic e-mails. With some coaching and guidance, this category of student can often earn an A in the course. But these students must realize the importance of the dispositional and motivational dimensions of agency as they act with purpose and intentionality for the rest of the semester.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx wrote, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."²³ In HIST 1700, students have immense opportunity to exercise the dispositional, motivational, and positional

dimensions of student agency. Because of the course's wide range of assessments, students select their own learning goals, topics of study, and assignments. Students, of course, do not have free rein to do what they want in the course. As Marx noted, humans can make their own path, but often not under circumstances they select for themselves. The size of introductory courses, which can enroll hundreds of students, place restrictions on an instructor's pedagogical choices. But HIST 1700's "choose your own grading adventure" is one model for thinking about how to foster student agency—and ensuring academic success—in a U.S. history survey.

Notes

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3. Margaret Vaughn, *Student Agency in the Classroom: Honoring Student Voice in the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2021), 1.
4. Anne Haas Dyson, "Learning to Write/Learning to Do School: Emergent Writers' Interpretations of School Literacy Tasks," *Research in the Teaching of English* 18, no. 3 (October 1984): 235.
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