Go beyond the Research Essay with Engaging, Effective History Assignments

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The classic research essay, beloved by history professors, is meant to engage students in the research process and the scholarly act of writing history. In most iterations of this assignment, students begin with a topic or question that they may or may not get to choose. They then conduct research with some primary and a good number of secondary sources. They present their results in a formal essay written in the third person, which supposedly fosters the "objectivity" that the discipline has prized since the late nineteenth century. Such essays do help students develop their research skills and learn the conventions of academic writing, but they do not necessarily spark real excitement for students or motivate them to see value in the full range of research and communication skills they can learn in a history class. Traditional essays can also mask the messy, creative process historians go through to produce those secondary sources, the passion that brought us to this discipline in the first place, and the profound debates about "objectivity" that have shaped our practice for millennia.

Several years ago, I reached a point where traditional essays just did not seem that exciting for me or for my students. Nor did the essays seem effective at developing the range of skills I wanted my students to have. I wanted my students to engage more deeply by pursuing topics they genuinely cared about, digging up sources I never knew existed, and imagining they were writing for audiences other than a professional historian. Since I started giving all of my students more choices I do still receive great research essays, but I also get Web sites and podcasts, lesson plans and board games—each demonstrating a profound grasp of the course material and a highly original way of conveying that content to a wider audience. These assignments are not just engaging; they are also highly effective, with extensive research backing up their pedagogical benefit.[1]

The kinds of assessment strategies teachers use in their courses send clear signals about what we value and where we expect students to put their effort. Traditional research essays risk suggesting that we value caution rather than enthusiasm. Such essays tend to involve

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[1] For more on other formats for presenting information, increasingly called "un-essays" because they can take any shape a student chooses (including board games, quilts, Web sites, paintings, or plays), see Emily Suzanne Clark, "The Unessay," Aug. 1, 2016, *Emily Suzanne Clark: Teaching and Researching American Religions,* https://esclark.hcommons.org/the-unessay/; and Catherine Denial, "The Unessay," April 26, 2019, *Cate Denial Blog,* https://catherinedenial.org/blog/uncategorized/the-unessay/.

doi: 10.1093/jahist/jaaa467

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what the University of California, Berkeley, education researcher Randi Engle and her associates describe as "a bounded framing of roles," where learners are "positioned on the periphery of a learning context" and "report on their learning about the ideas of others, such as those presented by a text or teacher" instead of sharing "their own ideas." These assignments thus reinforce what the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire dubbed the "banking model" of education, where the lack of knowledge students have about the past is corrected by depositing the expertise of professional historians. The historian Alan Booth's research indicates that these assignments can also have a negative effect on students' "motivation and intellectual risk-taking." Essays are safe choices, especially for senior history students who know what we expect of them. In contrast, I want my students to have the confidence to ask atypical questions and present their findings in formats that could appeal to a wide audience.[2]

Decades of scholarship about the best teaching and learning practices have demonstrated that student-centered learning helps students learn more effectively. We can apply those same principles to designing better writing projects. For example, in a massive research project into the kinds of writing students are doing at American colleges and universities, the writing experts Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner found that—no matter the discipline—students are more likely to describe a writing project as meaningful if it has three characteristics. First, the assignment should give students the freedom to choose their topic and might even include the freedom to choose how they wanted to present their findings. This matches a key result from research about effective, student-centered teaching and learning practices, which has demonstrated repeatedly that designing courses and assignments with a high degree of student agency helps students learn better. Kevin Gannon, a historian and director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Grand View University, includes student agency as one of his "essential features of a pedagogy of hope," observing that "we know . . . student motivation increases in direct variation with the degree of control or autonomy [students] perceive themselves as having in a course. We also know that increased motivation has all sorts of positive effects on learning." This can also be one of the easiest changes to make to your writing assignments. As Gannon notes, the simple act of creating opportunities for students to choose their own research topics can give them a greater sense of involvement in their own learning, letting them "see themselves as not just the recipients of content but as knowledge producers."[3]

[2] On valuing caution rather than enthusiasm, see Alan Booth, *Teaching History at University: Enhancing Learning and Understanding* (London, 2003), 128. Randi A. Engle et al., "How Does Expansive Framing Promote Transfer? Several Proposed Explanations and a Research Agenda for Investigating Them," *Educational Psychologist,* 47 (July 2012), 218. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 2010), 72. Booth, *Teaching History at University,* 133.

[3] Scholarship on the efficacy of student-centered learning includes Donald L. Finkel, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Heinemann, 2000); Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Dean A. McManus, *Leaving the Lectern: Cooperative Learning and the Critical First Days of Students Working in Groups* (San Francisco, 2005); Maryellen Weimer, *Inspired College Teaching: A Career-Long Resource for Professional Growth* (San Francisco, 2010); Susan Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (San Francisco, 2013); L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (San Francisco, 2013); Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom* (San Francisco, 2015); James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (San Francisco, 2016); Sarah Rose Cavanaugh, *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion* (Morgantown, 2016); Kevin Gannon, "Lecture-Based Pedagogy and the Pitfalls of Expertise," blog posting, Jan. 16, 2018, *The Tattooed Professor,* https://thetattooedprof.com/2018/01/16/lecture-based-pedagogy-and-the-pitfalls-of-expertise/blog; and Joshua R. Eyler, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories behind Effective College Teaching* (Morgantown, 2018). Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner, *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education* (Logan, 2016), 4. Kevin M. Gannon, *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (Morgantown, 2020), 88–89, 94. I replaced exams in my freshman history

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The second characteristic of meaningful writing for students is that the projects provide them opportunities to engage actively with their "instructors, peers, and materials." Students gain a better understanding of how a discipline works, the raw evidence professional scholars work with, and the passion their instructors have for the disciplines they teach. Instead of what the literature scholar Boyda Johnstone has described as a "pedagogy of detachment," where we, as instructors, "[embody] more authority" and feel less "beholden to the needs and preferences of each student," Eodice and her associates ask what it would "look like if we shared our passion for the subject matter more explicitly, viewing our teaching and writing assignments as connections to content." A similar perspective comes from the historian Jessamyn Neuhaus's *Geeky Pedagogy,* where she argues that "we have to foster a geek culture in our classrooms not of exclusion nor of hostile gatekeeping but rather of enthusiastic sharing." If we present our expertise to students in its final, polished state, as a sophisticated product instead of a passionate obsession, Gannon notes that we make it harder for our students to see how they can actively engage the past and dive into historical sources and interpretations on their own. Writing assignments that are shaped by an instructor's passion for their subject, that emphasize primary research over secondary scholarship, and that encourage collaboration between students, make space for students to acknowledge their own passion for history, and engage more deeply and authentically with the ways historians create knowledge about the past.[4]

The third feature has a close relationship: these assignments allow students to draw connections between their "previous experiences and passions" and their "future aspirations and identities." Booth's research demonstrates that recognizing "students' interests, prior knowledge and conceptions of learning (and teaching) in history, and how those can be effectively connected to course goals, content and methods, is essential in the creation of an environment for fostering complex learning." This is another challenge to the banking model of education: instead of seeing students as blank slates, entering our classrooms for us to fill their empty heads with our wisdom, it is more effective to see them as whole human beings who bring a wide range of knowledge and experience to every course and assignment. We can then design courses and assignments that show students why our classes and requirements are relevant and explicitly foster lifelong learning. The historian and director of the Lepage Center for History in the Public Interest Jason Steinhauer has written about creating assignments that encourage students to see themselves as history communicators, taking the skills and content they learn in a history course and sharing it with wider audiences. We can add value to our assignments by creating opportunities for students to use nonacademic language in nonacademic formats, helping them imagine themselves in a variety of writing genres in their futures.[5]

This final feature of a meaningful writing project, where students can connect their previous knowledge and their future goals to their writing assignments, should encourage us

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survey with a completely student-choice-driven series of written assignments. See Sheila McManus, "Assignment: Describe and Defend," in *The Academics' Handbook*, ed. Lori A. Flores and Jocelyn H. Olcott (Durham, N.C., 2020), 178–79.

[4] Eodice, Geller, and Lerner, *Meaningful Writing Project,* 4. Boyda Johnstone, "A Pedagogy of Detachment," Jan. 26, 2016, *Hook & Eye,* https://hookandeye.ca/2016/01/26/a-pedagogy-of-detachment/; Eodice, Geller, and Lerner, *Meaningful Writing Project,* 133. Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Geeky Pedagogy: A Guide for Intellectuals, Introverts, and Nerds Who Want to Be Effective Teachers* (Morgantown, 2019), 13. Gannon, *Radical Hope,* 41.

[5] Eodice, Geller, and Lerner, *Meaningful Writing Project,* 4, 38; Booth, *Teaching History at University,* 10. On fostering lifelong learning, see Gannon, *Radical Hope,* 23. My inspiration for getting my students to think of themselves as "history communicators" came from Jason Steinhauer's blog. See Jason Steinhauer, "Introducing History Communicators," Jan. 29, 2015, *National Council on Public History,* https://ncph.org/history-at-work/introducing-history-communicators/. On students writing in a variety of genres, see Eodice, Geller, and Lerner, *Meaningful Writing Project,* 41.

to rethink our discipline's attachment to demanding an "objective" third-person voice in student assignments. Gannon notes that history, like most scholarly disciplines, has a deep "reverence" for "objectivity"—the "separation of subject and knowledge"—which is supposed to "render our work more 'scholarly' and thus 'authoritative.' Despite the fact that true objectivity is a myth, any challenge to its regime feels transgressive and is likely to be treated as less-than." The educator and activist Parker Palmer's classic work *The Courage to Teach* includes a powerful anecdote about a student who was not sure if he could use the pronoun "I" in an autobiographical essay. When Palmer asked what had prompted the question, the student replied, "I'm a history major, and each time I use 'I' in a paper, they knock off half a grade." Palmer goes on to argue that this "academic bias against subjectivity not only forces our students to write poorly ('It is believed' instead of 'I believe') but also deforms their thinking about themselves and their world. In a single stroke, we delude our students into thinking that bad prose can turn opinions into facts, and we alienate them from their own inner lives." Similarly, the author, activist, and literature professor bell hooks observes that "many of our students come to our classrooms believing that real brilliance is revealed by the will to disconnect and disassociate. They see this state as crucial to the maintenance of objectivism. They fear wholeness will lead them to be considered less 'brilliant.'"[6]

Booth, and fellow historian Robert Bain, take these critiques further by unpacking history's distinctive, and somewhat hypocritical, attachment to "objectivity." For example, Bain argues that "history is more than a discrete subject matter; it is an epistemic activity. The discipline of history depends upon historians reconstructing the past, for doing history is more than merely uncovering facts. Likewise, learning history is more than memorizing facts. Students of history actively construct the past in their own minds." Booth adds that while many of history's current disciplinary conventions "foreground detached approaches to the subject in the interests of dispassionate judgement, imaginative engagement is as essential to high-level learning as it is to serious historical writing." Historians organize a massive amount of information "into meaningful patterns, and the incomplete and often fragmented nature of evidence about the past compels the historian to ask imaginative questions, intuit connections and follow hunches if an event or episode is to be adequately explained or represented, just as attempting to understand what motivated people in the past involves some empathetic engagement with their lives as a whole. The practice of history is therefore inherently creative." The standard diet of exams, book reviews, and formal research essays does a good job of reinforcing the perception that "objectivity" is the most important quality in good historical writing, but it hides the imaginative questions, intuitive connections, empathy, and the passion that drives many historians. Palmer notes that "behind their fearful silence, our students want to find their voices, speak their voices, have their voices heard." We can encourage them to find their own voices by letting them hear more of our own.[7]

Taken together, these characteristics of meaningful writing projects demonstrate what Engle and her colleagues describe as "expansive framing," which involves students as "active participants in a learning context where they serve as authors of their own ideas and

[6] Gannon, *Radical Hope,* 19. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco, 2017), 19. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York, 2003), 180.

[7] Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives,* ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York, 2000), 332. On the practice of history as inherently creative, see Booth, *Teaching History at University,* 6. Palmer, *Courage to Teach,* 47.

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respondents to the ideas of others." In addition, expansive, student-centered writing assignments foster more of the characteristics of "high-level learning" in history that Booth describes than traditional research essays. Both encourage students to seek out sources that are often incomplete, widely scattered, and contradictory; develop the analytical tools and critical thinking skills that historians value; and convey what they have learned to an audience. However, innovative assignments create more space for students to develop and apply their own "insights and interpretations" and think creatively about their place in the world outside a history classroom.[8]

In March 2020, when my university was forced by the coronavirus pandemic to close with just three weeks left in the term, these features of more engaging, student-centered, meaningful assignments helped my students complete high-quality final projects amid the chaos and stress. In my third-year class on the history of the U.S. West, students submitted everything from a surprisingly lively podcast on "free silver" and a set of "person, place, thing, disease" trivia cards, to a storyboard for a film about a time traveler in 1940s Hollywood and a well-researched board game about the mafia's role in 1960s Las Vegas. The projects from my students in the mandatory second-year "History in Practice" course included a two-person podcast (complete with product placements) discussing the accuracy of the 2013 video game *Assassin's Creed VI: Black Flag,* as well as blog posts critiquing the 2009 film *The Young Victoria* and the 2011 film *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The quality of the research and analysis was not diminished because they had the freedom to choose topics and genres that genuinely excited them. On the contrary: the "free silver" podcast would help any listener understand a complex topic; the trivia cards captured the randomness and contingency of "westward expansion"; the board game embedded a complex notion of how power can play out in a city such as Las Vegas; and even the humorous product placements turned into clever reminders that only certain kinds of history are commodified in popular culture. More importantly, my students told me that they appreciated having one fun thing to think about as their term crumbled around them amid the many tragedies of the coronavirus.[9]

There will always be a place for traditional writing assignments in history classes. We should, however, make a case for trying something different. As hooks declares, "the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring." At the academic level, Eodice and her colleagues conclude that "a meaningful writing project with the potential for students to 'transfer in' passion for a subject and 'transfer forward' to future writing and future identities is remarkably powerful." At the human level, many instructors increasingly share the view of the scholars I have cited here—that being a great teacher means caring as much about our students' humanity as we do about their mental and critical development. Those traditional research essays can serve a purpose, to be sure, but more engaging, effective writing assignments can be transformational.[10]

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[8] Engle, Geller, and Lerner, *Meaningful Writing Project,* 218. Booth, *Teaching History at University,* 25–26.

[9] *Assassin's Creed VI: Black Flag,* PlayStation 3 ed., dir. Jean Guesdon, Ashraf Ismail, and Damien Kieken (Ubisoft, 2013); *The Young Victoria,* dir. Jean-Marc Vallée (GK Films, 2009); *Captain America: The First Avenger,* dir. Joe Johnston (Marvel Studios, 2011).

[10] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, 1994), 7. Eodice, Geller, and Lerner, *Meaningful Writing Project,* 106. On caring about students' humanity in addition to their mental and critical development, see John M. Dirkx, "Nurturing Soul in Adult Learning," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 74 (Summer 1997), 79–88.