Creating our shared history education "laboratory"
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I will spend a little time, below, proposing a specific approach to the first-year course. But that's not what I want to focus on in this contribution. Instead, I am proposing a bigger plan: that we build many types of materials people believe in, try 'em out, and then assess what works.

Before you throw rotten fruit at me for using the dreaded "a" word, hear me out.

Since at least the publication of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, the question of what students are learning at university, and whether a university education is worthwhile, has returned to focus for policy-makers and academics alike.[1] This is nowhere more true than in the Humanities. A great deal of digital space and paper has been expended attacking or defending the utility of learning in the humanities, and propagating theories as to how we should approach teaching in these disciplines. Yet there is very little real evidence to firmly establish the value of Humanities education or the efficacy of different approaches, pedagogies, and materials. Indeed, some scholars suggest that key outcomes of learning in the Humanities are un-assessable.

At the same time, the external pressure on instructors to reshape what we teach based on perceived changes in the world and in our students is unceasing. Many of these are generated from the university level – the availability of resources, student demand, measures of student success. A lot of these factors actually come down from governmental or societal pressure. We are asked to teach to perceived notions of student achievement – graduation and retention rates, but also post-graduation employment and income. There are also changes within the discipline and new findings in the science of teaching and learning to consider.

In this environment, "assessment" becomes a dangerous but also potentially valuable practice. Assessment can be a terrible thing, as our fellow historian Erik Gilbert has pointed out.[2] Connected to a system of rewards and economies, it is often used to demand transformations in the curriculum that are not really of value to our students. As an Africanist who has studied development, I am keenly aware of the way that 'indicators' can distort real outcomes. I have seen how, in bad situations, measures of efficacy and outcomes have been weaponized to turn NGOs and local initiatives into tools of funder satisfaction rather than improved lives. Even when it works to some degree, there is a danger that assessment leads us to standardization that serves one group of students, but not another.

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[1] Richard Arun and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Chicago: University of Chicago Prss, 2011.
[2] https://badassessment.org

However, it seems clear that at least some outcomes can be assessed in ways that generate valuable information. We can take the best suggestions for redesign from our colleagues, and carefully build materials that manifest their ideas. We can implement these lessons, units, and entire curricula in a large number of classes, and study them through studies that utilize high social science standards to try to generate valuable insights. We can study what students learn. We can try to see what works. Then we can make our findings available to our peers, and then train each other in professional development-style methods and settings.

Here is a list of what I think we need to do this kind of work:
- A set of desirable outcomes for introductory history courses, whether universally shared or diverse but carefully considered
- Great, comprehensive materials (holistic lesson plans and more) that we build ourselves, for each other
- professional development and community-building opportunities
- large enough data sets (lots of us working together) to get meaningful findings
- carefully designed studies that generate information useful to us, rather than to legislatures or administrations
- effective communication and the collaboration of many organizations and groups

All of this will take a lot of work, of course. It means building materials to a high standard; recruiting colleagues to teach it; committing to trying out the materials and approaches our colleagues create; designing studies to a high standard.

I have my own vision for an introductory history course, one that I think aligns somewhat with many of yours. It would feature really carefully designed 'units' that each present students with a historical problem, trains them in a method to think through that problem, and guides them to offer their own original interpretations. I envision a world in which there are lots of these kinds of units, which we build for each other and try out in our classrooms, and then assess what students learn and use the results to improve the units incrementally over time. An instructor could select among these units, either to plug into their course individually or in a logical pathway in which students both build skills and get to work with the longer narratives constructed between the units as well.

But my vision should be just one of many that we try out. Overall, I am arguing that we should build the materials of our dreams, and assess what works ourselves, rather than let others do it. I'm well aware that there will be challenges and difficulties along the way. But let's try it. In the process, we might find we actually improve history education and student "success", defined in ways that are meaningful to *us*.