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My journey through teaching survey courses is marked by several turning points. As a newly minted PhD I began teaching western civ surveys. I was all about coverage. Teaching these courses for the first time I was captivated by all the relevant material. I wanted to lecture on and discuss everything!

The first turning point came when I realized that there weren't enough hours in the day or the classroom to do this. Very quickly I had to make choices about what to include and what to leave out. And once I started doing that, coverage began to matter less and less. When I scrutinized the choices I was making about what to include and what to put aside, it became clear that my decisions certainly tilted towards my favorite content but also tilted towards topics and subjects that let me cultivate the kinds of skills I valued as a historian—digging into primary source analysis, exploring differing interpretations of the same events (e.g. Arabic perspectives on the Crusades), etc. From that point forward I ceased worrying about coverage and shifted my attention to the survey course as a vehicle for helping students develop and hone certain transferrable skills.

The next turning point was one of communication. If I had decided that my survey courses would help students cultivate certain skills, then I decided to be completely transparent in sharing that with them. I included this information on the syllabus, but then I also deliberately and self-consciously discussed it with them. I asked them what a “transferrable” skill was and we talked about that. I tied individual assignments and tasks back to these skills—developing these connections and thereby hopefully making the assignments more meaningful. I talked with them about why I assigned the things that I did and what I hoped they would acquire through their engagement with these assignments. In short, I strove to be transparent in my teaching. I did not simply assume that they would make the connections between assignments and certain skills. I did not simply assume that they would intuit my conceptual approach to the survey course. Instead, I put it all out there, pulling back the curtain to reveal why the course and assignments were structured the way they were.

Such a skills-based approach might suggest that my survey courses were drifting towards becoming dry and practical with no space for the enthusiastic embrace of what makes history so compelling. But that's where the final turning point comes into play. My courses have been further transformed by my engagement with the scholarship on the science of cognition and learning. And here I will shamelessly crib from a piece that I wrote for *Inside Higher Ed* (January 9, 2019):

“Ask someone why they majored in history, and many of the answers will circle back to a strong emotional connection to the subject. It might have been a professor who told captivating stories about the past. Or an instructor with so much enthusiasm for the subject that they couldn't help but get pulled in. In short, behind every history major is invariably a great teacher who connected them in some way or another to the power of narratives about the past.

As Sarah Cavanaugh, an associate professor of psychology at Assumption College, demonstrates so cogently in *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom With the Science of Emotion*, harnessing these emotions is a powerful tool in motivating students and nourishing their academic potential. And it's not just that enthusiasm is contagious. It turns out that we learn

better and more effectively when such emotions are stirred and encouraged. Leveraging such positive emotions is good pedagogy. As historians, we have a distinct opportunity: ours is a storytelling discipline, and we should use that to our pedagogical advantage whenever possible to spark our students' enthusiasm and curiosity.

History is also an analytical discipline, and this, too, seems to resonate with students who get excited about the study of history. Students are drawn to fitting together pieces of evidence in order to puzzle out why historical events unfolded the way they have.

But we can carry this one step further, because here, too, our pedagogical strategies and choices can contribute to student learning in our courses. Historical events are not abstractions, and students drawn to history often note that it excited them precisely because they could take what they were learning and use it to change something beyond the walls of the classroom. In this instance, as well, the science of learning suggests some revealing connections to good pedagogy. Various studies have demonstrated that this sense of purpose beyond oneself is also a powerful motivating force that inspires students to stick with an assignment or a task, even if the work is hard. So as James M. Lang suggests in *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning*, "Students need regular invocations of the larger purpose of individual exercises, class periods and course units." When we can help students see a bigger goal that is connected to the smaller things they are doing in our courses, they are more likely to want to do them *and* do them well.

In recent years, we have seen powerful examples of that phenomenon in practice. We need only think of the archival work that students at various colleges and universities have done to help document the ties that their respective institutions had to slavery. The research that those students have conducted has prompted profound reckonings.

We will not always be able to provide such dramatic examples of self-transcendent purpose, but even small opportunities to link the work of the classroom to a broader goal, like this [transcription project](#) or this [food timeline](#) (and please note: both of these initiatives were directed at introductory-level courses and students), creates meaning and purpose. Pedagogically, the research suggests that such an educational approach will contribute to student success. More selfishly, from a disciplinary perspective, we may win some converts.

In short, as many of us who teach history already know and practice, creating enthusiasm for our field through our storytelling and the meaning and purpose that we build into our assignments will undoubtedly attract some students. But what if our pedagogy also told our students a bigger story: that these same things would contribute to their success in our courses? That they could be good at history? And that their success in history would be the result of cultivating skills and habits of mind that would serve them well in other courses and in their eventual career? That might be the best story of all."

So my philosophy of the survey course in a nutshell?

"A transparent, non-coverage-based, skills-focused course that harnesses what we know about the science of learning to provide a meaningful experience for students."