

## History for the Twenty-First Century Conference

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### Crafting History: Teaching the World History Survey Through Tool-Building

Though billed as an introductory course, the world history survey is increasingly taken by non-major juniors and seniors fulfilling general education requirements.<sup>1</sup> The task of building a course that is accessible to first-years while still engaging for advanced students looms large. An added challenge—central to declining enrollments in the history major—is the question of how to make the history survey useable for non-majors. Here, I'll outline one approach I have been experimenting with to address the question of usability and engagement: teaching world history through tool-building.

When I say tool-building, I mean three things. First, I model the tools students need to do analytical world-historical writing. Second, I integrate digital tools into their assignments. Most recently, I have been using Story Maps as a platform for students to produce a final digital essay.<sup>2</sup> Third, I use scaffolding to help guide students through the acquisition of analytical and digital tools.<sup>3</sup>

Introducing new tools requires sacrifices—in this case, of coverage. I warn students in the syllabus that they won't get a grand narrative from cavemen to capitalism. Spending class and assignment time on acquiring new tools means that I have to select lecture and reading material that models these tools along with the kind of world-historical thinking students should pursue. As they build new tools, students supplement my lectures with their own projects and in-class presentations. They take part of the responsibility for providing coverage and directing the flow of the semester. In the end, students are often more invested in the world-historical narratives they build than the ones they're handed. One computer science major took the extraordinary step of contacting and interviewing the head of the largest start-up incubator in Cairo, posting the audio of their interview in his essay. A student in our History minor dug up an old family journal—belonging to a distant relative and Malaysian sugar magnate—and featured it as a primary source. But getting to these sort of projects takes time, experimentation, and revision as students move through the course.

I aim for assignments and activities to create a sense of movement through the semester. I use short assignments to give students a semester-long sense of progression within their own work. Scaffolded

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Braun-Strumfels, "Why Does this Class Matter Anyway? Tuning History in General Education Courses," *World History Connected* 13, no. 2 (June 2016) <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.2/index.html>; Lendol Calder, "Tuning History: Redirecting History Surveys for General Education," *World History Connected* 14, no. 2 (June 2016) [https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.2/forum\\_calder\\_intro.html](https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.2/forum_calder_intro.html).

<sup>2</sup> For a reflection on assigning collaborative digital essays using the platform, Scalar, see: Dwayne Dixon, "Imagining the Essay as Digital Assemblage: Collaborative Student Experiments with Writing in Scalar," *Prompt* 1, no. 1 (2017) <http://thepromptjournal.com/index.php/prompt/article/view/13/12>.

<sup>3</sup> On skills-based pedagogy vs. coverage: Stephan Levesque, *Thinking Historically*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Dave Eaton, "Taking Cover: Explaining the Persistence of the Coverage Model in World History Surveys," *World History Connected* 13, no. 1 (February 2016) <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.1/eaton.html>; and Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006).

assignments help students think of their research and writing as an evolving process rather than the product of a single Red Bull-fueled night.

I use lectures and reading assignments to model how students can use world history as a tool. World history surveys aren't just an opportunity to tell students what happened; they're also a chance to show them how world historians ask questions and provide interpretations. The survey course is an opportunity to let students make their own world-historical argument, rather than handing them a long narrative that many will discard along with their notes after the final. In their final digital essay, I ask students to build a world-historical argument, which I define as "making comparisons or connections across a broad geography or a long time."

My scaffolding design moves from world-historical thinking toward a digital project as the semester moves forward, guiding students through the composing of a world-historical question, then on to research and analytical writing, and finally, how to do both in a digital format. I organize my world history course around commodities. Each student chooses a commodity to explore through a class presentation and final digital essay. They complete weekly homework assignments: research question, thesis statement, project proposal, annotated bibliography, visual analysis, one-page outline, one page of text, and a link to the draft digital essay. Each homework is ungraded, but each receives feedback, either directly from me or from peers. Feedback without assessment can provide accountability while still allowing space to experiment, make mistakes, and revise.

Where possible, I design class activities that address the week's topics while also helping to model tasks like thesis design and primary source research. Assigned working groups and activities like "abstract speed dating" help students gather feedback, troubleshoot, and share resources. As they work on learning how to present their research and writing in a digital format, students appreciate class time devoted to instructor-led tutorials and opportunities to share their work-in-progress with each other.

Particularly for non-majors, tool-building can make historical writing more accessible and useable. I've found that Story Maps enhances student engagement with primary sources. Visual sources take on immediacy as students write alongside and on top of them. Students get to see the fruits of their research presented on screen alongside their arguments. For history majors, digital tools are often novel and exciting. While for STEM students, doing this work helps connect history research to tools they see as useful. Students have used the digital essay that they created in my course for job or graduate school application portfolios.<sup>4</sup>

It's hard enough learning to teach your department's world history survey. Tasking new teachers with crafting a narrative of 250,000 years of human history while also expecting them to learn new digital tools is a tall order. This is where community comes in. In addition to lesson plans, syllabi, and assessment materials, we need a place for world historians to share tutorials and resources for learning new digital tools. But we need resources not just about using digital tools in the classroom, but for how to teach students to find, acquire, and use those tools themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> On transferable skills and making a history course useable: Daniel J. McInerney, "The Intro Course as an Introduction to Curriculum Change," *World History Connected* 13, no. 2 (June 2016)

[https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.2/forum\\_mcinerney.html](https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/13.2/forum_mcinerney.html)