Student Ownership of Learning in the General Education World History Classroom

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In my contribution to this discussion about our efforts to restructure the introductory

college history experience, I would like to suggest including efforts to promote student

ownership over their own learning. As research has shown, students with a strong sense of

ownership of their learning have higher motivations to achieve goals, a stronger belief in their

ability to succeed, an increased ability to reflect on the effectiveness of their learning strategies,

and a willingness to persist in the face of obstacles.[1] A useful summary provided by Kristall J.

Graham-Day and her research team at Ohio State University offers four practices proven to

increase ownership of learning: 1) be clear about expectations, 2) have mechanisms for students

to track progress, 3) have mechanisms for students to give and get feedback and 4) meet with

students one-on-one.[2] These are useful tips for any educator at any level and the first three, at

least, can also be used in large classes without significant burdens.

Those of us teaching General Education world history classes have two additional

challenges to promoting student ownership of learning. First, history is among the least popular

subjects among students coming out of high school, even as they are often required to take world

history as part of their General Education requirements.[3] That's a motivational problem: how do

we get our students invested in learning world history? We know that students feel connected,

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[1] David T. Conley1 and Elizabeth M. French, "Student Ownership of Learning as a Key Component of College Readiness," *American Behavioral Scientist* 58, no. 8 (2014): 1018 –1034. The opposite is also true. Šprajc Polona, Urh Marko, Jerebic Janja, Trivan Dragan, Jereb Eva, "Reasons for Plagiarism in Higher Education," *Organizacija*.50, no. 1 (2017): 33–45.
[2] Paula E. Chan, Kristall J. Graham-Day et al., "Beyond Involvement: Promoting Student Ownership of Learning in Classrooms," *Intervention in School and Clinic,* 50, no. 2 (2014): 105–113.
[3] Valerie Strauss, "Why so many students hate history — and what to do about it," *Washington Post,* May 17, 2017, accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/05/17/why-so-many-students-hate-history-and-what-to-do-about-it/?utm_term=.2d7b7cea636b.

engaged and meaningfully-involved in their own learning when they are studying topics that reflect their own interests, passions, and identities. By tapping into students' own sense of self, and allowing them to use that to drive their studies, we have a stronger chance of turning even skeptics into allies. That leads us to a second more practical problem: one-on-one meetings suited to getting to know students are often not realistic in high enrollment classes, especially for contingent faculty whose experiences we need to keep at the forefront of our minds as we move foward. Faculty often cannot get to know our students' assumptions, experiences, loves, hates, passions, memories, and political views in ways that are sufficient to help them gain a passion for learning world history. The question becomes: how can we help students connect their interests, passions and identities to their General Education world history classes? Asked another way, how can we mass-produce students' ownership of their world history education?

The most important part of this process, in my view, is not for us to explain to students that world history is critical to them to better understand their interests, passions and identities, but for them to *discover it for themselves.* Once they do so, they can begin to appreciate how they can use a knowledge of the past to guide them to make wiser, more ethical, and more realistic decisions. One approach is to guide students through a process of picking some part of world history to learn about that they explicitly connect to their interests, passions or identities. When students can pick some kind of specialization – for small or large projects – that are meaningful to them in their first few weeks of a class, engagement increases, self-confidence goes up, their willingness to put in extra hours rises, and the learning experience is just more positive for both students and faculty alike. How do students find topics in world history that are meaningful to them? In an ideal world, perhaps, we sit down and get to know each of them personally, guiding through the process. That's the experience I had teaching at an elite liberal

arts college years ago. At the large state school where I'm at now, where I lead a team of sixteen faculty who guide over 3,000 students through this process every semester, that's not an option. Instead, here's my solution.

Most importantly, there is no one solution. After all, when people feel that there is one pre-prepared path, they are less likely to feel their education as their own. In contrast, when they play a role in finding their own path, their attachment to it becomes stronger. But providing them with a few options can get most of them on their way to a general subject or theme pretty quickly. The first is to ask them to do a web search for news articles, controversies or debates that inspire their curiosity, enthusiasm or frustration. Another way is to leverage their sense that they need to prioritize their intended major as an entry point into a topic. A third way is to link the topic to some part of their identity or family history. Having a personal connection helps, but sometimes it's not as important as the fact that the *student came up with the topic herself*. Sometimes twenty-minutes randomly perusing Wikipedia can prove just as successful as delving into one's family history.

After an initial brainstorming, students walk their way through five steps over two weeks toward a world history project. First, pick a geographical scope. Does their topic include a part of the world outside the U.S? If yes, move on. If no, then either look at that same topic in another part of the world that interests them, find an useful comparison, or search for a book on that topic in world history that helps them pick another suitable part of the world. Second, pick a chronological scope. This involves finding a textbook on the geographical region or theme in world history, and reading just enough to make an intelligent decision about a starting point and stopping point – usually the narrower the better. Fourth, write down their topic and get feedback on it in smalls groups in class, and then as a low stakes assignment. Fourth, after incorporating

that feedback and reading a bit more and, write down a research question, and get feedback on it. Finally, revise that question based on the feedback. Throughout this process, they discuss their decision-making process in small groups. They may get useful feedback from peers, but the other purpose is to regularize and make explicit their investment in the process of picking their topic. In a class of 75, after two weeks, I might still have five students who need a one-on-one meeting, but the rest have found some topic that is meaningful to them. A student who found a provocative news article on reproductive rights, for instance, might examine the regulation of women's sexuality among in pastoral societies in colonial Nigeria. A forestry major might work on the effects of the chainsaw on ecology or indigenous land use in Brazil. A student with Mexican parents of French ancestry might work on the consequences of the French invasion of Mexico in 1861. A new member to the college swim team might explore the origins of modern swimming techniques in British colonialism of North America and Australia. Using this technique, students can get into projects that are about fundamental processes that have shaped world history – like colonialism, capitalism, and state building – in just about two weeks.

The most important outcome is not that a student's ideas are original, but that students *feel that they are their own*. At my university, we have been refining the steps I just summarized to mass-produce these individual student transformational experiences. But the collective experience of H21 probably can find other successful methods to promote student ownership of learning as well. But before this groups considers the structures underpinning what we produce, I believe it is important to consider not only *what motivates us to collaborate*, but also to consider *what motivates students,* to help faculty recruit them as partners in their own education.