

“Being ignorant is not so much a Shame, as being unwilling to learn”

Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard Improved*, 1755¹

The opening quote by Benjamin Franklin is directed as much at myself as my students, for I have found that the most successful teacher-student relationship is a two-way exchange. When the teacher fosters a learning environment based on mutual benefit and respect, the classroom becomes more than a space for lecturing and notes—it transforms into an environment of personal exchange, development, and success. Consequently, my teaching experience thus far has taught me two especially important lessons: first, that continuous improvement should be a goal for both the teacher and the student; and second, that such an approach will cultivate a particularly productive, motivated, and comfortable environment for both parties.

A successful learning environment for both teacher and student require preparation, a lively lecture, active learning exercises, and utilizing multiple forms of media. Throughout my teaching career, I have honed my skill in promoting such an atmosphere. While lecturing on the American Revolution, for example, I provided students with a PowerPoint presentation on the overhead (which included many pictures and quotations from primary documents), multiple videos from both movies and documentaries, and also had them refer to their own primary document book. Throughout my lecture, I split the class in two and had them argue as either the British or the patriots over issues like empire, individual rights, taxation, and the validity of different acts of violence. Suddenly the students were utilizing all their sources available to make a valid argument. In short, they were actively participating in a critical discussion rather than passively receiving a lecture, and in doing so were asserting themselves as individuals with cogent arguments on important, scholarly topics. I use this exercise often for topics ranging from Euro-Indian contact to the Civil War.

I also cultivate a safe and comfortable classroom where students of diverse background and experience are encouraged to interact with each other and challenge each other’s assumptions. Key to this is my attention to the cross-cultural, complicated, often-global nature of historical interaction. In an introductory course on early American history, for instance, I stressed the international context of the colonies rather than following the traditional, national narrative of American history. During one lecture in particular, I utilized my own research on early American taverns to reveal how diverse peoples, places, ideas, and goods clashed in the colonies. At the conclusion of the lecture, I divided the class into groups so they could reflect on the myriad transatlantic and global interactions of the early modern period, and how this correlates to our current world. Such interactive activities help students of all backgrounds and religions to realize their own place in the past and the present.

Sensitivity to diverse skill sets and learning styles is key to creating a productive, open classroom. In my experiences both teaching and taking a course on pedagogy, I have learned that instructors often teach to their own learning styles. I realize that just because I am an active classroom participator does not mean everyone is. As a result, I incorporate numerous small-group and one-on-one activities into my class to include those students who may be shy,

¹ Benjamin Franklin, “Poor Richard Improved” (1755) in *Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 1,284.

inexperienced, or have trouble articulating their thoughts into words on the spot. I also use writing as a discussion tool by utilizing online discussion boards to allow otherwise quiet students to make their voices heard. Numerous course evaluations have shown that my diverse teaching styles have connected with students of all types.

Cultivating a fertile learning environment in the classroom extends to out-of-class assignments. In my experience, paper assignments of varying lengths are one of the most effective and beneficial ways for students to communicate what they have learned from class. I usually assign at least two papers per semester so that students can take the time to thoroughly convey their view on broad topics. Within these papers, students are expected to analyze primary documents as well as summarize lecture and textbook material. Their performance on subsequent papers allows me to chart their progress in writing, analysis, and professional skills such as organization and following directions. I sometimes also assign in-class essays, but allow students a week in advance to grapple with the essay question. This way, students learn how to formulate their thoughts in advance, develop an effective study method, and express their thoughts in a succinct, critical way.

Having used myriad sources for teaching large and small class sizes, I am a proponent of utilizing media in the classroom. Our students are growing up in the age of “Facebook,” constant, multiple forms of digital media, and global communication. In order to compete with all of these external factors, we as educators need to use these outlets as much as possible. I often show clips from popular films that pertain to the day’s lecture. For example, I show a clip from the film “Amistad” depicting the brutalities of the “middle passage” after lecturing on and assigning primary documents over this historical event. Not only do such clips break up the lecture and give students time to take a quick breath, but they also engage students in different (perhaps more familiar) ways by adding visual references to existing lecture and reading material. The “Amistad” example is especially important since reading about the “middle passage” is not always as effective for understanding the journey’s sheer brutality as actually seeing it. After watching the clip, I lead the class in a discussion over the film clip, concentrating on its accuracies and fallacies as well as how it helps us to understand the American history beyond great men and great deeds. Students thus come to terms with the brutalities of the “middle passage” by reading first-hand accounts, listening to my lecture, and watching a film depiction of the event. Such a wide-ranging approach to teaching serves to connect with more students. I incorporate clips from films into my lectures very often and am always on the watch for more.

More than only stressing facts and dates, I promote students’ critical consciousness and professional development. Consequently, the success of my class is contingent upon teaching students how to make a well-informed, well-supported argument, take good notes, take responsibility for their actions, and compose themselves in a professional environment. These are skills that extend beyond the history course and that will benefit them throughout the rest of their lives. I promote an open atmosphere of discourse from both sides of the podium and welcome questions and disagreements. In short, I encourage an environment of reflection, analysis, and critical thinking, and in doing so develop relationships with my students that will hopefully benefit them for the rest of their lives.