



History | 2013-2014 Assessment Report

My seminar in history explored the 1970s in a historical perspective, discussing a dynamic decade in the recent history of the United States. Throughout the semester we tackled many difficult questions, including: What, exactly, were the 1970s, and why do they matter? How did the United States deal with the legacies of the 1960s? How did the United States change in the 1970s? In the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam United States, how did Americans see themselves and their place in the larger world? And how did the culture of the 1970s depict and make sense of the decade's crisis of confidence? We sought to find answers to these and other questions by reading and discussing recent scholarship, watching several important films from the decade, and conducting original research projects. My ultimate goal was to have the students engage in the actual work of a historian, thinking deeply about the past, engaging in meaningful historical conversations with their peers, and creating a piece of original scholarship based on both primary and secondary sources.

Students were assessed on their overall participation throughout the course, four book reviews, a project proposal and annotated bibliography, and a final 15-page paper based on significant primary research. Many students struggled with various aspects of the course. We read eight books throughout the semester, and several students were unfamiliar with the techniques of skimming or gutting a book to make reading a book per week a manageable task. Book reviews were often simplistic, offering general summaries rather than analysis on a book's strengths and weaknesses. Most were also unprepared to engage in weekly discussions of our readings and films, probably preferring lectures (which I do not believe in for seminar courses). Students did team up to lead one discussion each throughout the semester, though the questions they posed were often uninspiring. When I asked students what they liked most about a given book, I often received the answer, "this book has a lot of interesting facts." Most students had difficulty identifying a book's core argument, and many were simply silent throughout the large majority of our discussions, even when talking about really engaging popular culture such as the television show, *All in the Family* or the film, *Taxi Driver*. I would describe our student population as very shy. Many students also struggled with some of the most basic elements of historical writing, such as delineating the difference between primary and secondary sources, making a clear argument, and the process of creating footnotes. We discussed these and other topics thoroughly throughout the course, but I was surprised that so many of the students had little or no experience with them.

The final papers were, however, overall good, as students did engage in some strong research, particularly through the archives at the UWGB library. Students really liked engaging with primary sources, and many came up with really unique and provoking topics. Many were very excited about working with archival materials, and I loved to see that kind of enthusiasm. Yet ultimately they need more training on how to analyze and assess these sources. I do feel that most students grew a bit throughout the semester as they were challenged by the rigor of the course materials and expectations, but other than few standout students, the seminar was difficult

in that conversations about our books and films were very general and lacked both depth and enthusiasm.

Having now gone through the experience of leading the history seminar, I see our students struggling greatly with doing the actual work of a historian. The enthusiasm for the past is there, but a certain level of sophistication is not. Early in the semester I asked students what had made them interested in history, and most said that they were drawn to the field by general interests in war or, to be frank, the History Channel. They liked talking about the basics—this happened, that happened, etc.—but had difficulty moving beyond rote facts. Ultimately I feel that we as a department need to do a better job throughout all our courses of helping our students to learn how to think historically. Our students really do love the intricacies of the past, but they struggle to move beyond interesting facts and stories to engage in real discussions and analysis about the importance or significance of historical events and actors. They need more of a push to move beyond a simplistic understanding of the past. Our proposed methods course should help with this challenging problem, as the students in the seminar simply were not prepared to talk on a weekly basis about arguments and ideas, and also need much more practice with research, argument, and writing. Clearly we are not training a cadre of future academic historians, and so perhaps my approach in the seminar was too rigorous for our students. Yet I do believe that there is an overall dearth of analytical skills that our students should certainly be equipped with by the time they leave our program. Again, a methods course should start to solve this problem, and we should continue discussions as a department on what, exactly, we want our students to accomplish by the time they graduate. Perhaps talking more about careers beyond the academy and the usefulness of the skills they are learning in our classes would be beneficial for our students, and again an earlier methods course—not the seminar—is the place where these conversations should start.