

Understanding Historical Thinking

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Humanistic Studies and History

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<http://www.thegraybox.net>

Course Design: Big Questions

- Overarching Questions: What do historians do? What kinds of sources do historians use to learn about the past, and how do they interpret these sources? How does early American history continue to be significant today? How does your knowledge of early American history help you understand the present?
- Part 1: What was Turtle Island (North America) like before the arrival of European colonizers? How and why did the First Nations of eastern North America lose most of their land by the early 19th century? How did First Nations resist domination and manage to retain some sovereignty?

Course Design: Debating History

Students submit “Debate Preparation Paragraphs” electronically and participate in small- and large-group discussions of the following questions:

- Did Pocahontas Help Her People?
- What Was the American Revolution Really About?
- How Democratic Was the Founding of the U.S.?
- What Role Did Slavery Play in the Coming of the Civil War?
- How Is Early American History Significant to You?

Course Design: “For & Against”

On written exams, students respond to historical claims using evidence from primary and secondary sources. They argue both for and against intentionally problematic statements.

For example:

Cristoforo Colombo discovered a “New World” in 1492.

or

The American Revolution was fundamentally democratic.

My Research Questions

- How effective is my overall course design in helping students develop an understanding of what it means to think like a historian?
- How do my students – having completed a course that is question-driven and focused on debate and argument – compare to other students who have taken more traditional history “survey” courses?

Methodology: Survey

For a small amount of extra credit, students wrote paragraphs to answer these 2 questions.

- Question 1
 - *Please briefly describe and explain, in your own words, what historians do. In other words, how do historians study their subject, and what are their goals in doing so? Be as detailed as possible in the space provided.*
- Question 2:
 - *Please give 1–2 specific examples of what historians do. In other words, describe specific examples of how historians carry out their work. Be as detailed as possible in the space provided.*

Methodology: Rubric

Response Type	Examples	Code
Q1: How do historians study their subject, and what are their goals in doing so?		
Questions	Observes that historians ask complex questions about the past	Q (+)
Sources	Observes that historians use multiple primary sources	S (+)
Perspectives	Observes that historians use sources from different perspectives or interests	P (+)
Analysis	Observes that historians analyze primary sources Observes that historians contextualize primary sources	A (+)
Interpretation	Observes that historians formulate an interpretation of the past	I (+)

Full rubric available at: <http://www.thegraybox.net/history/>

Methodology: Coding

Please briefly describe and explain, in your own words, what historians do. In other words, how do historians study their subject, and what are their goals in doing so? Be as detailed as possible in the space provided.

I believe that historians are teachers. To me, they are people who go deep into their research to find the truth about our past. Their major goal would be finding out information about our past and spreading it to others as a learning experience. They study this subject through historical books, the internet, and other historians.

OS
PH
P

Vague response to question 1.
"OS" means oversimplification.

Please briefly describe and explain, in your own words, what historians do. In other words, how do historians study their subject, and what are their goals in doing so? Be as detailed as possible in the space provided.

Historians, by referencing historical documentation and other credible sources, attempt to explain the past. They find ties or links between events and both figure out why they happened and how. Along with this they try to educate others about what they find and why it is relevant.

S
I
A
PH

Fairly capable response to question 1.

Methodology: Data Analysis

Q	S	P	A	I	D	PH	SQ	SS	SH
0	1	0	1	0	1	2	0	1	0
0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	2	0	1	0
0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0
0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	3	0
0	1	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0
1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
0	2	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	1
0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
0		1	0	0	0	2	0	1	0

Excerpt from spreadsheet

Conclusions: Results Summary

	My Students	Comparison Students	Difference
Number of Participants	110	44	
Mean Total Score (statistically significant)	4.3	3.3	1
Competent (A/AB) or Nearly Competent (B) Responses	1/4	1/10	15%
Historians Use of Primary Sources*	0.82	0.48	0.34
Historians Use of Analysis and Interpretation*	0.98	0.55	0.43
Discussion and Debate among Historians*	0.35	0.14	0.21
Specific Historians*	0.19	0	0.19

*Mean number of times mentioned by students.

What's Next?

- Methodology: Improve quality of student responses by treating them as graded exam answers (instead of offering extra credit for mere participation)
- Methodology: Reword question to focus on methods of historical thinking to gather more focused responses
- Methodology: Pose an authentic question that asks students to explain how they could apply historical thinking and skills to respond to a dubious historical claim
- Pedagogy: Use my current data to identify strengths and weaknesses of students who have completed my course, in order to improve my course design