Ongoing Forum: Book Reviews and the Teaching of World History

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My teaching of HIST3029, "Transnational history: A new approach to the past"[1] was a double experiment: in addition to the challenge of teaching world history for the first time, I wanted to use book reviews as a tool for training academic writing. The experiment may not have gone entirely according to my plan, and there is ample room for improvement in the future, but it was a worthwhile experience which merits being shared. For one, this forum seeks to establish a platform to discuss different approaches to teaching world history in general, and the use of book reviews in particular; my own class shall serve as a starting point. In addition, sharing experiences or ideas about different contents, methodologies, and formats of teaching in the broad context of world history will enable the creation of a space in which the gap between teaching and research can be bridged. This is all the more beneficial as, in my experience, there are never enough opportunities for feedback and discussion of teaching per se, and especially teaching as it relates to research and the academic discipline.

I would like to start this essay by outlining how I taught HIST2129 and what I had in mind when I designed the course; I will then discuss how this played out in the classroom and try to evaluate my own teaching in the light of the effectiveness of both

[1] My department is currently employing me as a Visiting Assistant Professor, which is a euphemism for "lecturer." This means that I am teaching courses that other people have developed in the past, yet not necessarily in the same fashion that the courses' creators intended—in essence, I am free to teach whatever I fancy. This also means, however, that the course title and course description does not necessarily reflect what I intend to do, or my approach, though it is usually broad enough to accommodate different methods and interpretations of the content of a given course topic.

content and assignments, and consider avenues for improvement as well as lessons learned. I taught HIST3029 in the spring of 2014, and was lucky to be able to offer it, as only four students were enrolled.

In developing my syllabus, the first challenge was actually the content. What, exactly, did I want my students to learn, and with what kind of knowledge did I want them to walk out of the classroom at the end of the semester? Two options emerged: a chronological approach in which I would teach world historical events or developments (things such as the Columbian Exchange, the Silk Road, or the global aspects of the French Revolution and the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries); or a more theoretical approach with a stronger focus on the underlying ideas and concepts of world history. The undergraduate curriculum at HKU seeks to offer a balance of Chinese and Western history (I should really put these into quotation marks), and there is considerable breadth in the geographical and temporal dimensions of courses. In addition, the class is an undergraduate seminar, open only to history students in their final year. Therefore, I decided that a somewhat theoretical and idea-based course would be more appropriate—and perhaps more interesting—for students.

In addition to the class sessions in which we heard student presentations (see below), the topics we discussed were the following:

- Introduction: Nuts and bolts of the course and a general discussion of global history
- Introduction (2): World history and how it is written
- Imperialism
- Disease

- Religion
- Women and Gender
- Food
- Environmental history
- War
- Globalization

For each of these discussion sessions, I assigned two, sometimes three journal articles or book chapters that captured the characteristics of the topic, but also offered avenues to discuss methodologies, historiography, or problems with a particular approach. It was often difficult to find useful articles that were neither too long nor too difficult to read (after all, it was an undergraduate class), and that had an engaging story to tell. My students did not necessarily agree with me on which ones were the more "interesting" or "good" articles/chapters. My own preparation consisted of heavily annotating the readings, and of preparing sets of questions for each text. What I realized over the course of the semester, however, was that we rarely got to discuss my lofty and abstract questions and ideas. Rather, we talked about the stories that the articles told, about the topics themselves, and about connections to the present. Most of the time, these discussions were not very focused on history, but I deemed the discussions, in which all students participated quite enthusiastically, too important to steer them more strongly to more historical discussions. To be honest, though, I am not sure this was a good thing to do; I am still debating with myself. Overall, I ask myself whether or not this course offered students a coherent and concise understanding of world history; my guess is that what they learned in this course was as fragmented and diverse as the discipline. This is not problematic in the sense that one of the skills that students need to learn at university

is to make sense of diverse and fragmented knowledge. On the other hand, I feel compelled, as a historian, to deliver some kind of story, a narrative if you will, that makes sense and that students can then interpret and engage with, even question, doubt, or subvert. With topics as diverse as those listed above, and with texts even more diverse, I am not sure that I was able to create this story, or any story at all. But perhaps this is the point (and the beauty) of world history—it is many things at once, and its multi-faceted-ness and complexity supersedes *the* narrative. I did, however, seek to convey to my students that world history in many instances subverts and challenges established and authoritative narratives, and used the assigned readings to demonstrate how world historians do this. If nothing else, this is something that they took away from the class.

Assessments were the second big question of creating the course. I wanted the course to be a bit more hands-on, a bit closer to what actual historians do, in order to make it feel "real" rather than just educational. I wanted to make them read books, because there is so much to learn from reading and reflecting on books (the nostalgia of my own graduate seminars clouds the memory of the pain of having to read a book every week for so many classes), and to use these books for assignments was a rather obvious choice. Although I had never used book reviews as assignments, the idea to have students write a book review appealed to me because this would give students the opportunity to expand in-class discussions of the books in their own papers. In order to prepare them for the review, I included several drafts and preparatory assignments that would give them the opportunity to explore the purpose and format of book reviews, and that would permit me to give feedback and help the writing get underway. I permitted students to choose the

book for their review from a reading list that I pieced together from several colleagues' world history reading lists. In the end, there were six assignments including the "final project," the book review":

- a presentation to introduce the student's book of choice to the class (5 minutes)
- an introduction of an academic journal. I included this assignment because I wanted students to explore different academic journals in terms of their objectives, format, content, and approach, and also to give students examples of book reviews (5 minutes).
- a written evaluation of two to three reviews of "their" book, in which I asked them to evaluate and compare the reviews, and to reflect on whether or not they focused on issues that students themselves deemed important in the book. This was due in week 9 of a 14-week semester (1000 words).
- a draft of the book review, including the structure and main points of the review
- a presentation to introduce the book review to the class (15 minutes)
- the final book review (3000-3500 words)

In the brief presentations of the books that the students chose, their main focus was on the content, structure, and arguments of their books. These presentations were intended to give the class an impression of the breadth of topics and the variety of approaches that a "world history book" can have; as a consequence, the presentations were very introductory in character and reflected, in some instances, difficulties that students had in grasping the message of their book. It should be added that I did not expect students to

have finished reading their books, and this was certainly a factor in some lack of clarity about what a particular book sought to accomplish.

Before exposing students to book reviews, I chose to add a look at journals as a step in between. It turned out that this assignment was more important than I would have imagined. I assigned a journal to every student; they were the *Journal of World History*, the *New Global Studies Journal, Itinerario,* and the *American Historical Review.* In preparation for the presentation, I asked students to look at a number of issues of their respective journals, and to find out about their mission, approach, structure, and contributors. While this had seemed very obvious to me, students had never thought about journals in this way (although all had used articles from academic journals for term papers). We spent the entire class period talking about journals in principle, and about audiences, and I found myself compelled to explain much more about the academic community than I had intended.

Subsequently, students had to write a 1000-word paper evaluating reviews of their book in the light of students' own understanding of the book. What I had in mind was to make them reflect on the different ways of reading a book—a reviewer might have a completely different take on the book, or emphasize different things, than the student. Overall, these short papers achieved what I intended: students took a closer look at reviews of their book and weighed them against each other and against their own impressions.

I understand this assignment as an important stepping stone in the process of writing their own review, and of evaluating what a review can—or should—achieve. All students used these reviews in their final papers, regardless of their agreement or disagreement with them. That said, we should perhaps have discussed the value of book reviews in class in order to make this evaluation more explicit and more critical.

Two drafts followed before the final review was due at the end of the semester, one in the form of a class presentation and one in the form of a written draft. For the written draft, I did not require that a substantial part of the paper be written, and all students submitted a mixture of bullet points and short paragraphs, ranging from two to six pages. They provided outlines of their reviews that were overall comprehensive and detailed, containing all the elements that their reviews would eventually comprise. These drafts gave me a good understanding of the structure and content of the reviews, and of the opinions, arguments, and conclusions of the students. I gave extensive feedback on the written draft on all aspects that I deemed problematic, unclear, or absent. In most cases, students made use of this feedback for their final papers, but the presentations were already better structured and overall more clearly argued than the initial drafts, which I attribute to the feedback. For the presentations, I asked that students hold their questions after all of them had completed their presentations, and was surprised how enthusiastically they then discussed and critiqued each others' drafts. There was also a good deal of discussion about the books themselves. I found this exchange of opinions valuable because students generally lack the opportunity to assess and evaluate their

peers' work (and my classes are no exception). Due to time constraints, I typed my notes on their presentations up and sent them to the students. The presentations were quite a bit more coherent in terms of argument and structure than the drafts; therefore, in most of my comments I attempted to make them question and clarify their own thoughts and assumptions, explain in more detail, or explore issues further. Many of the comments and suggestions eventually found their way in the final reviews.

The final results of the book reviews are on this website for you to read. There is one observation that I would like to make with regard to them, which concerns the revision process. There was first the problem that revisions were done after the end of the semester (because the review was the final paper, and hence due at the end of the semester) and that some students were not too excited about another round of revisions. More importantly, though, the revision process itself was surprising. My first reading of the final reviews was for grading—reading, some comments, and a grade, you know the drill. The second reading was for copy editing, and made me realize that there were many instances in which the writing and argumentation lacked clarity that I had, habitually perhaps, overlooked in my first reading (no, I did not change any grades). I returned the copy edited files to the students for their approval and some modifications, but what they returned was, in fact, not much different from their original papers. Hardly any of the instances where I had asked for additional explanation, specification, or simply

clarification, were indeed more in-depth than their initial submissions;[2] students tended to modify a sentence in question, offering a bare minimum of clarification, if any. This does not mean that any student submitted poor work in the assignments; it simply means that the reviews could have been quite a bit better—more concise, more balanced, more critical, or more readable—if students had invested more time or effort in the revisions.

There are several things that I am taking away from the course and from the assignments, and that I would like to share before opening this forum for discussion (of these or other related issues):

- The structure of class discussions needs more reflection, and perhaps more detailed planning: which aspects of the assigned texts do I deem worthwhile discussing, and how can this be combined with an evaluation about the topic's significance for the contemporary world? What is a sensible balance between students' thoughts on the topics and an assessment of the topics' world history character?
- There needs to be more discussion of journals in general and of book reviews in particular. It may be useful to devote an entire class period (or two) to this, given the importance of the review for the course and students' grades. This past semester, I gave students two book reviews of my own as examples that had roughly the same length as their final papers; I should make these available earlier in the semester and have students discuss their structure, argument, audience, etc.

[2] The same is true for revisions of the two reflective pieces, which are on this website, too. There was less need for clarification, though, than in the book reviews.

- I should be more upfront about the revision process as part of academic writing and of improving one's own work based on feedback. In addition, I am thinking about increasing the number of rounds or including peer reviews. Students could even be evaluated on their ability to implement changes that reviewers deemed necessary or desirable. This necessitates either a due date for the final paper during the semester (that is, 2-3 weeks before the end of the semester), or a more complete and substantial draft.

Finally, I would like to open this forum to everyone. Please feel free to share your experiences with, or questions about teaching world history and using book reviews as assignments. Please feel free to offer comments, suggestions, and even criticism of my teaching HIST3029. Please help create a forum to discuss issues such as combining teaching with research, integrating undergraduate students into the academic community, and developing student skills in the context of academic writing and thinking.