

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past  
Semester I, 2015-16  
Instructor: Dr. Birgit Schneider

I now taught HIST3029, *Transnational History: A new approach to the past*, for the second time, and I want to be completely honest: this is by far my favorite course to teach; it is not only the most fun but more importantly the most intellectually stimulating, the most comprehensive, the most challenging, and the most demanding of all courses that I have taught. What sets it apart from my other courses is the scale of interaction: to have a class which consists of discussion and presentations has the potential for a much more intensive learning experience, compared to my more traditional lecture courses (despite the elements of discussion and group work in these). We also do much more academic things than we do in my other courses, yet the content is actually more relevant to them: students make the connection between our increasingly globalized world and the relevance of World History, and they appreciate thinking in abstract ways about history as an academic discipline, beyond their own university studies.

Some difficulties related to class discussion have appeared this past semester. Twelve students from very diverse backgrounds were in my class: seven HKU students and five exchange students from mainland China, Canada, the U.S., and Britain. Nine students were history majors; of the others, one majored in economics and computer science, one in political science, and one in accounting and finance. In addition to their varying levels of knowledge about history in general and the course topics in particular, I found that they were interested in discussing very different things about the assigned texts. Forcing students to stick with one topic and think it through proved rather difficult and felt quite pushy; therefore, discussions were often jumpy and overall incoherent, because most students were more interested in pursuing their own train of thought than the one that their class mate(s) had started. In addition, even though I actively worked on *not* steering the discussion too much, I was asking the initial few questions to get a discussion going, and I kept poking students' responses for clarity, for ambiguity and misconceptions, and for slippery slopes (in the teaching evaluations, I got a comment about me always "questioning students' ideas." I find this critical evaluation of one's own ideas necessary, though I may have exaggerated it). What the result of this questioning was, though, was that the students appeared to discuss *with me*, and not with the rest of the class. It happened only a few times that students actually reacted to their peers' comments, which now compels me to find ways to encourage my students to engage more with one another. Finally, a class of twelve is big enough for students to believe that

they can hide from discussion. In this particular constellation, (perceived) command of English and the lack of habit of expressing one's ideas, in general or about unfamiliar or complex topics, sufficiently explain the phenomenon, but it is nevertheless an act of cheating on the class when the major component of the class is discussion.

In their reflective essays, students spend some time thinking about what World History is, and how it is relevant. In class, we discuss texts with an eye toward how "World History" they are. When I teach this course again in the future, I want to extend this theme to the review books: there is always a great breadth of topics, geographical areas, times, and approaches among these books. It may be useful to discuss whether or not the books, taken together, constitute a slice of World History, and can be understood as a useful sample of the scholarship that World Historians create. This might help students get a better grasp of the scale and scope of the field, and of the course.

Finally, the book review will undergo some modification in the future: I want to make it a more collaborative effort by introducing peer review. Students will read perhaps two other students' reviews and offer commentary, criticism, and praise, based on a set of questions or guidelines. In addition to creating a public visibility of their work by publishing them in this journal, I strongly believe that students can benefit from seeing and assessing their peers' work, as it will enable them to evaluate their own work more critically. Practically, this means that the book review project cannot be the assignment in which everything comes together at the end of the semester, because of the timing of the peer review process. The book review will therefore have to be completed in the second half of the semester, leaving enough time for one round of feedback and for modifications of the book reviews by their authors before the end of the semester. This may also smooth the copy editing process, which right now drags into the next semester, creating at times frustration for students and teacher alike.

Let me end on an optimistic note. Most students have, at the beginning of the class, no (or a very limited) understanding of what world history is, but gain this understanding over the course of the semester. This is apparent from the reflective essays, in which I ask them to define, or at least reflect on, the concept. What is staggering in this, however, is that through reflection on history as an abstract concept and academic discipline, they become more aware that history can be carried out in very different ways (national and world history being only two of many options); that bridging eras, continents, and disciplines is possible and feasible; that the ways in which history is done reflects the concerns of present societies and politics; and that they themselves, as students ("mere students," as they sometimes say), can contribute to and shape this dis-

course. Through reading World History and through writing it, they become more aware of their active work as historians, and discover their own agency.