

## Teaching Philosophy

Teaching means to share a love of learning, to stir the imagination of the students, and to broaden their minds. It wants to explore different ways of feeling, of knowing, and of understanding. When applied to European history, this exploration becomes an exciting journey, full of surprises and of discoveries. With a gentle but steady hand, the students are guided along a winding and climbing road to absorb a variety of images and insights. They will encounter major figures from the past such as statesmen, writers, scientists, and reformers. In this way they will experience how European rulers and their ministers maintained political stability or implemented programs of social and economic reform, and how thinkers and artists have created the current modes of political and cultural discourse.

During this journey the students are invited to turn around repeatedly and to look back over the receding landscape of the human past and to grasp connections between patterns of thought and systems of values through succeeding periods in history. They will notice that the highways of the past are littered with the remnants of the rise and fall of empires and of forgotten visions and discarded ideologies. These ruins of the past are still worth exploring to understand the problems and the opportunities of the modern world and to learn from the mistakes or follies of preceding generations. Such a confrontation with the past will allow the students to see the human condition within a wider historical setting. They will be exposed to different cultures and political systems. They will recognize that societies in the past shared to a surprising extent their dreams and fears. They will understand the motives and the long-term impact of the views and actions of powerful religious and political elites.

The portrayal of history as a journey relies upon the power of imagination to chart the topography of the human past. It forms the main method to entice the students to turn away from their preoccupation with the present. History becomes a human story, a travel account of a journey through time. Through the use of biographical vignettes, the students will touch the hearts and minds of major figures in the past. Like an impressionist painting, the narrative method captures the mood and the local colors of a time frame. Major trends and formative periods are seen through the eyes of the actors on the stage of the past. To single out the actors in the lectures helps to create suspense, because the students, rarely if ever, know the results of historical events. Suspense in turn arouses the students' interest to know the outcome and makes them eager to learn more about the past.

Although a narrative account transforms history into an exciting field of study, from the teacher's point of view the story is constructed in such a way that students will be able to find the major causes and results of important topics such as the religious reform movements, the emergence of the Great Powers, and the industrial and political revolutions. The appeal of the narrative method will persuade the students to gain a full and precise command of the evidence in order to support their generalizations with clear and cogent formulations on the essay exams. Students must develop the intellectual discipline to make judgments about the past based upon an accurate command of the pertinent evidence. They will be taught how to acquire this discipline through the review questions at the start of each lecture.

While some lecture topics include explanations of different historical interpretations, the assigned readings and papers are mainly used to help students realize that each generation of historians wants to re-interpret the past and that even within the same generation they offer conflicting views about the same body of evidence. This emphasis on historiography aims at developing the students' ability to think critically and not to accept an assigned history text as the final word. Most students need help to find the major themes and theses of the required readings. Therefore, study guides are designed to prepare them for the discussion sessions. All students are asked to elaborate upon at least one significant feature of the assigned study topics. In this way, the whole class contributes to a better understanding of the main themes of the textbook and of the supplementary readings. The teacher will respond positively to all student comments and unobtrusively correct mistakes through a re-formulation of their answers. When some students refuse to participate, they are urged to express their informed opinions without making them feel embarrassed.

Although the students will be challenged to produce quality work, they will also receive guidance and support. Teaching is a form of ministry. It is a special calling to serve all students regardless of ability and background. Through a number of difficult questions on the tests and through critical comments on the papers, the brighter students are motivated to aim for excellence in their understanding of the lecture and reading material. The weaker students are taught how to improve their study habits and how to complete the course with a passing grade. Yet, students should not be allowed to take short-cuts, or even worse to resort to calculated deception, to pass the course with a minimal amount of effort. Here only firmness will compel the students to show integrity and to develop mature study habits. Aside from these corrective interventions, the students are encouraged to develop a love of learning through a caring and personal presence in the class room and through a playful and spontaneous use of wit and humor.

When the students acquire such a love of learning and start smiling at the foibles of the past, teaching becomes a joyful and a rewarding experience. Yet, to accomplish this goal remains a never ending challenge. It demands regular preparation and a continuous search for thought provoking interpretations. But the arrival of a new class of students at the start of another semester creates a powerful incentive to teach the course with contagious enthusiasm. If I would become boring or indifferent, the sad results are soon reflected in their disapproving eyes. Therefore, the students keep challenging me to strive for educational excellence. They are the main source of my inspiration as a teacher.

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