

Alan Christy
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I think my best insights and innovations in teaching have come when I've reflected on the most effective experiences I've had as a learner. The best learning experiences I've had were those in which I learned through a research project process (in which the core activities are learning to ask good questions and learning to find good sources) and those in which I worked in a team.

In the winter quarter of 2011, I embedded this approach in a course I taught on the Japanese Empire (History 150D). Rather than provide the students with a list of assigned sources that I felt gave the best possible information on the topic and rather than design a class schedule that walked students through the subject matter that I thought was most logical and effective, I framed the class as an experience in collaborative research. I told the students that I was currently working on an oral history-centered project on the life of a former Japanese soldier, then living in Watsonville. The man had been sent to Manchuria in the last stages of WWII and had subsequently been stranded there for eight years after the war ended. I showed them a two-hour video I shot of the man telling his life story and then I invited them to join my research project by collaboratively building a web page that would be a companion to a book and/or film I would make about the man. At the end of our viewing of the video, I asked the students one question to launch the class: "What do you need to know to make sense of his story?" The class, which met Monday-Wednesday-Friday, was structured as follows. On Mondays we worked on generating research questions. On Wednesdays we worked on figuring out how to find sources that could answer our questions. On Fridays, the students, who had divided themselves into thematic research groups, presented to each other the sources they had found that week and proposed one reading (per group) that everyone would read over the weekend. The following week when we returned to class, we would generate new questions, based on what we had learned individually and collectively from our research the prior week. This cycle repeated throughout the entire quarter.

The experience was amazing. I gave only one 20-minute impromptu lecture through the entire quarter. My primary responsibility in every class was to remember everyone's names and the order in which they raised their hands. The students, with a smaller than usual number of exceptions, committed themselves completely and at the end of the quarter, 30 of the 44 enrolled students asked to keep working on the project. I realized I had stumbled onto a teaching method that produced students who refused to stop learning. So I kept working with those students, off the books, for the next 15 months, doing more research, raising money for a group research trip to Japan and, at the students' initiative, carefully dissecting the way the class functioned so that we could encourage developing more classes like this in the future.

This year, I am repeating that experience in two classes. In the fall I taught a senior seminar on Okinawan history. For this class, I told the students that we have a collection of about 150 photos taken in Okinawa in 1952 by an American Army Captain named Charles Gail as our primary source. The job of the students was to use the photos to

generate research that would then become elements at an exhibition of the photos at the Sesnon Gallery and then at the Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum. In addition to the research, I asked the students to help design the exhibition, create publicity for the project and raise money. As with the first class, the students traveled with me to Japan at the end of the quarter to continue our research and now, two quarters later, they are still working with me, developing the exhibition plan, conducting research and creating media (web, video, audio) to publicize the research project and its findings.

This quarter I am teaching a freshman research seminar in the Challenge Program for Stevenson College called “The Nuclear Pacific”. In this seminar the students and I are using a collection of 60 boxes of the personal papers of Earle and Akie Reynolds, housed in Special Collections at McHenry, to serve as the central thread of a broader collaborative effort to investigate the key issues related to nuclear weapons, energy and medicine in the Pacific, from the bombing of Hiroshima to the nuclear accident at Fukushima in 2011.

In all three of these classes (which have all had a tremendous response from the students), I offer the students a chance to join me in a real research project that will be presented to a broader public. They respond powerfully to the idea that the work they will do is engaging with real, existing questions and that the audience for their work will be outside the classroom. I make clear to them that while I have experience and expertise that is relevant, in the specifics of the research project I am essentially in the same position as they are. I am learning about the subject with them, not teaching it to them. Rather than pre-determine what the questions are that will drive inquiry (as we usually do in a lecture class), I work with the students to develop questions out of encounters with intriguing and puzzling primary sources. The materials we begin with are such that there are many directions these classes could take, but by inviting the students to develop the questions that drive the inquiry (rather than receive them from me as assignments), I have found that the students claim ownership of the class and develop better research and learning skills than they do in my more standard classes. The actual direction hardly matters as students see that others exist and they learn to take responsibility for their choices. By the end, the students understand that learning about any subject is a long-term project and that it is mastery of the practice of inquiry, not mastery of the subject matter itself, that determines success.

Finally, learning to collaborate effectively is emerging as one of the most important effects of this approach. In all three classes, I’ve had the pleasure of watching the students transform from a collection of disconnected individuals to a functioning team with strong bonds of mutual reliance and trust. For many years, I have had group research project elements of a large lecture class on WWII Memories in the Pacific. Inevitably I hear groans and protest from a number of students who dread working in teams and judging by end results, their complaints are often warranted. But in the three classes I’ve described above, the collaborative approach has paid huge dividends as students support and drive each other’s work. I could point to many examples of how the students’ commitment to each other through their shared commitment to the project has immeasurably improved our learning experience.

In sum, I think my best teaching experiences—experiences that I can offer to my colleagues as examples to consider—have come when I make myself transparently take (not play, but *take*) the role of a learner in my own class. This is, after all, how I work when I do my research as a professional historian. I encounter something puzzling and enticing. I grope my way around, asking questions, finding partial answers and more questions. I build a network of people and archives that can help me ask better questions and more intriguing materials. In the end, I try to convey to a broader audience not only what I've found but how I found it and why it is significant, pointing, thereby to the possibility (even necessity) of more inquiry.