

## **Steven Lechner: *The Three Pillars of My Teaching Philosophy***

Three watchwords guide my pedagogical philosophy and approach: collaboration, inclusivity, and rigor. For me, collaboration means building and nurturing relationships of trust and support with students, other history faculty, and across perceived disciplinary boundaries. For example, I believe in empowering students to partner in their own learning, an objective I pursue through a student discussion leader model. The following passage is taken from the Syllabus I developed for NC State's History 254: *Modern American History*:

Each student will lead a class discussion once during the semester. The discussion leader must prepare a written "plan" that balances the goals of reinforcing and relating to course themes and sub-themes, covering the readings from *Give Me Liberty* and *Voices of Freedom*, and addressing the spirit of the Focus Questions (the regular homework). The discussion leader does not have to complete the FQs for that day. The discussion leader must meet with the instructor to discuss the written plan at least one (1) week before the class session for which she or he is responsible. The student bears the ultimate responsibility of finding a mutually acceptable meeting time, although the instructor will present options. The discussion leader will also complete a self-assessment due the class period immediately following the one she or he leads.

The benefits of this experience are myriad. Students have at least one class session in which they bore deeper into the material than anyone else and, consequently, feel the gravity of others relying on their "expertise." Also, they must prepare on multiple levels and for multiple audiences. First, they present their plan to me, thereby allowing us to engage in a substantive discussion about the historical content and explore possible delivery methods. Therefore, students start to think critically about how they and others learn from the past. They then execute their plan, usually learning that even the most carefully crafted strategies must be flexible enough to react to changing circumstances and unanticipated obstacles on the ground. Finally, students reflect on their experience, giving us another opportunity to communicate about this teachable moment. Throughout the discussion leader experience, I serve as the student's mentor, guide, and partner, giving them every chance to taste success. Countless students

have described this assignment as a valuable way to practice active listening while gaining self-confidence and leadership skills transferable to other academic and professional settings.

My pedagogy also reflects a commitment to inclusivity. I believe that critical thinking and a respect for others act as inclusivity's fertile soil. Engagement and practice provide the nutrients necessary for inclusivity to grow and develop, that is, for inclusive excellence to exist. Whether teaching *Modern American History* or *American Sport* at NC State or *World Civilizations* at William Peace University, the secondary and primary sources I use, the lecture topics I feature, and the tone and tenor of class discussions all serve the greater objective of considering the past through multiple lenses and perspectives. As we proceed through time in the *Modern American History* course, starting with Reconstruction, many of my students express a feeling of learning American history anew. This suggests their prior American history courses remained rooted in the standard received narratives that tend to reinforce existing asymmetries of power and erase and exclude more than they add and include. To interrupt this cycle, I frame every class I teach by emphasizing the value of critically evaluating routinized narratives of the past. I then cultivate a learning environment designed to afford students ample space and time to share their thoughts, interpretations, and questions through guided class discussions. The discussions, assignments, and assessments challenge students to consider historical questions and craft historical arguments from diverse perspectives relating to race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and generational diversity. Inclusive historical inquiry and exploration, as practiced in these ways, opens up new possibilities in the present.

Rigor constitutes the final pillar of my teaching philosophy. Rigor is not possible unless and until the teacher fosters a learning environment of trust, respect, and inclusion. Once students invest in building such a place, however, they will work hard to maintain it. Moreover, students will buy into challenging assignments and high expectations if the teacher takes the time to explain the pedagogical reasoning behind a course's architecture and assessment strategies. For instance, I stress to my students

the merits of developing sound communication skills. Thus, I set high expectations for class participation and assess such activities accordingly. To build trust and confidence, I model effective class discussions and provide students with consistent and timely feedback. Understanding that many students are uncomfortable with speaking in front of their peers, I engage students offline to explore tactics they might employ to better engage with our discussions. Relatedly, I believe in the power of positive reinforcement and use it to great effect to encourage students to take risks. My students also write a lot. I share with them the importance of sound writing and explain that my classroom is a supportive space in which to enhance these skills. I scaffold writing assignments, utilize available experts such as writing labs and librarians, provide examples of good writing, and encourage students to meet with me during the research and drafting phases of their work. As a result, upperclassmen often wish they had taken my course early in their college careers while first and second year students carry an enhanced skill set into their other courses, regardless of their major.

Teaching is hard work, but there is nothing more rewarding. I moved from practicing law to teaching believing that the latter pursuit affords me a better opportunity to serve as a positive change agent. Collaboration, Inclusivity, and rigor are the three pillars by which I pursue this goal.