

The Benefits of Nontraditional Assessment for Historical Thinking

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In both classrooms and across academia, nontraditional forms of assessment have been growing in popularity in recent years, and for good reason. There is now more of an emphasis on digital assessment tools than ever before, and the processes of historical thinking and research are not exempt from this trend. As a nontraditional student, I have experienced two distinct types of post-secondary assessment, first in my late teens and early twenties (2010s), and now again in my early thirties (2020s). Ten years ago when I was working towards my associate's degree at Ball State University in Muncie, IN, most of my professors focused on more traditional forms of assessment, such as speeches, portfolios, slideshow presentations, research papers, and written exams. Now that I am back at Ball State working towards a bachelor's degree in Social Studies Teaching and History, I see a clear embrace of nontraditional assessments, most of which have public-facing and digital components, including podcasts, blogs, websites, video documentaries, and other creative project options. This change is meaningful because it allows students to express themselves creatively while still demonstrating their mastery of course objectives. In recent years there has been a shift towards an emphasis on public history, and the university is more focused on technology and community engagement than ever before.

A prime example of this combination producing nontraditional assessments was my experience in Dr. Jennifer Mara DeSilva's World Civilizations I class in Fall 2020. As this course was taught online (due to COVID-19 restrictions) and used many digital tools and public resources, the entire experience was nontraditional compared to courses I had taken at Ball State in the past. Our midterm and final projects were the creation of two artifact-focused podcast episodes, which had been modeled for us throughout the semester with assignments related to episodes of the BBC's *History of the World in 100 Objects* podcasts with Neil MacGregor, then director of the British Museum. However, before we could prepare those major projects, we had much to learn about the processes of historical thinking and the sourcing of artifacts.

Learning how to properly source, corroborate, and contextualize artifacts was a precursor to the major podcast assignments. Dr. DeSilva provided scaffolding for these processes early in the semester. At first, I felt I was struggling, but once I realized that there were formulas for historical thinking, it all began to fall into place. Each week, we focused on artifacts from different civilizations, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India, the Mediterranean, Africa, Northern Europe, and the Americas in preparation for choosing one artifact to investigate more fully. For each artifact we studied, we answered questions using historical thinking processes articulated by the Stanford History Education Group. For sourcing questions, we determined the date the artifact was created, the place of origin, who would have created it and for what purpose, the type of evidence the artifact was, and the known context, all while using the historian's vocabulary (e.g., primary and secondary sources). For corroboration questions, we compared the creation dates, the places of origin, creators, and overlapping content for multiple artifacts to determine whether various artifacts were able to corroborate one another. Historical context was also important and we explored what was going on in the world at the time that might cause someone to create the artifact. What might their motivations be? What could we infer about the past based on the artifact in question? Was the artifact useful in answering the question we are asking about the past? This scaffolding might seem tedious, but it prepared me to be precise about what I knew based on my artifact observations. I would use this very specific evidence-based writing style in the podcast episodes that I would create for the midterm and final projects. If I'm being honest, it made me a more observant and thorough historian.

As we embarked on the podcast assignments, we had the freedom to choose an artifact (within certain parameters) from the David Owsley Museum of Art on Ball State's campus. For the midterm project, I created a podcast episode examining and contextualizing a Bodhisattva statue from sixth-century CE China, and for the final project, I chose a bust of the Mexica God of the Flayed Skin, Xipe Totec (1469-1481 CE). Being free

to choose the artifacts that I investigated allowed me to follow my passion and made me enthusiastic about sharing my research through these podcast episodes with family and friends.

Writing a podcast script required narrating historical analysis, which drew on my skill at sourcing and corroborating artifacts. I also realized how important it was to place artifacts within the correct historical context and present concrete evidence to support my argument about the artifact's use and user. In constructing my podcast scripts, I learned to find scholarly sources and how to properly incorporate them into my analysis. That was a great learning experience for future history classes and an important step towards the historian's best practice. In my own secondary education, for the most part, I was not taught the processes of historical thinking in a methodical way. We learned mostly key terms, names, dates, and some of the context that events occurred within, but not how to use specific evidence and reasoning to reach conclusions about that information, or why it was important for us to know the process. Digital products like podcasts or websites can put historical analysis on public display and make it more accessible outside the classroom. Demonstrating how you came to your conclusions about the past reinforces the idea that historical reasoning is important for everyone, not just historians.

The podcast projects from World Civilizations I encouraged me to develop a specific evidence-based style as a historian and taught me the foundations of historical research. The podcasts combined the freedom to follow my passion with a clear analytical process that we had practiced throughout the semester. The resulting podcasts were personally interesting, but also useful summative assessments of skills that I developed over the semester. I have followed these steps in subsequent historical projects, and I will carry them with me when I teach history in my own future classroom where the recordings that I created can be used to show my students how they too can follow the historian's process. The nontraditional character of the podcasts reflects the new ways that historical research can be assessed, but also publicly presented and preserved.