

An Interview with Dr. Jacqueline D. Antonovich

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For the fall 2022 special issue of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, focused on teaching history with the unessay, I'm very pleased to be able to include my recorded interview with Dr. Jacqueline D. Antonovich.

Dr. Antonovich is an Assistant Professor of History at Muhlenberg College and historian of health and medicine in the United States, with particular interests in how race, gender, and politics shape the medical field and access to health care. Her teaching interests include histories of public health, alternative medicine, disability, reproduction and childbirth, and epidemics, as well as the history of the American West, nineteenth-century America, and the Gilded and Progressive Eras.

Her current writing projects include a book manuscript on women physicians and medical imperialism in the turn-of-the-century American West, and an article on the public health politics of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Dr. Antonovich is the co-founder and executive editor of Nursing Clio, a peer-reviewed blog project that ties historical scholarship to present-day issues related to gender, health, and medicine.

On a personal note, I was on a panel about unessays with Dr. Antonovich at the Teaching History conference in 2021. Her work in this area is truly impressive and I'm delighted to be sharing her insights on this for our special issue.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Welcome Dr. Antonovich and thank you for speaking with me today. Let's jump right in! How did you become interested in using the unessay assignment in your undergraduate history classes?

Jacqueline Antonovich: I'll start off by saying that as a teacher and an educator in general I've always been really interested in active learning. And you know in my courses, you know we do a lot of you know, traditional you know historical textual analysis and things like that. But, for me, I really like to mix up low stakes and sort of higher stakes assignments, so in my classes we're always doing you know things like you know writing poetry or doing graphic comics or playing games, or doing things like that, so I feel like I was naturally drawn to a project like an unessay.

I had never heard of it until I came across it on Twitter, which is surprisingly a very great space for finding new pedagogy. I think Cate Denial, Christopher Jones, and Aparna Nair, those are three people who I saw on Twitter showing examples of student on essays and for me this seemed like a really intriguing way to create a capstone project for my history students and in a way that different from the traditional essay.

So, for me, unessays just seemed like a natural fit for the classroom for me already, and I will say also that I'm at a small liberal arts college in which most of our students are double majors majoring in minor ring and a lot of different things, and they're very active in the arts and in sports and so to me, this was also a great fit for my college, because our students sort of very naturally or interdisciplinary. And it feel it felt like this was a great way to get them to think about history, through an interdisciplinary lens.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: So in my experience many historians in particular seem to be receptive to using the unessay in their classrooms. Why do you think so many educators in our discipline are interested in the unessay assignment?

Jacqueline Antonovich: I think the unessay assignment has become more popular in the last few years, precisely because of the moment that we're in, what I would maybe classify as sort of a public history turn and I think that historians are becoming more aware of the ways in which they can't simply replicate this sort of ivory tower mentality, with their students and we're in a moment, where we're trying to think about how do we get students to think about history, and everything around them right now and that history can be translatable

and to all sorts of audiences and into all different formats and to me that's one of the most exciting things about unessays is teaching our students that writing rigorous research papers is important but that also history shows up in almost everything that you do. Whether that's a board game, or you know, a knitting project or anything else. The unessay powerfully demonstrates to students that history is a translatable field into all sorts of different things, does that make sense?

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Absolutely, yes, and that actually it's a perfect segue to our next question, we can dig in a little more here. How does the unessay benefit student learning and engagement and history specifically, and learning generally? You've already touched on some ways, can you expand on those for student learning?

Jacqueline Antonovich: I think it does a couple of different things that sound contradictory, but actually are not. On one hand for students who are very tied to learning to writing a research paper they know how to do it they're good at it right they're used to it because, maybe their history majors and they've taken a few courses and they feel like they're on familiar ground. Giving them an unessay assignment is a challenge. I always give students, the option of writing the traditional research paper if they don't want to do the unessay but I do like to have conversations with those students when they decide that; just kind of dig in a little bit deeper and find out what what's the fear here? And for the most part, once we have that conversation, for the most part they do decide to do the unessay. And I think what that ends up doing is, really, allowing them to think about their major in a totally new way and for some students that scares them, and then it's a conversation. I think my job is to sort of guide them through that so that it's not some scary and for students who maybe are either new to history or maybe are not new to history but are scared of the research paper and were

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Interested.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Or disinterested or were ambivalent or whatever they are, the unessay provides more of freedom to explore it sort of untethered them from the structure of an essay. I feel like they can you know learn more about history, without having to worry about, you know. whether they have great transition sentences and their footnotes are correct, and you know all of these things, and I think that's really beneficial for students.

And in terms of just learning in general, this sort of ties back to the first thing I said, and when we first started talking, and that is at my college, we really do emphasize the sort of learning across the curriculum and again for me that enables students who maybe are really good at painting, for example, or something else. I feel that that gives them a base, then, to know that they're good at something and also tie that into doing historical research.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: It sounds like you're talking about how it can enable students to build new historical knowledge on previous knowledge and that previous knowledge is expanded when you offer the unessay.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yes, that too. You can see students building this historical knowledge through doing the unessay. But then in some really special cases, you can also sort of see them building their skill set and another they're more confident about; that duality of learning coming together that you don't see in other on it and in other sort of traditional history.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And there's a good fit for your student population and your college's mission.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yes, yeah.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: That actually is the perfect segue to my next question! Are there ways that the unessay supports inclusive and equitable teaching practices.

Jacqueline Antonovich: I mean, absolutely. At mt college, we have a pretty high percentage of students who identify as disabled and I also teach a history of disability course and one thing that I found about the unessay is in terms of the way that it's structured and the way that I structure it and is that it really does allow students more agency in crafting and executing their final project, so you know students who have various sort of different learning, I don't wat to say "learning styles," don't say that! [laughter]

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Learner variability.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yes, learner variability and learning variability.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Accommodations?

Jacqueline Antonovich: One of the things students do when they submit their [unessay] proposals is they include a plan of action, where they are allowed to sort of say “Okay, well, I’m going to do this, and this is how I’m going to do it, and this is the way that I want to do it.” What I find is that allows students more agency than if I’m planning out their essays. So how I look at it is I’m not “accommodating” them, right, because accommodating to me sort of you know feels very top down.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Right.

Jacqueline Antonovich: I’m not “accommodating” but rather students are the ones telling me how they’re going to do a project, and I find that from the feedback that I’ve received from my students, they find that very empowering.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And that’s really speaking to the importance of structure that Vijy Sathy and Kelly Hogan often emphasize about inclusive teaching practices requires. Providing structure so that there’s lots of ways that student fields students can see how they can succeed and you’re taking that even a step further by providing a lot of structure *co-created* with students, so that the students when they undertake the unessay project, they have a lot of structure in place at least some of which they’ve helped build before they start in on the project.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yes, absolutely and I think once they are, just to back up for a second and say that I absolutely 100% agree with the structure part and I think that’s what one of those fears that pops up with students, you know is that the idea of the unessay feels very unstructured and untethered and that really freaks out some students, right?

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Absolutely.

Jacqueline Antonovich: But you know again, it’s part of having those conversations about unessays up to the point where they start the proposal and then actually build the project and where they have their plan of action that’s their sort of self-structuring. But leading up to the unessay there, it is very scaffolded. I do feel like that scaffolding, that structure, does create the foundation for them to feel confident, to be a little bit more imaginative. And I always emphasize with them that the grading has nothing to do with the final product. Like I’m not grading you on [your] artistry or any of that. So I use very low stakes scaffolding, that we do along the way.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Right. And the transparency that you’re offering early on. Well, thank you that’s very that’s inspiring! But what kinds of challenges and obstacles have you encountered using the unessay? Let’s not put on rose-colored glasses here.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yeah. Well, using the unessay is a long term [pedagogical] project, in which you are constantly figuring out what works best, and I will say I have sort of two challenges that I want to highlight. One has to do with exactly the structure thing that we were talking, about the very first time that I did a non-essays as a brand new professor inspired by the Twitterverse.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And all of them look like wonderful unessays [on Twitter] and I was like, “I want to do that!” [laughter]

Jacqueline Antonovich: The very first time I was so bare bones, I did like, okay, “I want you to submit a proposal I want you to do a bibliography and it wasn’t even an annotated bibliography and the unessay, and then a two page reflection.” And they were fine. Those student rose to the occasion. There were some great unessays but I left the semester feeling like it just wasn’t rigorous enough and I didn’t really get a good sense of assessment. I didn’t get a good sense of what did [students] learn other than having conversations with them and I felt a little bit unsatisfied.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: With measuring students’ increased historical skills?

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yes, yeah. And I mean, again yeah, this is great, but as an educator I was just uncomfortable with the assessments. Rather than give up on the whole thing, because I did find it quite inspiring, I just decided that there needed to be more scaffolding. There needed to be more conversations, there needed to be things like an annotated bibliography. Our unessay projects now have about ten steps! I’ve created

these very low stakes assignments rate and all along the way, that allowed for me to assess more accurately [how and what] they're learning over the course of the whole project. So I've become a lot more confident with that, but it was a little bit of a disappointment, the first time.

And the other challenge that I face which I'm sure a lot of folks who do unessays faced in the last few years was teaching unessays online. I was teaching and we had an unessay assignment when we pivoted online and I thought about not doing it.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Spring 2020.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yeah I was really worried about how it would come together. One of the most amazing things to do when you do an essays is to have your presentation day or a couple of days, when it's almost like a gathering and students are really excited to see what other students have done. I've had students in the past do cooking where we get to sort of taste their Civil War cooking or whatever and it's just really so rewarding and I thought, "Well, how are we going to do that online?" It isn't going to be as rewarding and meaningful. So that was a challenge and just even figuring out how that works, like how you how do you upload this? Like, say, a knitting project? But you know, we did find ways around it and, and it did work out, I will say it wasn't as amazing as it is in person, but I do think it's actually worth thinking through how to do a project like this and translate it online for a lot of folks who teach online courses. With just a little bit more planning and creativity and creating a space for students to share their work with other students. It can be done and it's a little harder.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: That might be the best use of zoom yet.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Exactly, exactly.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: I was just wondering if we might go back to the scaffolding? And if you would have an answer if somebody asks: "So it sounds like you're saying the unessay is a lot more work for me, as the instructor." Have you found that to be true?

Jacqueline Antonovich: No, Absolutely not. The scaffolding actually isn't anything else that I wouldn't do teaching in the class otherwise. I just sort of fold it into the final project. So if I could give you an example. You know my students and when I teach history of medicine courses or history of public health courses, most of my students have never taken a history course college level history course in their life, most of them are science majors public health major, pre-med. That's a very different population than history majors and minors or liberal arts, you know their liberal arts things. So, for me, part of the challenge, then, is in my hesitation in doing unessays with them was I only have one semester to teach them how to how to do history. [If] I do the unessay, it will that somehow take away from their experience of taking that one college level course that usually ends with like a 10 page [paper].

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Right.

Jacqueline Antonovich: And so to me this is where the scaffolding, and my need to teach them history, sort of collide, and where I don't actually see it as is much more work for these courses. The way I scaffold work before we ever even get to their proposals is that we do these very low stakes, one-page papers. That's their first [assignment] and it's intended to teach them how to do historical research and how to think about historical research and all of that folds into their unessays because to do their unessay they need to do that research. They'll do many papers, and [I'll tell students] go explore an old newspaper database on a topic that interests you, then our second one will be let's go explore what scientific journals are saying about that topic.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Okay.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Then let's do another mini paper on what historians are saying about that topic, and I've just added a new one where can you find your topic in digitize letters and diaries. So how are regular people talking about these in their everyday life? And then I have them do a short reflection, take a step back, and think about all of these sources that you found in these different databases, how do they talk to one another, do they contradict each other, do they reinforce one another? And again, these are one-page papers, very low stakes, it's not a lot of grading.

And I also ask them to reflect on the search process itself. So that they kind of get an idea of the challenges

[of doing historical research] when, after they have all of that. Then [when] it's time to make their unessay proposals, they have this archive that they've created of sources to think about creating their unessay project.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Right.

Jacqueline Antonovich: And the feedback that I've received from students is twofold. One, it was amazing that by the time they got to the unessay they already had all of this research, and they have the skills to do more research for their projects. They really actually appreciated the part where we have them I have them reflect on doing the searching and the research.

So that's a long way around of saying that I think it only feels like a lot more work but it's really not.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Well, and I guess, I would also add that it sounds like, based on my approach to teaching, is that it allows you to nerd out about the things you love doing as a historian, meaning we got into this job because we wanted to bury ourselves in archives and look at all these interesting sources. This approach allows us to share a little bit of that archival love with students and build their skills and it sounds like that's exactly what the scaffolding process allows you to do work.

Jacqueline Antonovich: It also creates these very interesting sort of reflection. It creates the basis for great conversations. Students will be like, "Dr A, I have found all of these things in the scientific journals about my topic, but I can't find any newspapers that are talking about this, nothing!" And I love to tell them finding nothing is a finding. Why is that? And let's talk about that. Especially in history of medicine courses, maybe it's a topic that's too taboo for presses to talk about. But maybe you're using the wrong terms, maybe they were using a different term during that time, so it creates these moments of conversation and to nerd out with students. [laughter]

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And research historical research.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Exactly and I will also add that by the time they get to the end of this process, they could write a research paper.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: With the sources they have.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Or they could do an unessay!

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And incidentally, they may have just increased their skills, with how to sort out fact from fiction online, for example.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Yes, yes, absolutely yeah.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Okay, so my final question you've already touched on a lot. You've [shared] a lot of great suggestions and ideas, but is there any additional specific and practical advice that you would give other history instructors who would like to try designing and implementing an unessay assignment? Maybe the big do's and don'ts in addition to the ones you've already touched on? Or you want to reiterate?

Jacqueline Antonovich: The scaffolding to me is the big one and the other one, I would also say, one of the big things that you really need to do with your students is [help them view] it as a long term project. [Emphasize to students that they will have the chance to] figure out what works for them specifically and what doesn't work. Because one of the first things that you're going to which the pushback that you're going to get a lot from students is a fear of being graded on something that they've never done before. So building that into the process in your assignment sheets, in your syllabus, in your conversations, about not grading for artistry. Giving them that comfort zone is really important. If you don't have a lot of students, I would also recommend having individual conferences with students and early on, maybe even before they do the proposal so that you can help them troubleshoot things that they're thinking about. Another big "Do" is what the unessay sort of does naturally—creates community in your classroom. So don't wait until presentation day to have students share their ideas or share their presentations with the class! Give five minutes or ten minutes every once in a while throughout your class to have students group up and talk about what they're doing and how to troubleshoot with each other. Discuss the process and resources on campus where they can take advantage of like the digital learning assistance on my on my campus. That can help them with a podcast.

Help them create a website. We have all sorts of things like that and campus recording space. Share with

them early and often that those resources that are available to them and so they don't necessarily have to do it alone. There's help on campus to figure out. "I really want to do a podcast but I've never done a podcast before, what do I do?" Well, we have resources on campus that will help you.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And in a large class you could even create a low stakes kind of group not, not a graded project but like a work group. So there's fifteen people who are interested doing podcast so you meet a couple times go to the support services and if there's questions, run into problems, as a group, you can pass it on to me so that might make it more manageable bigger class.

Jacqueline Antonovich: Exactly. And in one last thing that I will say the scaffolding does help students stay on task, but I believe also having those moments where they check in with each other sort of forces them to stay on task, and that was one of the challenges that I also ran into early on, is that, how do I make it so that or how do I facilitate student learning so that they don't save it to the weekend before?

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Thank you so much!

Jacqueline Antonovich: Thank you.