

An Interview with Dr. Catherine Denial

Catherine Denial

Knox College

Jessamyn Neuhaus

SUNY Plattsburgh

Teaching History 47(1)

DOI: 10.33043/TH.47.1.61-66

© 2022 Denial & Neuhaus.

Distributed with [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

For the fall 2022 special issue of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, focused on teaching history with the un-essay, I'm delighted to include my recorded interview with Dr. Catherine Denial.

Cate Denial is the Bright Distinguished Professor of American History, Chair of the History department, and Director of the Bright Institute at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. A Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians, Cate is the winner of the American Historical Association's 2018 Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching award, and a former member of the Digital Public Library of America's Educational Advisory Board. Cate currently sits on the boards of the *Western Historical Quarterly* and *Commonplace: A Journal of Early American Life*. Cate is at work on a new book, *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, under contract with West Virginia University Press. Her historical research has examined the early nineteenth-century experience of pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing in Upper Midwestern Ojibwe and missionary cultures, research that grew from Cate's previous book, *Making Marriage: Husbands, Wives, and the American State in Dakota and Ojibwe Country* (2013). In summer 2018, Cate was an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, PA.

On a personal note, I was on a panel about un-essays with Dr. Denial at the Teaching History conference in 2021. Her work on un-essays, generously shared via open-access platforms and social media, is groundbreaking.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Thank you for joining me, Dr Denial. How did you become interested in using the unessay assignment in your undergraduate history classes?

Cate Denial: I first became aware of unessays because of Christopher Jones. I saw on Twitter that he had shared a number of his students' projects from their un-essay assignment. And they were spectacular! I remember someone had made an incredibly detailed map and I kept zooming in on it and pulling out and trying to see all the things that they had put into this map. It just seemed so fun, and so I asked some questions and then I started googling and I realized this was something I really, really wanted to do in my classes.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: There's definitely a Twitter connection there, isn't there?

Cate Denial: Yeah, yeah.

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

Cate Denial: I think there's a couple of things. One of the things is that unessays allow us to practice some of the principles of universal design for learning, and to give students multiple entry points into showing us what they have learned. So, for students who really struggle with a lot of reading or a lot of writing, or who don't do well under timed conditions—all kinds of ways of assessing learning that can really be an obstacle to students with disabilities are removed in the unessay practice. Because the students really get to design something that is authentically theirs, and that plays to their strengths.

Also, I think the unessay is a wonderful way of having students get personally connected to the business of doing research and assessing argument and comparing sources in a way that is much more lively and hands on than many of the more traditional ways we might approach that. So, especially as opposed to writing a paper, for example. I do still have my students write papers in my class, but the unessay becomes something in which they're very personally invested, because they have the freedom of choice about what it is that they do, And so suddenly concepts that have maybe seemed a little dry or a little removed from their world suddenly come

alive, and there is nothing quite like that, I think, for getting people excited about the purpose of *doing* history instead of just thinking about history.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Okay, I think you actually addresses both of my next two questions in that incredibly good answer [laughter]! But I'll just give you the opportunity to if you want to add anything: How does the unessay benefit student learning and engagement in history, specifically, and learning generally? And then the next question attached to that was how it supports inclusive and equitable teaching practices.

Cate Denial: The thing that has struck me the most in several years of doing unessays now is that it gives me the opportunity to assess what my students know instead of what they can write, which are two very different things. If I want them to write like a historian, I need to spend a lot of time on the conventions of how to write like a historian. If I want to know if my students are understanding the big picture of my course, if they are understanding how to assess evidence, compare and contrast arguments, think critically about how knowledge is constructed, I don't need them to write to do that. Or they might choose a different modality of writing. I've had people write screenplays and poetry and make crafts and all kinds of stuff, but they get to choose how they demonstrate that they have been paying attention. There were times in the pre unessay days, where I might have thought, "someone is not paying attention right now," or "someone is checked out." I have never thought that since I started doing un-essays! [Because] it turns out the modality was absolutely everything.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: That's what's so interesting! The way that student choice, and also it sounds like your enthusiasm, really combined to increase their opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and engagement in the class. As an introvert by myself, I know that I'm always telling people don't just look to how much students talk in class to assess how engaged, they are that's not the only way.

Cate Denial: Right.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And the unessay definitely gets to that.

Cate Denial: Yeah definitely.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: But it's not all rainbows and unicorns! [laughter] So what kinds of challenges and obstacles have you encountered using the un-essay?

Cate Denial: The biggest challenge was that when I started using the unessay I still gave them a paper option and they could choose between the two. That undermined the purpose of the unessay because people who are very good at writing chose to write a paper because it was not . . . well who could blame them? They wanted a great [grade]; they knew they were good at history writing [and] this was the swiftest and safest way to get that great grade, right? So, I took away the paper option eventually to make sure that everyone was on a level playing field; that this was equitable; so that no one had an advantage over anybody else because everybody got to make the same kind of choices about their strengths their weaknesses and their interest in a certain subject.

Another challenge was taking it online once the pandemic started. How do you have unessays—creative things—when you can't actually go *get* the thing, [when] they can't bring in the diorama or the embroidery or the whatever they're doing. But I found that if I asked them to make a video or take photographs of what it was, it worked great. They still put just as much effort into what they were doing, they still asked for just as much help, they were still as engaged. I wish I could have had the tactile experience of some of those projects, but I still got an appreciation for the work that they had put in in the things that we're trying to communicate to me.

Some students need more direction than others, for sure. But that's why there is a proposal component to the unessay in my class, so that I can read that proposal and immediately say "this is a life's work you can't do this in three weeks," or "I think this needs to be expanded," or "here are some books, you should look at this is a great article," you know, really give them individually-tailored feedback. Which is very quick and easy to do! I think some people think the unessay is going to be just a tremendous amount of work for themselves, but I have not found that to be the case. Because it's not about assigning a grade to all these component parts, it's about just giving honest feedback in a timely manner so that students can be on track. So, I think that the proposal stage really sort of identifies for me where people are struggling, very, very quickly, and I can give them the advice and the feedback that they need immediately and that seems to work.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Thank you. Following up [on] that, what is your student population like and why do you think they have been particularly responsive to the un-essay assignment?

Cate Denial: I teach at a small liberal arts college, we are about 40% students of color, about 14% international students, about one third first generation students, about one third Pell [grant] eligible. My classes top out, when they're at their largest, at about thirty, I'm more often teaching twenty-five students. If it's an upper-level seminar it's only fifteen, so I have the opportunity to be able to really dive into these projects with the students. If you have a class of 80, this is a much harder project to do. That said, I think we put a lot of work into structuring writing assignments and it's just the same kind of thing; you've got to structure it so that everybody's on the same page, and they are so much more fun to grade than papers! Okay, remind me the question because I think I drifted.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Let's go back to the inclusive part of using un-essays.

Cate Denial: I do think [un-essays can increase inclusivity] because I'm asking people to make connections to things that really interest them; to things they're really good at; to things that they're pursuing other places on campus, for example. People are given the freedom to really draw on their cultural background, their cultural interests; they are able to draw on things that are important to them For example, they were able to sort of connect [the study of] biology to history. All of these different ways of drawing in connections from across the student's life are implicit in an unessay, so I've had people write rap, really good songs, where I'm just like I could never figure that kind of rhythm and everything myself, but I can absolutely appreciate it once I'm hearing it and seeing it. People have written classical music; people have cooked things; people have tried out entirely new skills! I had a student who made a star quilt which was something that was taught to many Native girls in boarding schools, so he was sort of exploring the history of boarding schools by making a quilt for the first time. He had never made anything on a sewing machine. People are drawn to the things that matter to them, and this gives my students the opportunity to say what it is that matters to them, rather than me saying this is what's important and you must comply. And what matters to them varies wildly and that's one of the real thrills of doing this project.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And also, it seems like key to why it's effective for learning, because our brains are smart and they conserve their energy for what matters to us. And if it's not important to us, it's almost literally impossible for our brain to take in that new information and adapt and build new skills, if it just doesn't seem very important. Especially when we're teaching and learning in a pandemic crisis world, with intersecting multiple crises.

Cate Denial: Yeah, and I think that, especially in history where our inclination is to teach a lot of content and we want to cover everything, the unessay gives us the opportunity to step back and say, well it's impossible anyway, right? The unessay gives us the opportunity to step back and say to our students, "Look, I might not be able to cover everything that is really meaningful to you. But you can go out and do the research about the thing that is super meaningful to you." And so they get that autonomy to pursue their interest in the historical subject I'm teaching, as well as just in terms of you know, the modality in which they're going to show me what they've learned.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Okay, so let's finish with some advice: What specific and practical advice would you give other history instructors who would like to try designing and implementing an unnecessary assignment, the big do's and don'ts?

Cate Denial: I will say the short answer is that I have written a lot of this stuff on my blog (<https://catherinedenial.org/blog/>). And I will say the longer answer is, have your students make a proposal to you. It only needs to be a paragraph, they don't need to have done research yet. But they must have a sense of the subject they want to investigate, and some sense of what the modality will be for them in demonstrating their learning. Having that come in and turning it around really fast is key to making this successful. You don't have to write on all of those [proposals], by the way, you can record the little voice memos, which are very personable and very quick. So going through those and making that a priority is important. So, when you are scheduling an unessay in

your course design make sure that you scheduled time in your week when those are coming in, so that you can immediately turn them around again, rather than trying to, sort of, fit them in around all the other things that you have to do in a given week.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: I just have to say those could be required and assessed but not graded [which] makes the turnaround time a little bit easier as well.

Cate Denial: Absolutely, I do not grade any of those proposals, not only because I am committed to ungrading, but because it takes away the pressure on the students to think about proposals as something that have a certain appearance, a certain set of rules to them. I just want to see what their ideas are, right? And taking away the grade means that they're going to be much more honest with me about what those things are.

I would say another "do" is do give your students, wherever possible, the opportunity to interact with each other's projects. I used to make the unessay the very last assignment of the of the term. And so, then they would turn them into me, and I would get to enjoy them, but they didn't get to see each other's work. So now it's the second assignment in a term, and the day that it's due everybody just brings everything to class and we do a gallery walk. And they do it in like two rounds, so that everybody gets a chance to tell people about their [project], but then they get to go around and ask questions of other people. That, I think, is so, so important, and I know in my student evaluations, they have talked about how meaningful, it is for them to see what other people have done, for them to be affirmed in the choices that they made by their peers as well. That's really important.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And increasingly important, since all the research is showing students are having more and more trouble connecting with their peers, feeling isolated all exacerbated by the pandemic. So, a community-building activity like that this can really make or break a class.

Cate Denial: Do factor in a couple of days of preparation, of group workshopping. I take my students to the library very early in the term and say: "What do you want to know if you were given the opportunity to learn anything about whatever the subject of the class? What would you choose?" And then they end up, by the end of that class—they have to have gone to the bookshelf and pulled a book and showed me that they have the book. So that's one [workshop], and then I have at least one workshop where the class period is literally come and work on your own. So, whether that is doing research, writing something up, whether it's creative and you bring some things with you, whatever it is—just be present and do some work on it and then I'm there to answer questions to go around to sort of see where people are in the process, you know? That also was [also] community-building, because they would form a little group, and they would talk to each other about their work and [pose] questions.

Don't grade things unless you until you really have to, you know. Be supportive, give feedback, but don't grade the component parts that lead up to that final project, give them the freedom to get some things wrong without there being any real consequence other than [generating] a great conversation with them.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Well, thank you so much, Dr Denial. Your work is cited in several of the other articles in this special edition of the journal, so I really appreciate your time today.

Cate Denial: Thank you.