

Introduction To The Fall 2022 Special Issue: Using The Unessay To Teach History

I love words and I love writing words. For me, joining the scholarly conversation about a topic via written analysis has been one of the most rewarding parts of being a professional historian and academic. Similarly, teaching students to clearly convey their ideas in writing and, specifically, how to make a convincing historical argument and support it in the form of a written essay drawing on primary and secondary source research, has always been one of my favorite parts of working in higher education. So it's somewhat ironic that the first issue of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* under my editorship is devoted to teaching history with the unessay—a pedagogical strategy which offers a myriad of ways that educators can help students build historical thinking skills in almost any format that is *not* the standard written essay.

But it's also entirely appropriate for me to be organizing this special issue because I fervently believe that learning new teaching practices and being pushed outside my pedagogical comfort zone as a college history professor is an essential part of effective teaching. One of the fundamental, foundational realities of being an effective teacher is that we are all, from our first class to our last, always learning how to help our students learn. We try new things, we observe and measure student learning, reflect on what worked well, what's not working well, revise, and then try again. That entirely normal pedagogical learning curve has skyrocketed exponentially during the covid-19 pandemic era, and today teachers and college instructors everywhere grapple with unprecedented challenges and upheavals. Moreover, racialized, gendered, and other biases about academic expertise create major teaching labor inequities for educators from historically marginalized groups, such as faculty with disabilities and women faculty of color. Other aspects of embodied identity, along with employment status and differing student populations, contribute to widely disparate teaching conditions. However, there is one universal among all people who care deeply about teaching: the need to engage in ongoing pedagogical reflection, learning, and discussion, even in the midst of multiple intersecting global and national health, economic, political, and social crises.

This is what convinced me to assume the editorship of *Teaching History*: an opportunity to help facilitate ongoing dialogue, reflection, and scholarship about teaching and learning in social studies and history classrooms at every level, from kindergarten through graduate school. I'm honored to be taking on this role and I'm absolutely delighted to introduce the special Fall 2022 issue on teaching history with the unessay. The articles and interviews collected in this issue offer social studies and history educators insights into designing, implementing, and assessing student learning with the unessay assignment—a teaching strategy that is garnering attention in our field for the ways it challenges standard practices and suggests fascinating new possibilities for inclusive, effective student learning. Furthermore, as shown throughout this issue, teaching history with the unessay can also energize and inspire us as educators, possibly even helping to mitigate some of the burnout that looms large for many of us after years of living and working during a pandemic.

The articles in this special issue demonstrate that the unessay can support student learning in multiple ways, in both its content and form. As Jennifer Guiliano explains in her article “The Unessay as Native-Centered History and Pedagogy,” one of the most compelling reasons for using the unessay is how it can reinforce student understanding of the true complexity of knowledge production about the past, decentering normative discourse about what “counts” for history. Guiliano writes that “the unessay serves as a form of disruption in the history classroom by asking students to consider alternative forms and formats of knowledge as equally valid as the five-paragraph essay that dominates academic history” (8). This is a particularly vital point for students studying Native American history, as Guiliano explains: “[Students] struggle in the first few weeks of our course as we discuss non-written forms of evidence and how oral histories, arts, and ritual are themselves important forms of historical evidence.... In my classroom, the unessay offers the opportunity for them to demonstrate that they have understood the importance of non-written and non-white sources” (7). The inherent diversity of the unessay creates an additional layer of learning for students, as Guiliano concludes: “It encourages them to be agents of their own learning by centering student choice; but it also allows me to highlight for them

how complicated Indigenous history can be when it meaningfully engages with non-colonial methods and sources” (12).

Guiliano, and indeed all the authors in this issue, do not ignore the potential pitfalls and limitations of the unessay assignment, even as they explore its positive impact on student learning. Our own specific historical moment shapes both of these aspects of using the unessay in history classes, as Ryan Irwin argues in “The Unessay, and Teaching in the Time of the Monsters.” He writes that his article “frames the unessay as an instrument that constructively engages student cynicism about what we do, and it explores how we might enhance the relationship between effort, understanding, and success in the classroom” (14). But Irwin also suggests we need to bring more rigor and careful nuance to how we implement and assess the unessay, even during this enervating time (a “time of monsters”) to be a history educator. Asserting that we need more “satisfying explanations about how these projects [achieve] learning objectives that [align] with my understanding of the historian’s craft” (17), Irwin unpacks several specific unessay assignments that he has successfully used in his classes to improve students’ historical analytical and writing skills.

Doing history in our own unique moment in time, with the current technological advancements in mapping, is an integral part of Jacqueline Reynoso’s unessay assignment requiring students to analyze and remap John F. Smith’s 1888 map of the United States, as described in her article “Remapping a Historical Geography: An Unessay to Unsettle Perceptions of the Antebellum North.” Reynoso points out that “increasing appreciation for the inclusion of geospatial tools in history courses has benefitted from the not-unrelated explosion of new digital mapping software,” arguing that “these developments have not only paved the way for more spatially-conscious instruction, but ... they also provide an opportunity to design interactive student research assignments outside the mold of more conventional essay formats” (26). Utilizing these new online tools as part of an unessay assignment creates new learning opportunities for students in the field of historical geography, and Reynoso concludes that the success of the assignment demonstrates how “one of the most visually impactful ways to undermine the influence of an engrained geography is to create alternative maps of the same place” (31).

The historical moment we live in—the covid-19 pandemic—had a significant impact on the evolution of unessay assignments in Nora Slonimsky’s teaching practices, as she details in “Mediums and Messages: Citations, Sources, and Memory in Revolutionary Unessays.” Slonimsky writes that she began using an unessay assignment out of “interest in the relationship between forms and content of expression alongside the complex circumstances of trying to be an effective and supportive educator in a virtual format” (37). However, the unessay appealed to Slonimsky not solely as an innovative adaption to pandemic era teaching and learning but also because it reinforced some of the most important learning outcomes in her classes: “Given the incorporation of public history elements, including discussions of commemoration, museum studies, and history media and communication, an unessay where students could consider so many mediums, from curating an exhibit to gaming, seemed an intuitive option” (38). As the assignment evolved, Slonimsky found that “teaching with unessays to be as much about the wide-ranging, innovative, and creative forms that students crafted as the learning process in which they were made, a process deeply embedded in the work of history and of forming clear understanding the past” (37).

Like Slonimsky, Reba Wissner’s adoption of the unessay assignment was a response to both personal and pedagogical circumstances. At the start of her article “The Unessay in the Music History Classroom,” Wissner reveals that “I began to think about what [the unessay] would mean for music history classes and how having the choice of topic and medium would not only benefit students, but also benefit my sanity in a semester where I had around 250 final projects to grade” (45). Emphasizing both transparency and universal design for learning, Wissner’s approach to the unessay “provides benefits for assessing in a discipline that is both writing and performance based” (45). Wissner includes several important cautions for educators interested in using the unessay, pointing out that “nontraditional structures can reinforce inequity and exclusion without sufficient structure and support [and] ... employing this kind of assignment can also be

challenging for those who do not fulfill the stereotype of what a professor looks like, namely women, persons of color, those who look young, and disabled professors, to name a few” (49). With these caveats, Wissner enthusiastically endorses the unessay assignment, concluding: “Creativity can be a catalyst for critical and analytical thinking and skills, especially within historical context. The results of the creative endeavors of the unessay facilitate those skills and engagement with history in a way that most essays cannot” (50).

In the spirit of what Wissner identifies as the unessay’s ability to foster creative critical thinking by decentering traditional modes of historical writing, this special issue of *Teaching History* includes two special sections for types of articles that do not often appear in our journal but most definitely add important insights to our scholarly discussion: reflections about learning history with the unessay written from the student perspective and interviews with two leading unessay teaching practitioners.

I believe that student voices should be more concertedly included in all scholarship of teaching and learning and are particularly relevant in conversations about nontraditional assessment mechanisms aimed at increasing inclusive course design and empowering students’ academic and intellectual agency. In “The Benefits of Nontraditional Assessment for Historical Thinking,” Haley Armogida, a nontraditional student in her thirties returning to college for a BA in Social Studies Teaching and history at Ball State University, details how creating artifact-focused podcasts for a world civilizations course helped her build and improve her historical thinking processes. She concludes: “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” (54).

Similarly, in “Mapping out the Historical Process in Novel Ways,” history BA student Samantha Kidder explains how creating a historical site marker using the online ArcGIS StoryMaps tool in her Ball State University U.S. history survey course significantly increased her own understanding of public history. Kidder writes: “Using local historical sites as a way to think about national movements and events made them seem more compelling and led to using a greater variety of evidence (e.g., visual, video, and textual). These new options opened a door in my early experience as a historian and allowed my work to become more creative and inclusive. Choosing the nontraditional option resulted in stronger research that could be shared with a wider audience” (55).

This special issue concludes with two recorded interviews I conducted with Cate Denial and Jacqueline Antonovich, professors of history recognized by numerous other scholars in and outside our discipline as influential thought leaders on using the unessay for college teaching and learning. A highlight of my interview with Antonovich is her detailed discussion of the need for carefully scaffolding the unessay assignment in order to ensure students are in fact correctly locating, accessing, and effectively applying their knowledge of primary and secondary sources to the project. In this way, argues Antonovich, all the crucial researching skills that historians prize and hope to instill in their students can be meaningfully learned as part of a well-designed unessay assignment. In her interview, Denial too emphasizes the role of quality research in effective unessay assignments. She also discusses how activating a student’s individual and unique interests, giving them options for identifying and exploring at length a specific topic via the modality of their choice, not only increases inclusivity in design and assessment but also boosts each student’s ability to learn historical thinking skills because those intellectual moves become linked to something that truly matters to that individual student.

While having special import for an issue about unessays, I hope to include student writing and all types of interviews in future issues of *Teaching History*. Student perspectives are an invaluable part of pedagogical learning for all educators. The online open-access journal publication platform for *Teaching History* is maintained by the Ball State University Libraries and as such I would like to be able to include work from their student body in particular. And while interviews cannot replace peer-reviewed research, I believe they can be one way for more people to contribute to and participate in the scholarship of teaching and

learning (SoTL) in meaningful ways. Interviews could increase SoTL access and inclusivity for a wider range of teacher-scholars, keeping in mind all the systemic inequities in higher education that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

In full disclosure, I was on a panel about unessays with Jacqueline Antonovich and Cate Denial at the Teaching History conference in 2021 and they are both important members of my personal pedagogical learning network on Twitter. It is in fact on Twitter where many educators at all levels and in all disciplines are frequently discussing unessay assignments, as mentioned in a number of the articles in this special issue. Of course, a Tweet or Twitter thread cannot reproduce the work and insights of a scholarly journal article. But I do regularly see productive, positive conversations about teaching and learning history on Twitter. With that in mind, part of my assuming editorship of *Teaching History* is our new Twitter account. Follow us @TeachHistAJM, not as a replacement for the peer-reviewed scholarship on teaching and learning here in the pages of our journal but as an addition to the venues and platforms where we find ideas, insights, and new tools for teaching. I am truly grateful to everyone on Twitter who helped shape my understanding of the unessay.

Thank you as well to all the authors in this issue and to everyone who worked to get this issue out into the world, especially Micah Gjeltema, Open Content and Digital Publishing Librarian and Katie Bohnert, Library Scholarly Publishing and User Interface Analyst at Ball State University. Their expert assistance and infinite patience have been invaluable as I learn how to utilize the open-access publication platform for *Teaching History*. I also want to thank Jennifer DeSilva, Professor of History at Ball State University, for soliciting the student perspective essays for this issue. I'm extremely grateful for the outstanding work and support of our outgoing Book Review Editor, Richard Hughes, who will be stepping down after this issue. I'm very pleased to be welcoming Natalie Mendoza as the incoming Book Review Editor. Dr. Mendoza is an Assistant Professor of Mexican-American and Modern U.S. History at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and co-founder of the Teaching History conference. Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to outgoing *THAJM* editor, Sarah Drake Brown, who has been so encouraging, gracious, and incredibly supportive every step of the way. It's a cliché but she truly leaves some very big shoes to fill!

I hope you find this special issue of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* on teaching history with the unessay thought-provoking and inspiring. I look forward to continuing to learn with you here at *THAJM*.

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