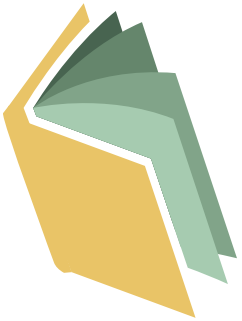

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Rusks and Mastic: How to Incorporate Cuisine into a Byzantine Empire Course

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Introduction

Teaching Byzantine history offers educators a fascinating opportunity to explore how the Roman Empire continued from antiquity into the late Middle Ages.[1] As with any history course, standard lectures and discussion of primary sources are essential to teaching effectively about Byzantium. Via lectures, instructors can explain complicated subjects such as Chalcedonian Christology and the Byzantines' relationship with the Kyivan Rus'. Through primary source discussion, instructors can guide students into analyzing historical evidence in texts like *The Secret History* by Procopius and *The Alexiad* by Anna Komnene. In addition to these traditional teaching methods, I have adopted another strategy for my university-level Byzantine Empire course: incorporating food and food history into the curriculum. During a class meeting dedicated to "Byzantine Cuisine," I bring in six Byzantine foods for my students to sample: barley rusks, olives, feta cheese, pork sausages (*loukaniko*), *bougatsa* (a pastry), and the sweet Easter bread called *tsoureki*. I also pass around five of the Byzantines' favorite spices – rosemary, cinnamon, anise, mastic, and mahlep – so that students can inhale their aromas. A significant learning outcome of this lesson is that students will be able to explain a fundamental aspect of daily life in Byzantium: what and how people ate and drank. More specifically, as students sample these foods and smell these spices, they are adding gustatory and olfactory experiences to the historical facts they have learned.

This culinary activity is part of The Byzantine Empire course I teach at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. UMass Lowell is a public research institution that offers a variety of academic programs, including majors in business, engineering, the humanities, sciences, and health sciences. The Byzantine Empire is an upper-level undergraduate history course that emphasizes reading and discussing primary source documents as well as the completion of written research projects. Most of the students who take The Byzantine Empire are history majors, though students from other disciplines also enroll to satisfy arts and humanities general education requirements.

My "Byzantine Cuisine" lesson is an example of object-based learning. With this method of education, teachers integrate objects, including artifacts, artwork, specimens, manuscripts, and rare books, into the learning environment. A key aspect of object-based learning is that it is multisensory. This means, as Helen Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson explain, that it "invokes a variety of senses and encourages a form of interactive or experiential learning."[2] How does this prove useful? Judy Willcocks reports that the multisensory

1 As I explain to my Byzantine Empire students during our first class, the "Byzantines" actually called themselves "Romans" and understood themselves to be subjects of the "Roman Empire." In the modern world, we refer to this civilization as the "Byzantine Empire" to distinguish between the medieval, Greek-speaking remains of the Roman Empire and the universal empire of antiquity. "Byzantine" derives from "Byzantium," the name of the ancient city on the Bosphorus where Constantinople was founded in the early fourth century. For more details, see Timothy Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1, 60-63. Gregory's survey of Byzantine history is the textbook I ask students to read. Besides satisfactorily narrating the events of Byzantine history, another strength of this book is that, at the end of each chapter, it lists relevant primary sources available in English translation and secondary studies recommended for further reading. The latter is especially useful for my students as they select a monograph to read for their book review, an assignment intended to augment their knowledge of Byzantine historiography.

2 Helen Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson, "An Introduction to Object-Based Learning and Multisensory Engagement," in *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education*, ed. Helen Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 1.

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and interactive elements of object-based learning can lead to students having deeper and more memorable learning experiences.[3]

Educators in various academic contexts attest to the pedagogical value of object-based learning for the study of history. For example, Georgina Brewis and Charlotte Clements write about the "curated teaching collection" that Brewis uses at University College London in her course on the twentieth-century history of British voluntary and nongovernmental organizations. The collection includes objects such as a wooden tray made by servicemen blinded during World War I, a BBC "Radio Circle" badge from the 1920s, and a 1970s Woodcraft Folk shirt. Brewis and Clements state:

> Each object is linked to themes and topics we cover on the course – allowing us to have an "object of the week" to discuss as an ice breaker. In week one, students are encouraged to examine several objects in detail to come up with their own ideas about what the object is and what cause or organisation it might be linked to…Handling physical objects can provide a tangible link to the past, allowing students to think about the experiences of those who might have used or worn the objects, but whose stories might not have survived in written form.[4]

And Jeanne Brasile, the former director of Seton Hall University's Walsh Gallery, reflects on how students benefited from object-based learning at Walsh Gallery. In November 2022, students in a Viking history course visited to see replicas of the Gundestrup Cauldron and the Book of Kells. As the students examined these objects, they could relate the imagery back to prior reading and coursework. Brasile observes:

> Students were taken by the scale of the work, the construction of the cauldron, and the high relief imagery, which is visible 360 degrees around. Objects are powerful tools for learning, especially when students realize they are standing in the presence of an object made by people or cultures from long ago. In this sense, objects can become almost like time machines, bringing us back to pivotal moments in human or natural history.[5]

In the case of my "Byzantine Cuisine" lesson, this activity centered on food and spices offers students a significant window into daily life for people in Byzantium. Food can be a decisive marker of one's occupation, social class, economic status, religious beliefs, and geographic location – all of which could influence Byzantine daily life. Moreover, after the students have been learning visually and auditorily all semester long, it also allows me to engage their senses of taste and smell. Consequently, many of my students will remember this culinary lesson far more clearly than my best lectures or our most spirited discussions of primary source documents. Ian Mosby made similar observations while teaching modern history at the University of Guelph. As he lectured on the Canadian home front during World War II, he shared Canada War Cake and Depression-era Poverty Cake with his students. These cakes, which were both made without butter, eggs, and milk, and tasted like spiced raisin bread, helped Mosby to communicate how social class influenced Canadians' individual experiences of wartime shortages and rationing. He noted that these cakes also revealed something about the "taste of war" on the Canadian home front. Mosby asserted: "Food is not simply a great way to get students interested in history. As museum curators and public historians have long known, the sensory experience of history can sometimes be far more powerful and illuminating than the text-centric narrative structure that historians tend to rely upon."[6]

In this article, I explain how I organize this Byzantine cuisine activity and how it enriches students' knowledge of the social, military, and religious history of the Byzantine Empire. I begin with the structure and organization

3 Judy Willcocks, "The Power of Concrete Experience: Museum Collections, Touch and Meaning Making in Art and Design Pedagogy," in *Engaging the Senses*, 48.

4 Georgina Brewis and Charlotte Clements, "Teaching History with Objects," The Social History Society, December 19, 2018, https://socialhistory.org.uk/shs_exchange/teaching-history-with-objects/.

5 Jeanne Brasile, "Bringing History to Life!," Seton Hall University Archives & Special Collections Center and the Walsh Gallery Blog, November 30, 2022, https://blogs.shu.edu/archives/2022/11/bringing-history-to-life/.

6 Ian Mosby, "Eat Your Primary Sources! Or, Teaching the Taste of History," Active History, May 9, 2013, https://activehistory.ca/blog/2013/05/09/eat-your-primary-sources-or-teaching-the-taste-of-history/.

of the food-oriented lesson. Next, I describe the six foods and five spices that are the core of my presentation. I discuss their respective histories and quote germane primary sources that my students and I read out loud during class. Among these texts are excerpts from the ancient Roman recipe collection called *Apicius* and Procopius's *History of the Wars*. I then offer suggestions for other ways teachers can incorporate these foods and spices into their Byzantine history curriculum. Lastly, I review the evidence that students had a positive response to this experiential learning activity.

An Overview of the Structure of My "Byzantine Cuisine" Lesson

After my students and I complete our chronological survey of Byzantine history from the reign of Emperor Constantine I (r. 306-37) through the aftermath of the tumultuous Fourth Crusade (1202-04), we spend a few class periods considering topical subjects. Besides Byzantine cuisine, we also study cities and villages in Byzantium as well as Byzantine art and architecture. Pausing our chronology with the thirteenth century allows us to examine these themes that run throughout Byzantium's long history before we ultimately conclude the course with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

To begin the unit on "Byzantine Cuisine," I arrange the food on a table in the classroom. Some of the foods are easy enough for me to prepare at home; others I buy already prepared at the supermarket and a local Greek market (more on this below). I place notes next to the foods on the table to indicate what they are and to make recommendations for condiments. The students then load up their plates with the sweet and savory delicacies they would like to sample, as I commence my illustrated PowerPoint presentation.

As the "Byzantine Cuisine" lesson begins, first I introduce my students to the book I relied heavily on to prepare my lecture: Andrew Dalby's *Tastes of Byzantium: The Cuisine of a Legendary Empire*.[7] Its inclusion in the lesson serves two purposes: first, to remind students about the course's emphasis on Byzantine historiography, and second, so that students will know what to read if they want to learn more about this subject. Not only does *The Tastes of Byzantium* describe captivatingly what Byzantine people ate and drank, but it also contains excerpts from relevant primary sources as well as some recipes.

Next, I describe the overarching traits of Byzantine cuisine. It was largely a synthesis of ancient Greek and Roman culinary traditions. The former emphasized seafood; the latter, exotic flavors and spices. Through trade, the Byzantines also adopted foods from neighboring civilizations. For example, the waters of the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and the rivers in Rus' lands became sources of caviar and smoked sturgeon. And it was through trade at places like Alexandria, Edessa, Trebizond, and Mosul that the Byzantines acquired rare Eastern aromatics and spices such as musk, nutmeg, and sandalwood.[8]

We then proceed to consider a full menu: what did the Byzantines eat for bread, fruits and vegetables, cheese, seafood, meat, and pastry? It is in this segment of the lesson that I discuss rusks, olives, feta, *loukaniko*, *bougatsa*, and *tsoureki.* So, students are eating, tasting, and smelling these six foods as I explain their respective histories. Next, I talk about the importance of water and wine as beverages. Since this is an undergraduate course, I cannot serve alcohol in the classroom, but I briefly elucidate the history of wine in the Mediterranean, and particularly the sweet wines, resinated wine (flavored with pine resin), and spiced wines that were so important to the Byzantines.[9] As for the five spices, I weave discussion of them into relevant points in the lecture. I pass the spices around in small plastic jars so that students can appreciate their aromas.

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7 Andrew Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium: The Cuisine of a Legendary Empire* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010). For a brief discussion of Byzantine cuisine within a larger global context, see Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 170-73.

8 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 59-60, 122. For a more detailed introduction to the cuisines of the ancient Greeks and Romans, see Joan Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 150-72.

9 For more on water and wine in Byzantium, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 85-93, 180-82. For information on retsina, the traditional white wine of Greece flavored with pine resin, see Diane Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 51.

Lastly, we conclude with an introduction to Emperor Constantine VIII (r. 1025-28), the hedonistic brother of the austere warrior emperor Basil II (r. 976-1025), whose conquest of Bulgaria we study earlier in the course. I inform the students that of all of Byzantium's rulers, Constantine VIII was the only one we are aware of who took interest in gastronomy. We then read out loud part of Michael Psellos's *Chronographia* 2.7, where he described Constantine's talent for preparing sauces and colorful, fragrant dishes. Psellos wrote:

> [Constantine] was a man of enormous size…His constitution, moreover, was more than usually robust, and his digestive powers were extraordinary, with a stomach naturally adapted to assimilate all kinds of food with ease. He was especially expert in the art of preparing rich savory sauces, giving the dishes character by combinations of color and perfume, and summoning all Nature to his aid – anything to excite the palate.

Byzantine Foods and Spices

The first of the six foods that I share with my students is one of the daily breads that Byzantine people ate: barley rusks (Figure 1), called *paximadia* in Greek. As students take their rusk, they notice immediately that it is not like the soft, moist bread they are used to as they eat sandwiches and dinner rolls. Rather, it is hard, dried bread that was described as "dipyros" in ancient Greek, which means "twice-baked."[10] But why would anyone want to eat bread like that? To answer this question, we read the following quotation from Procopius, where he explained why it was so important for Byzantine soldiers: "The bread which soldiers are destined to eat in camp must of necessity be put twice into the oven, and be cooked so carefully as to last for a very long period and not spoil in a short time, and loaves cooked in this way necessarily weigh less."[11] Its value, then, lay in the fact that it lasted a long time and was light to carry. These advantages are surely why, I remind the students from *The Secret History*, the once indigent Emperor Justin I (r. 518-27) brought rusks with him in his cloak as he journeyed from his native Illyria to Constantinople to join the Byzantine army.[12] So, as students sample rusks, they are eating and tasting the same bread that was familiar to common people and soldiers in Byzantium. For those who might want to try baking rusks, they require only a few simple ingredients. However, it may be difficult to find barley flour in a regular grocery store. Also, the baking process alone takes at least three hours.[13] An easier option may be to buy rusks at a local Greek market or online. Because of how hard rusks can be, I bring olive oil and diced tomatoes to moisten and soften the bread.

Figure 1. Barley Rusks *(Paximadia)*

Second, I offer my students table olives (Figure 2). In antiquity, olives were a key source of food and oil both for the Greeks and the Romans. They became one of the main foods that Greek and Roman peasants ate, and were an essential part of the Byzantines' diet, too. People in Byzantium consumed olives preserved in brine, vinegar,

10 For rusks and their long history, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 17, 22, 27, 79, 99-100; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 38-39. For more on the history of barley specifically, see Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 33.

11 Procopius, *History of the Wars* 3.13.15

12 Cf. Procopius, *The Secret History* 6.2-3

13 For a *paximadia* recipe, see Elene Paravantes, "Authentic Greek Barley Rusks - Paximadi Kritiko," Olive Tomato, April 4, 2018, https://www.olivetomato.com/greek-barley-rusks.

or honey vinegar.[14] I prefer to bring in a medley that includes purplish-brown Kalamata olives and large green Halkidiki olives seasoned in extra virgin olive oil and salt.[15] I opt for the medley so that students can see some of the different colors, and taste some of the different flavors, of olives. Table olives can be easily purchased at supermarkets and at local Greek markets.

Third, students sample feta cheese (Figure 3), which the Byzantines called *prosphatos*. It is white, soft, and tangy. It can be made wholly with sheep's milk, or primarily with sheep's milk, with a small amount of goat's milk being added. Using sheep and goat's milk to produce cheese became a common practice in ancient Greece. Because feta is preserved in brine, it is quite salty.[16] To gain insight into a western European's opinion of the taste of feta and how it was marketed in Crete during the late fifteenth century, we read the following passage from the travelogue of the Italian pilgrim Pietro Casola: "They make a great many cheeses; it is a pity they are so salty. I saw great warehouses full of them, some in which the brine, or *salmoria* as we would say, was two feet deep, and the large cheeses were floating in it. Those in charge told me that the cheeses could not be preserved in any other way, being so rich."[17] Like olives, one can conveniently buy feta cheese at the grocery store or at a Greek market.

Figure 2. Table Olives

Figure 3. Feta Cheese

The fourth food that my students try is the smoked pork sausages called *loukaniko* (Figure 4). I talk about it as we consider the kinds of meat that were popular in Byzantium. (Since some students may not eat pork, it is advisable to remind them at the beginning of class that they are not required to eat the sausages for this activity.) Reportedly, it was soldiers of the late Roman Republic who brought knowledge of *loukaniko* to Rome, after serving in Lucania in southern Italy; hence its name.[18] To get a better sense of how *loukaniko* was made, we read this excerpt from *Apicius*: "Pound pepper, cumin, savory,

14 For typical Byzantine vegetables and fruits, including olives, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium,* 74-77, 80-81. For the importance of olives in ancient Greece and Rome, see Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 87.

15 For more on popular Greek olives, and particularly Kalamata and Halkidiki olives, see Jim Botsacos with Judith Choate, *The New Greek Cuisine* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 20-21; Diane Kochilas, *The Glorious Foods of Greece: Traditional Recipes from the Islands, Cities, and Villages* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 208; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 26.

16 Andrew Dalby, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 190; Botsacos, *The New Greek Cuisine*, 22; Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 154. For the importance of cheese, broadly speaking, in antiquity, see Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 83-84.

17 Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, 190. I am quoting Dalby's slightly modified and more easily comprehensible version of the early twentieth-century English translation of Casola's account: Pietro Casola, *Canon Pietro Casola's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*, trans. M. Margaret Newett (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 1907), 203.

18 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 27-28; Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, 181; Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 65-66. For typical Byzantine meats, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 27-28, 69-71.

rue, parsley, bay berry spice and *liquamen*. Add meat which has been thoroughly pounded so that it can then be blended well with the spice-mix. Stir in *liquamen*, whole peppercorns, plenty of fat and pine nuts. Put the meat in the skins, draw them quite thinly and hang them in the smoke."[19] As we can glean from this evidence, these sausages were intended to be zesty – and they continue to be today. I offer students both orange-peel-flavored and leek-flavored *loukaniko* so that they can taste these different exotic flavors. Like the olives and feta, one can buy *loukaniko* at a regular grocery store or Greek market. When sliced, they take approximately thirty minutes to bake.

Figure 4: *Loukaniko* (Purchased at Sophia's Greek Pantry in Lowell, Massachusetts)

Fifth, I introduce students to *bougatsa* (Figure 5), which is made of thin, flaky phyllo dough that is filled with custard. Its origins can be traced to Cappadocia in Anatolia, while that region was still part of the Byzantine Empire. In the beginning, *bougatsa* was just sheets of phyllo, sometimes sprinkled with crystalline sugar, that men ate while working long hours in the fields. It was not until the eighteenth century that one of the Greek women in Izmir (formerly called Smyrna) had the idea to add semolina flour and cream to the phyllo, thereby creating the traditional *bougatsa* known to the modern world. One can sprinkle powdered sugar and cinnamon to further sweeten it. I inform students that this pastry is considered the culinary symbol of Thessaloniki,[20] once the second city of Byzantium, whose long history we study in the course. So, as students sample *bougatsa*, they can experience one of the main tastes associated with this city so famous for its Byzantine churches, late Roman ruins, and impressive Museum of Byzantine Culture. Making *bougatsa* is not difficult and requires only about an hour.[21] *Bougatsa* can also be purchased frozen at the supermarket or Greek markets; at Greek markets, one may even be able to buy it freshly prepared and warm.

Figure 5: *Bougatsa*

Sixth, I offer my students *tsoureki*, or sweet Easter bread (Figure 6). It is similar to the special breads called *kollyrides* that the Byzantines used to make at Easter time. They baked them into different shapes, and each loaf had a red egg in the middle. Still today, Eastern Orthodox Christians customarily bake *tsoureki* on Holy Thursday and eat it on Easter Sunday. It is made with

19 *Apicius* 2.4. *Liquamen* (Latin), or *garos* (Greek), was the salty fermented fish sauce known to people throughout the universal Roman Empire of antiquity. It continued to be popular in Byzantium during the Middle Ages. For more on *garos* and how to make it, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 27, 68, 177.

20 Philip Chrysopoulos, "Bougatsa: The Fascinating Greek Delicacy that Comes from Byzantium," Greek Reporter, January 9, 2025, https://greekreporter.com/2025/01/09/greek-delicacy-bougatsa; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 365.

21 For a *bougatsa* recipe, see Maria Koutsogiannis, "Bougatsa (Greek Custard Pie)," Food by Maria, last modified July 10, 2024, https://www.foodbymaria.com/bougatsa.

sweet spices and is usually braided, a practice that dates to antiquity, when pagans believed that braiding bread might ward off evil spirits. The bread itself, as it rises and takes its final shape, is supposed to symbolize Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. One can decorate the bread with either sesame seeds or sliced almonds (though it may be advisable to skip adding nuts in case any students are allergic). At least one red-dyed egg is placed on top of each loaf and symbolizes Christ's blood.[22] Regarding the red egg, I tell students about an Orthodox tradition that connects it to Mary Magdalene, the first person to see Christ after his resurrection. According to this story, after Pentecost Mary traveled to Rome, where she proclaimed the gospel. While at a banquet where Emperor Tiberius was present, she preached to him about Christ and insisted that he had risen from the dead. She signified this by holding up an egg as a symbol of new life. Tiberius responded by saying he would not believe in the resurrection unless that egg turned red. It then became red in Mary's hand, and she showed it to the emperor, announcing "Christ is risen!"[23] *Tsoureki*, therefore, is a great and useful food to share with students, not solely because of its sweet taste and smell, and its unique appearance, but also because it offers us insight into Byzantine religious beliefs and customs. Like *bougatsa*, one can bake *tsoureki* at home, though it can be a complicated process requiring well over three hours.[24] Some may find it easier to buy *tsoureki* already prepared at a Greek market or bakery. It is available throughout the year, but comes with the traditional red egg only during the Easter season. Greek markets often carry the red dye used to color the eggs, and it can also be purchased online.

Figure 6: *Tsoureki* (Sweet Easter Bread)

Figure 7: (left to right) Rosemary Leaves, Ground Cinnamon, and Anise Seed

Regarding spices, since they were a valuable commodity for the Byzantines, I have customarily passed around rosemary leaves, ground cinnamon, and anise seed (Figure 7). We think about rosemary as I discuss meat. Although recommended as seasoning for roast lamb, overall rosemary's presence in Byzantine cookery was actually quite minimal. However, because of its strong scent, it proved useful for improving the odor of Constantinople's streets in anticipation of imperial progresses.[25] So, the people of the City would have associated

22 Philip Chrysopoulos, "Tsoureki: A Beloved Greek Easter Bread and Its Timeless Traditional Recipe," Greek Reporter, April 17, 2025, https://greekreporter.com/2025/04/17/tsoureki-greek-easter-recipe.

23 Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Mary Magdalene: A Visual History* (New York: T&T Clark, 2023), 25-27.

24 For instructions on dying Easter eggs red and a recipe for *tsoureki*, see Marilyn Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs in America*, 2nd ed. (Bethesda, MD: Nea Attiki Press, 2002), 290-92.

25 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 39; Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, 190.

rosemary with public appearances of the emperor; and we today have a scent we can identify with Constantinople. I pass around cinnamon as we study *bougatsa*. Students will, of course, be very familiar with its taste and smell, since it is so common in the modern world. However, I explain that during the Middle Ages, cinnamon was a rare and precious exotic spice that came to Byzantium from as far away as Sri Lanka and southern China. The Byzantines used it to season various kinds of meats, gravies, and soups.[26] We consider anise as we explore the different sorts of wine Byzantine people were accustomed to drinking. Anise wine was among the spiced wines they drank.[27] Since it is not advisable to offer students wine in the classroom, passing around aromatic anise seed still allows them to get a sense of what this beverage smelled like. Rosemary, cinnamon, and anise can be easily and inexpensively acquired at supermarkets and online.

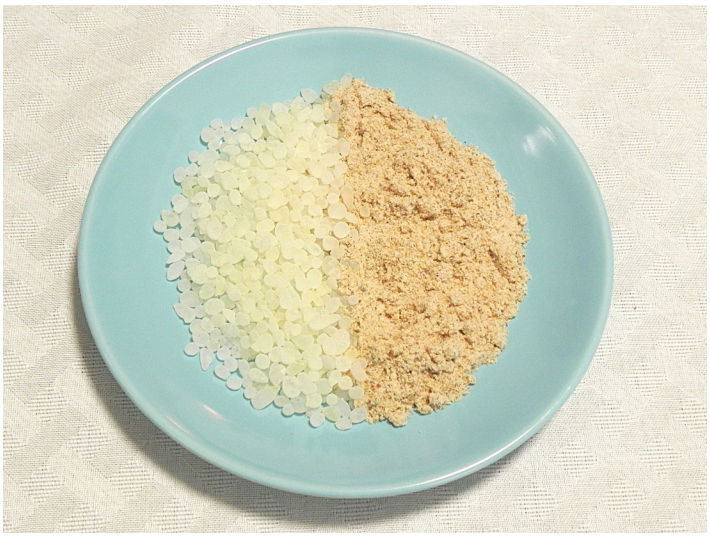

Figure 8: (left to right) Mastic Crystals and Ground Mahlep

More recently, I have started to introduce students to mastic and mahlep (Figure 8). Together, these spices give *tsoureki* its particular and unforgettable sweet flavor and fragrance. Mastic was produced in only one location in the Byzantine Empire: the southern part of the Aegean island of Chios. It is the crystallized resin of a shrub called the *mastichodendro*. Mastic crystals, or "tears," are translucent and pale-yellow in color. One must crush them into powder to use mastic for baking. Like anise, mastic was also added to wine to flavor it.[28] Mahlep comes from the kernels of the dried, cracked pits of St. Lucie cherries. Like the mastic crystals, these kernels must be ground into a powder,[29] which is beige in color. Discussing mastic and mahlep presents instructors a great opportunity to teach students about two exotic spices they will have probably never heard of before. However, unlike rosemary, cinnamon, and anise, mastic and mahlep cannot be bought at regular grocery stores and must be purchased online or at Greek markets. They may also be more expensive than the other three spices, but are worth the investment for what they add to this lesson.

These six foods and five spices are the heart of my "Byzantine Cuisine" lesson. In my experience, it has worked well pedagogically to introduce them all during a single class period dedicated to this subject. However, that is not the only way to incorporate Byzantine food and spices into a history course. Some instructors may find it useful, for example, to share rusks and *loukaniko* during a class period focusing on Byzantium's military history. Or perhaps one could bring in *bougatsa* for a lesson that concentrates on Thessaloniki and its Byzantine art and architecture. *Tsoureki* could prove strategic for a class meeting dedicated to the study of Byzantine Christianity. Passing around some, or all, of the spices I discuss might be useful for a lesson considering trade in Constantinople, and what it would have smelled like seeking to acquire exotic spices in the City's markets.[30] Or, for a final class meeting, feta,

26 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 46-47, 52, 161-62.

27 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 182; Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire*, 171. Two anise-flavored spirits that are popular in Greece are ouzo and *tsipouro*. For more details, see Marianthi Milona, ed., *Culinaria Greece: Greek Specialties*, special edition, trans. Susan Ghanouni, Harriet Horsfield, Pat Pailing, and Rae Walter (Ullmann and Könemann, 2007), 62-63, 328-31; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 58.

28 Milona, *Culinaria Greece*, 332-33; Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 44, 51; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 360-61; Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs*, 291-92.

29 Robyn Eckhardt, "Turkey's Most Elusive Spice," Taste Cooking, August 14, 2018, https://tastecooking.com/turkeys-elusive-spice; Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs*, 291.

30 For more on the importance of spices in Constantinople's economy, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 38-43.

olives, and *loukaniko* might serve as tasty historical snacks as students offer final reflections on what they learned during the semester. Instructors might even make cooking foods like *loukaniko* and *bougatsa*, which do not take long to prepare, a classroom activity. There are plenty of options. Teachers can tailor what elements of Byzantine cuisine they use based on their curriculum and various pedagogical goals.

Student Response to "Byzantine Cuisine"

How have students responded to the "Byzantine Cuisine" lesson? Do they perceive it to be a beneficial experiential learning activity? Their feedback in spring 2025 course evaluations demonstrates that it was indeed effective. First, the subject matter clearly piqued their interest. One student described the lesson as "very interesting and engaging," and noted that this was "probably the most focused I have been in a college class." But more specifically, students emphasized that they appreciated the activity's multisensory approach that enabled them to taste the history we were considering. A student wrote: "The class on cuisine, where we got to actually taste what we were learning about, was one of the best in-class experiences I've ever had at [UMass Lowell]." Another student commented: "The class on Byzantine cuisine was extremely interesting and reminded me of one of my favorite YouTubers, 'Tasting History,' and this can be a fun way to learn history."[31] And another student stated: "I thoroughly enjoyed the Byzantine cuisine lecture. It is one thing to just hear about the food that these people ate, but to be able to taste it in person enhanced the lecture to another level. The food itself was also very good and made for a very memorable lecture that I will remember for a long time."

Besides student comments in course evaluations, faculty observation of my "Byzantine Cuisine" lesson likewise confirms its pedagogical effectiveness. When I gave this lecture most recently, on April 9, 2025, the chair of UMass Lowell's History Department, Christoph Strobel, attended. He shared his feedback with me in a report he wrote after class. He described that he "walked into a class filled with delicious food smells." Regarding the lesson's content, he stated:

> The class moved away from the usual lecture and primary source discussion format that dominates the history classroom. The lesson on Byzantine cuisine engaged not only the students' senses of sight and hearing, but also their senses of taste (sampling Byzantine foods) and smell (smelling the spices familiar to the Byzantines). It was adamantly clear that the students had fun with this lesson and that they had a memorable experience.

Conclusion

To conclude, incorporating Byzantine cuisine into a course on the Byzantine Empire is an effective teaching strategy that deepens students' knowledge of history and promotes experiential learning. Students will come away from this object-centered activity able to explain what and how Byzantine people ate and drank. They will be able to do so based on their own experience eating Byzantine food and smelling some of the Byzantines' favorite spices in class. Regarding food, as students eat barley rusks, they are consuming the same hard, dry bread so familiar to Byzantine soldiers and common people – people like Emperor Justin I. While trying olives, they are enjoying the same savory staple found on tables throughout the Byzantine world. With feta, they can taste this popular salty cheese whose marketing was described by Pietro Casola in the fifteenth century. While sampling *loukaniko*, they are eating the same flavorful pork sausages that Roman soldiers first encountered in southern Italy, and which eventually became one of the Byzantines' favorite meats. With *bougatsa*, students get to try the delicious phyllo and custard pastry now synonymous with Thessaloniki, Byzantium's second city. As they eat *tsoureki* and observe the symbolism of this braided sweet bread and its red egg, they are reminded of the Byzantines' belief in Christ's resurrection and how these medieval people adapted non-monotheistic culinary traditions for their own purposes. Concerning spices, as students sniff rosemary, they are experiencing a scent associated with the streets of Constantinople before imperial processions took place. With cinnamon, they are inhaling what was once a rare and costly spice from Asia that the Byzantines used to season food. While smelling anise, they are experiencing

31 A reference to "Tasting History with Max Miller," https://www.youtube.com/@TastingHistory.

an aroma people in Byzantium were accustomed to as they drank spiced wine. And as students sniff mastic and mahlep, they are smelling the very spices that give *tsoureki* its sweet fragrance and flavor. Indeed, making an examination of Byzantine cuisine part of a Byzantine history course is an enriching cross-cultural experience that students will very likely not forget.

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Author Note

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Experiencing the Past: Teaching Public History with Impactful Collaborations

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Experiencing the Past: Teaching Public History with Impactful Collaborations

It's a Friday morning during finals week of the fall semester, and one of my students exclaims "this is turning out so much better than I expected!" She is working with a team of classmates on installing an exhibition about women's history. This is the first time she has created an exhibition; it's the first time for most of my students. Hearing her delight and surprise is a fulfilling teaching moment and comes after extensive work and preparation. Researching, developing, creating, and installing exhibitions using archival materials is the final project for the public history courses I teach at my university. After spending the semester learning public history concepts through readings, lectures, guest speakers, class discussions, and hands-on activities, students begin the multi-week process of producing their own exhibitions.

Applying Experiential Learning to the Public History Class

Effective public history teaching requires a combination of theory and practice, and hands-on activities are vital for preparing emerging public historians for the profession. Collaborating with stakeholders both on and off campus offers valuable opportunities for students to learn about the field of public history and grow their skillsets. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is a powerful teaching model that provides a series of stages for students to be immersed in activities and reflect on their own learning. The cycle begins with concrete experience, where students are exposed to a hands-on activity early in their learning process. This is followed by reflective observation, where students are guided through writing and/or discussing their experience and what they learned, with an eye toward building on this initial experience. Abstract conceptualization follows reflective observation, where students build on what they've learned and their reflections by taking on a larger project or task. The Experiential Learning Cycle's fourth and final stage is active experimentation, where students are engaged in real-world applications of what they've learned through the cycle.[1]

Literature Review

This approach to teaching public history using an experiential learning framework builds on the process written about by Jason Lustig, who argues for active learning and public engagement in the history classroom instead of the traditional lecture and research paper format to engage students in critical thinking and a deeper understanding of historical ideas.[2] Relatedly, Leeson et. al discusses incorporating experiential learning in the classroom in their article that grew out of a panel discussion sponsored by the *Sixteenth Century Journal*. The article talks about a variety of hands-on learning strategies. They also acknowledge the challenges instructors face when creating classes with experiential learning and note that these approaches often require trust from students and support from one's institution in the form of funding and flexibility. Instructors aiming to implement hands-on activities need to balance traditional, structured techniques and assignments with opportunities for creativity

1 David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. (Prentice Hall, 1984).

2 Jason Lustig, "Active Learning and Public Engagement in the History Survey," *The History Teacher* 54, no. 4 (2021): 637-669. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27181294

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and experimentation.[3] Edward J. Balleisen and Rita Chin also acknowledge the institutional barriers to experiential learning in their discussion about rigid approaches to pedagogy and curriculum structures. Nonetheless, they emphasize the importance of bringing experiential learning into the humanities classrooms because it helps students develop valuable career skills. Hands-on projects emphasize the relevance of what students are learning in the history classroom and provide a more engaging learning experience.[4] Christopher B. Livingston discusses the public history collaboration between Walter Stiern Library at California State University, Bakersfield, and the History Department. While the student activities, which included research projects, exhibition installations, and archival processing, required extensive effort on the part of faculty, he argues it was worth it because it effectively engaged students and fostered connections between the campus and community.[5]

Like these educators, the Experiential Learning Cycle guides the structure of my public history courses and provides a framework for the collaborations I incorporate into the course to ensure student success and learning. I have developed a variety of partnerships for public history teaching including a campus museum, the university archives and special collections, a community art center, the local historical society, and an eighth-grade social studies class. Through these collaborations, students engage in meaningful experiential learning activities and develop relationships that will prepare them to work in the public history field. This article discusses these partnerships to illustrate how collaborations and experiential learning have been effective in teaching public history. My work builds on the argument made by David Coles and Deborah Welch, who emphasize the importance of projects that provide opportunities for students to gain experience while benefiting the community.[6] This approach is supported by Rebecca Conard's argument that public history education has grown out of a pragmatic approach where public history projects serve both academic and community needs.[7]

Establishing Partnerships

Soon after beginning my position as assistant professor and coordinator of our public history program, I organized a public history advisory committee that included the director of our university's archives and special collections, the director of the local historical society, the director of the on-campus African American museum, faculty members from the university's MLIS program, two graduate student representatives, and history department faculty. I consulted with this group for ideas about how public history students could gain hands-on experience. I wanted to cultivate ideas for public history projects where students could serve the community and support public history initiatives that already exist on campus and in the community. This advisory committee shared exciting ideas about projects that had been done in the past that could be revisited such as living history tours on campus, as well as new needs in their organizations, like creating labels for exhibitions at the on-campus museum. We also formed an agreement with the MLIS faculty to allow their graduate students to take public

3 Whitney A.M. Leeson, James M. Ogier, Kathryn Brammall, Greta Grace Kroeker, Jennifer D. Selwyn, Myrna Ivonne Wallace Fuentes, Janis M. Gibbs, and Michael F. Graham, "Experiential Learning in and Out of the Classroom," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 46 no. 4 (2015): 1009-1032. https://doi.org/10.1086/SCJ4604006

4 Edward J. Balleisen and Rita Chin, "The Case for Bringing Experiential Learning into the Humanities," *Daedalus* 151, no. 3 (2022): 138-152. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01934

5 Christopher B. Livingston, "Imagined Spaces, Preserved Places: A Case Study of Historic Preservation through Applied Learning Environments and Service-Learning," *The American Archivist* 81. No. 1 (2018): 216-230. https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.1.216

6 David Coles and Deborah Welch, "Bringing Campus and Community Together: Doing Public History and Longwood College," *The History Teacher* 35 no. 2 (2002): 229-235. https://doi.org/10.2307/3054180

7 Rebecca Conard, "The Pragmatic Roots of Public History Education in the United States," *The Public Historian* 37 no. 1 (2015): 105-120. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2015.37.1.105. The argument that public history education can benefit students and communities with service-learning and experiential learning projects that serve the community is also discussed in Carla Gerona, "Plan C for Curate: Teaching Studio History and Museum Studies in the Twenty-First Century," *The History Teacher* 53 no. 1 (2019): 37-66 https://www.jstor.org/stable/27058563 and Emily E. Straus and Dawn M. Eckenrode, "Engaging Past and Present: Service-Learning in the College History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 47 no. 2 (2014): 253-266. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43264227

history classes, and public history students could take elective courses in the MLIS program. Working with this advisory committee was effective for ensuring that the coursework, class options, and internship opportunities I offered my students complemented the needs and existing work on the university's campus and in the community. It also created multiple avenues for public history students to pursue distinct paths in public history by tailoring their elective courses and internship positions.

Stage One: Concrete Experience

Field trips to local museums and cultural centers are an important part of my public history classes. Students need to learn how these sites operate, how they serve the public, and become familiar with how collections are displayed and managed. Field trips constitute the concrete experience phase of the experiential learning cycle in these courses. The significance of field trips is emphasized by Libby Bischoff because of the ways they expose students to local history. She argues that engagement in this way helps with retention and makes history feel more relevant and accessible to the students.[8] I have taken my Introduction to Public History and Principles of Public History students to several museums and public history sites in our community. For example, we met with the director of our local historical society and learned about how they collect materials, how they handle research requests, how they document the history of the region, and the challenges their organization faces. The primary challenges of funding and staffing were important for students to hear about, because they are so common among historical societies, museums, and similar entities. Learning about how institutions address these challenges is crucial.

We also took a field trip to the local art center. This is not a site strictly dedicated to public history, but it was an important place for students to visit because the work they do there and the ways they serve the community are related to public history. They produce rotating art exhibitions that feature items from their permanent collection, items on loan, as well as shows dedicated to featured artists. The students met with the curator, and his description of the exhibition planning, development, and installation process was very similar to the work of public historians. The art center serves the community with various programming for all ages, and these types of offerings are also common to public history museums and organizations. The director shared the center's approaches to fundraising and community outreach, which correlates with what students could expect to experience when they enter the workforce. Furthermore, trained public historians could potentially expect to work at art centers and similar community organizations because of the connections and overlap among the arts and humanities, and because the training public historians receive is applicable at these places. In fact, the director informed students that a history graduate was employed on the center's small and active staff.

Stage Two: Reflective Observation

We followed both field trips with writing and discussion activities about the sites we visited. This is the reflective observation stage of experiential learning and allowed my students to process what they saw and heard about and then apply it to what they already knew about public history. We discussed and wrote in response to questions such as: "How is the site presenting content, ideas, and collections? Do you sense a bias in how these things are presented? How is the site funded? What type of impact do you think this has on their offerings and the work they do? How has visiting this site changed or reinforced your understanding of public history?" By engaging students in reflection and discussion about how ideas are presented and the potential impact of funding and bias on public history presentations, students are encouraged to think critically about the work they will produce. This prepares them for the abstract conceptualization stage of the experiential learning cycle, where they produce labels for public exhibitions in a museum setting.

8 Libby Bischof, "The Lens of the Local: Teaching an Appreciation of the Past through the Exploration of Local Sites, Landmarks, and Hidden Histories," *The History Teacher* 48 no. 3 (2015): 529-559. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24810529

Stage Three: Abstract Conceptualization

I teach a unit on writing exhibition labels in public history settings. We engage with this information through readings, lectures, and discussion to explore concepts such accessibility, developing thesis-driven museum labels, and organizing labels into levels of information for the public. After this, students visit the on-campus African American museum. This museum grew out of a personal collection of artifacts and needed help revising and creating informational labels for the objects they have on display. The museum serves as a popular field trip destination for students of all grade levels. It also plays an important role on the university campus, since many classes visit the museum as part of their curriculum and the museum employs numerous students as interns and student assistants. Since the museum's holdings came from a private collector, the director identified a need for assistance from my students. The item's labels were inconsistent, and some were hard to read either visually or contextually. Some items did not have labels at all. This was a great opportunity to engage my students in real-world public history applications, since writing and rewriting these labels would contribute to public history already taking place on campus and in our community.

Collaborating with the museum's director, I tasked my students with writing new labels for objects that did not have them, and revising labels that needed improvement. This was the abstract conceptualization stage of the experiential learning cycle, where students applied what they learned in class and on field trips. Through this collaboration students were able to engage with the topic of writing exhibition labels more deeply and to apply what they read and discussed in class. They were immersed in what labels need to do in actual museum settings. An important guideline for writing exhibition labels is to ensure they are accessible to the general public so a variety of audiences can engage in museum exhibitions. The leading guidelines for museum exhibition labels advise to write them at an eighth-grade reading level. Even if visitors can read and understand college-level discourse, that doesn't necessarily mean that they want to do so while on a leisure outing and on their feet. Writing at an eighth-the grade reading level does not mean "dumbing down" content or "talking down" to visitors, nor does it mean you can only write about topics learned in or before middle school. Rather, if you write at an eighth-grade reading level, you broaden the audience you reach and ensure your content is accessible for diverse visitors.[9] We collaborated with a local eighth-grade class to ensure that the labels my students were writing and rewriting met this goal of being accessible for an eighth-grade reading level.

My public history class and the eighth-grade class each visited the museum on different days, and then each class reflected on what they saw and experienced. My students were each assigned two display items and, with a partner, tasked with rewriting or in some cases creating a new label for the items. After my students wrote a first draft of their labels, we shared them with the eighth-graders who provided feedback. The eighth-graders were asked to analyze the labels for clarity. What questions did they still have after reading the label? What was unclear? What did they want to know more about? Gathering feedback from eighth-graders was important for making sure the label language was accessible to the general public. Once the eighth-graders provided feedback, my students were tasked with writing a second draft that took the younger students' feedback into account. The younger students pointed out what areas were unclear, where they needed more context, and what questions they had about the topic after reading the labels. My students then revised their labels using this feedback to ensure that what they produced in the final draft of their labels was at an eighth grade reading level. These completed labels are now on display in the African American museum on campus.

This collaborative assignment provided benefits for the eighth-graders and for my students. The eighth-graders learned historical information that was researched and written by college students, and they were able to practice critical thinking and crafting effective questions. In addition to collaborating with the eighth-graders and the museum, my students collaborated with their partners in the class to research and write the labels, review and incorporate feedback, and then revise their writing to create finished products. This process is representative of the experience of curators and other public historians, who need to collaborate with numerous stakeholders on

9 Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, (*Rowman &Littlefield, 2015) and Jennifer Blunden, "The Sweet Spot? Writing for a Reading Age of 12," *Curator* 60 no. 3 (2017) 291-309. https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12205

projects and be mindful of multiple audiences.

This was an effective activity, but it did present some challenges. As is so often the case in group projects, some classmate collaborations worked better than others. We had instances where some students did more work than their partners, which caused frustration. A couple of pairs actually submitted two different labels, suggesting they chose to eschew collaboration entirely. Also, while the eighth-grade feedback was useful for reminding my students to keep the label language clear and for pointing out references and context clues that could be lost on the general public, some of the feedback was less helpful. Reflecting the interest of a young person's mind, we had multiple instances where an eighth-grader would ask the types of questions they were presumably tasked with answering in a book report or other biography assignment in class such as who someone's inspirations were or other tangential questions. This information may be useful in a long form exploration, but for a museum label it can take things off topic and lead to overly long exhibition signage.

Stage Four: Active Experimentation

The labels assignment prepared students (and me) for the larger collaborative project that we engaged in later in the semester. My students' final project for their public history course was to research, develop, plan, and install an exhibition that goes on display in our university's library. The final exhibition represented the active experimentation stage of the Experiential Learning Cycle for the public history classes. This project enabled us to utilize the university's archival collections, highlight the existence and offerings of the archives, and have students produce real work that benefits and builds on the public history initiatives that exist at our university and in the community. My classes have produced exhibitions about civil rights and Black freedom movements, women's history, and World War II using materials from the university's archives and special collections.

Students worked on this project for several weeks, and they worked in teams. I selected the main topic and then divided students into groups that were each assigned a subtheme. For example, when the class created exhibitions about civil rights and Black freedom movements, one group focused on arts and culture, another on education, and a third group focused on leadership and activism–all within the larger topic of civil rights. Prior to the beginning of the project, I worked with archives staff to develop a list of potential items students could use from the archival collections. Students were then tasked with selecting objects from these lists to build their exhibitions. After making their selections, students conducted research and wrote labels that explained their topic and introduced the history they included in their exhibitions. They also created labels identifying and providing information about each item on display. Finally, the students worked in their teams to install the objects and labels to complete their exhibitions. This was the final assignment for the class and comprised a significant portion of their grade. The exhibition planning, development, and installation represented the active experimentation stage of the experiential learning cycle in the class.

Challenges

While providing valuable experience for the students and benefits for the library and university archives and special collections, the exhibition projects do present challenges. Some of these challenges have been overcome through changes I've made to the assignment and process, while others remain. As mentioned previously, team projects and group assignments consistently present challenges because there will almost always be some inequality in the distribution of work. Some students will take on more than others because of differences in personality, preparation, and motivation. I have tried to overcome this by having students assign specific tasks to members of their team, requiring multiple progress reports, assigning a reflection at the end where students assess their work and that of their teammates, and engaging with students during class time to ensure they are actively working on the project and allowing their teammates to contribute. Some other challenges are related to the exhibition contents. As a newer professor at the institution, I needed to quickly educate myself on the collections and local history in order to effectively lead my students. Furthermore, when working with the on-campus archive we were limited to their holdings. This has sometimes meant limited diversity in the items represented, and in

some instances, students wanted to talk about an event or idea in their exhibition but were unable to because there were not appropriate collection items for them to use. Finally, because we were using archival collections, they largely consisted of documents and photographs and were predominantly two-dimensional. Exhibitions that utilize multi-format materials and a combination of 2-D and 3-D objects are most engaging, so the nature of archival holdings places a limit on what students can produce.

Benefits

These challenges are outweighed by the powerful benefits that come with the project. Collaborating with archives provided major benefits for the students. They learned about how archives work by accessing the materials and spending numerous class sessions in archives to develop the exhibitions. They learned about proper handling of artifacts and archival materials, and handling these historical primary source materials made history come alive for them and inspired thoughtful discussion, critical questions, and impactful decision making. Students do the work of real public historians when they create exhibitions. This is an opportunity for them to learn firsthand what public historians do and gain experience they can use to help them find jobs. They finish the class with applicable skills. Working in archives provided exposure to the profession and enabled them to see the work of historians beyond teaching. The experience also allowed them to consider whether this is the type of job they would want to pursue after graduation. The students contributed to the needs of the campus and community by producing these exhibitions because they highlighted the university's archival collections in a visible space on campus which served as a form of advocacy for the archival program. By completing successful exhibitions, the students exceeded their own expectations and created something beyond what they thought they could. After producing their own exhibitions, students have developed a deeper appreciation for museum exhibitions and other public history projects they encounter. Finally, the students learned about their historical topics with the research and writing they conducted for the exhibition, which is always a goal for any type of history course.

Conclusion

Collaborating with the on-campus African American museum, the eighth-grade classes, the art center, the local historical society, and the university's archives and special collections resulted in assignments where the students' completed work contributed to existing public history initiatives. They engaged in real world applications of what they learned in class and provided a public demonstration of their competence. These opportunities made public history come alive for my students. Utilizing Kolb's experiential learning framework provided an effective structure for my public history courses where collaborations with entities and individuals on campus and in the community all worked toward building courses where students gained a meaningful understanding of the public history field and their own potential.

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Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing Simulations: Reacting to the Past's "The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148"

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On June 24, 1148, "a general court was proclaimed at the city of Acre to consider the results of this great pilgrimage, the completion of such great labors, and also the enlargement of the realm." As the contemporary chronicler William of Tyre dutifully recorded, on the eve of the Second Crusade the expedition's leaders and "other noted men of high rank" gathered together and "entered into a careful consideration as to what plan was most expedient."[1] What happened next?

In my earliest teaching days over fifteen years ago, I would present the events of the Second Crusade by synthesizing quickly the Council of Acre's final deliberation, explaining how they decided to march against Damascus and showing the disastrous consequences of this choice. Why did they choose this destination? What motivated the crusaders to opt for such a course of action? What other options did they have at hand? And suppose they had decided to march against Ascalon instead? Rarely, if ever, did my brief summary of the Council of Acre and its aftermath provoke this sort of questioning in my undergraduate classroom. Then, at the suggestion of a colleague to whom I had expressed my frustrations at what I perceived as a lack of student curiosity and what appeared as their inability to grapple with the issues being raised and the broader historical thinking skills, I introduced in my courses a role-playing simulation pedagogy, *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP).

RTTP consists of a series of flexible yet elaborate games, set in a precise historical moment. Students, grouped in factions, dress the part of the event's protagonists and try to advance their group's goals. To win the game, they pursue their objectives through public speeches, class discussions and position papers informed by primary sources and classic texts. During the game, the professor becomes a gamemaster with a supervisory role who sits in the back of the classroom, while students take control of the class, presiding over class sessions, setting rules, and moderating debates.[2]

This article delves into a case study of integrating the active learning pedagogy Reacting to the Past into an upper-level history seminar, "History of the Crusades," offered at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), an institution situated within the heartland of the United States with a student body comprising over 15,000

1 William of Tyre, *A History of the Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, trans. E. A. Babcock and A. C. Krey, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), XVI.29, p. 183.

2 "'Reacting to the Past': Pedagogical Introduction," *Reacting to the Past*, https://reacting.barnard.edu/node/2607, last accessed: February 19, 2015, also hosted at https://ou.edu/content/dam/honors/docs/RTTP%20Pedagogical%20Introduction%20(Feb%202015).pdf. Last accessed: May 20, 2025; C. Edward Watson and Thomas Chase Hagood. "Reacting to the Past: An Introduction to Its Scholarly Foundation." In *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017.

Although in this essay the words simulation and game are used interchangeably, the latter better expresses one of the main elements on which RTTP is based: in Mark Carnes' words, "bad play." As he explains, "From Plato to Erikson, and from Rousseau to Csikszentmihalyi, the chief proponents of educational reform have indicted bad play – the lure of social competition, the longing to imagine what it's like to be someone else, and the subversive implications of both types of activities. More precisely, the leading philosophers and educators have insisted that bad play, while tolerable among children and teenagers, is wholly unsuited to the young adults – especially those destined for college." However, Carnes continues, "Reacting students become fully engaged because the elements of bad play – the pressure of social competition, the joyous liberation of taking on a new identity, the thrill of subverting customary social hierarchies and conventions – are so powerful." Mark C. Carnes, "From Plato to Erikson: How the war against "bad play" has impoverished higher education," Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, November 21, 2014.

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individuals spanning across ages, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds. The seminar is categorized as upper-level elective and caters to a mixed classroom of undergraduates from various disciplines and History graduate students. This case study aims to explore, from the perspective of both the instructor and the students, learning outcomes and pedagogical results of teaching history with role-playing simulations.

First, I explain the essential elements and game mechanics of Helen Gaudette's "The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148," an RTTP simulation that brings to life a momentous turning point in the history of the crusades: the council held at Acre in 1148 on the eve of the Second Crusade to decide its leadership and its raison d'être. I then draw from firsthand experience using RTTP and from students' feedback to discuss the simulation's pedagogical benefits applied to a typical History of the Crusades upper-level course, also presenting suggestions for diverse assignments in a class including both undergraduate and graduate students. Then I conclude with an assessment of the pedagogical value of these simulations.

"The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148"

The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148 time-travels the students back to June 21, 1148, upon the arrival in the Holy Land of armies led by French and German monarchs in response to Pope Eugene III's call to arms.[3] The victorious outcome of the First Crusade, with the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, had led to the establishment of Crusader States in the surrounding territories under Western control. However, half a century later, news of the fall of the County of Edessa, the first Crusader State to be founded, and the rising power of Muslim leader Zengi prompted the pope to issue the Bull *Quantum praedecessores* (1145), calling for a new crusade. In their journey to the Holy Land to join Western forces already stationed in Jerusalem, the French and the German contingents encountered several obstacles that significantly weakened their armies. When the troops finally arrived, their noble leaders gathered in Acre to discuss where to direct the crusade.

In the role-playing simulation, students dress the part of the council attendees – monarchs, barons, dukes, and religious authorities gathered on the eve of the Second Crusade in the assembly hall of the fortress of Acre, located in the northern area of the city and occupied by the Hospitallers. Each student is assigned a role, a nametag, and a role packet that briefly recounts the main biographical traits of the character and defines his or her goals, objectives, and suggested strategies to adopt during the council sessions. So, to cite an example, the role sheet of King Louis VII starts as follows:

> *You are the French King Louis VII, leader of the French crusader armies. Along with Cardinal Guy of Florence, the papal legate accompanying you on your mission, and Count Thierry of Flanders, you constitute the French faction. You are known for being an exceptionally devout, well-learned, and quite handsome man.*[4]

The sheet next explains the rest of his biography, also suggesting primary and secondary sources to be consulted to get a better idea of the character and facilitate the student's immersion into the part. Then, it paints in broad strokes the behavior that this person is expected to assume in each debate in order to achieve their objectives. In the case, again, of King Louis VII,

> *One of your most important goals during the crusade is to win glory and success on the battlefield against the infidels on behalf of the French people and all of Latin Christendom. You will, therefore, argue in favor of launching a crusade at this time in Debate 1.*[5]

Finally, the sheet concludes by listing the individual victory objectives, which, depending on role and faction, may include making sure that the crusade is declared or called off, defending it as a just war, being elected to lead the expedition, supporting or hindering the campaign of a particular candidate, or directing the armies against a

3 Helen A. Gaudette, "The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148. Student Manual" (Unpublished manuscript, February 2015), Word file, 8.

4 Helen A. Gaudette, "Instructor Manual - The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148." (unpublished manuscript, February 2015), Word file, 36.

5 Gaudette, "Instructor Manual - The Second Crusade," 38.

specific target.

The council participants are grouped into four main factions: the French, led by King Louis VII; the Germans, led by Conrad III; the Kingdom of Jerusalem, led by Queen Melisende, and a group labeled as the Eastern Allies, led by the Master of the Templars and including, among others, the Knight Templars and Hospitallers. As in most RTTP games, some players are assigned undecided or neutral roles. The factions must compete in trying to attract these neutrals to join their ranks, by persuading them of the likelihood of success of their proposed campaign and by luring them with private negotiations and even bribes – fiefs, benefices, trading privileges, relics, and so on.[6]

An additional game mechanism that is particularly creative and effective in heightening the competition, nurturing the quality of assigned papers and speeches while also teaching the students about medieval religiosity, is the relic element. At the end of each class, or session of the council, the best speeches and papers are awarded "relics" in the form of plastic bones, each bearing a different value, or victory points, expressing its spiritual power. The student who earns a relic can further increase its value by creating a reliquary to house it, and then use the sacred object to gain the preferences of the neutrals or exchange it for other privileges. In order to win the game, a faction needs to collect the highest number of victory points by the end of the third debate, through the achievement of their objectives, the possession of relics, and the support of the neutrals.[7]

For the purpose of the game, the single full day over which the assembly historically took place is divided into six to nine class sessions, subdivided into three main debates. To begin, the council discusses the idea of crusading and the justifications for holy war as applied to the specific context, and then votes by show of hands on whether the Second Crusade should proceed at this time. If the majority of the participants votes in favor, the debate moves to examine the target options: should the army move against Edessa, Ascalon, or Damascus? The risks, advantages, and disadvantages of each proposed campaign are presented and carefully weighed, and a new majority vote decides the direction of the expedition. Finally, in a campaign election-style debate the council selects the person best skilled to lead the crusade, discussing also whether a secular or religious authority should obtain such leadership.

To prepare debates speeches and discussions, the students are encouraged to explore several Christian and Muslim primary sources, including the chronicles of the First and Second Crusades by William of Tyre, Fulcher of Chartres, Odo of Deuill, Otto of Freising, Ibn al-Athir, Ibn al-Qalanisi, and Usamah ibn Munqidth. Other selections consider the idea of jihad, holy war and just war, including excerpts from the Qur'an, the Bible, and Augustine's *City of God*, along with several key documents from the Investiture Controversy. While the students' speeches, dialogues, and discussions in class do not follow a predetermined script, they are profoundly informed by and substantiated in the primary sources – there is even a penalty prescribed for mentioning ideas, things, or facts that occurred after 1148.

Why play a game in a History of the Crusades course?

Students' reactions to the announcement that part of the course is going to be devoted to "playing a game" vary. The medieval enthusiasts and fantasy role-players anticipate the first debate with growing expectations, often starting to read the game book and inquiring about rules and strategies well before the actual beginning of the simulation. Others are intrigued by the novelty of the pedagogy and curious to find out more about it. On the other hand, some students are intimidated by learning that they are required to come prepared and engage actively in each session, delivering speeches in front of their peers and constantly raising questions or making observations rather than simply listening to lectures and taking notes.[8] For some, especially those who have

6 Gaudette, "The Second Crusade," 25-31.

7 Gaudette, "The Second Crusade," 32.

8 As Andrews et al. observe, surveying the findings on student resistance to active learning in the extant literature, "Students may be resistant to new instructional methods because student-centred activities may require more effort, may require students to attempt a task they do not feel efficacious at or see value in, or may be outside of students' assumptions about teaching and learning." Madison E. Andrews, Matthew Graham, Michael Prince, Maura Borrego, Cynthia J. Finelli & Jenefer Husman. "Student resistance

learned how to navigate the system and find themselves at ease in the traditional lecture-review-test schema, role-immersion games can be perceived as a destabilizing step out of their comfort zone, requiring the mastery of skills that go beyond good comprehension of the text, attentive notetaking, and retention of key information.[9]

Other students, perhaps the high-achievers accustomed to poring over assigned readings, may be reticent about engaging in something sounding to them more like a playful and childish activity than an upper-level course assignment.[10] "When I was first told that we were going to be taking part in a role-playing simulation on the War Council of Acre for an entire month, I was very skeptical about whether this would be a learning experience for me. 'Could we really learn that much by playing a game?" wondered Matthew, a senior double-major with a stellar GPA. And yet, he continued, "To my surprise, this was one of the best learning experiences I have undertaken throughout my undergraduate education."[11]

Why does the RTTP pedagogy make this possible? A first answer, at a basic level, is fairly intuitive: while history is commonly perceived as boring, role-playing simulations make it fun, to the point that students routinely arrive even thirty minutes early to class, and at the end remain lingering around to exhaust seemingly endless questions. As one of them told the class at the end of the semester, "When hearing my alarm on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, I was ready to roll out of bed and excited to come to school because that was game day."[12]

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to active learning: do instructors (mostly) get it wrong?," *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education*, 25:2, 2020, 142-154, DOI: 10.1080/22054952.2020.1861771 On student self-report learning perception in active classrooms, see Louis Deslauriers, Logan S. McCarty, Kelly Miller, Kristina Callaghan, and Greg Kestin. "Measuring Actual Learning versus Feeling of Learning in Response to Being Actively Engaged in the Classroom." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116 (39): 19251–19257 (2019). doi:10.1073/pnas.1821936116.

9 Richard Felder, a pioneer of active learning, explains student resistance to active learning in these terms: "Learner-centered teaching methods like active and cooperative and problem-based learning make students take more responsibility for their learning than traditional teacher-centered methods do, and the students are not necessarily thrilled about it." Richard M. Felder, "Hang in There: Dealing with Student Resistance to Learner-Centered Teaching." *Chem. Engr. Education, 45* (2), 131-132 (Spring 2011). See also David C. Owens, Troy D. Sadler, Angela T. Barlow, *et al.* "Student Motivation from and Resistance to Active Learning Rooted in Essential Science Practices." *Res Sci Educ* 50, 253–277 (2020); Sneha Tharayil, Maura Borrego, Michael Prince, *et al.* "Strategies to mitigate student resistance to active learning." *IJ STEM Ed* 5, 7 (2018); Shannon B. Seidel, and Kimberly D Tanner. "'What If Students revolt?'—Considering Student Resistance: Origins, Options, and Opportunities for Investigation." *CBE Life Sciences Education* 12, no. 4 (2013): 586–595.

Instructors' concerns about some student resistance may represent a barrier to the implementation of new teaching strategies like this, out of fear that "their use of active learning might lower their course evaluations, especially among instructors whose tenure, promotion and merit ratings depend heavily on such measures." Madison E. Andrews, Matthew Graham, Michael Prince, Maura Borrego, Cynthia J. Finelli & Jenefer Husman "Student resistance to active learning: do instructors (mostly) get it wrong?," *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education*, 25:2, 142-154 (2020), 150.

10 Analogous student perceptions of instruction have been observed by Keri Watson and Patsy D. Moskal after incorporating the RTTP game "Modernism vs. Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-89" in an upper-level art history course at the University of Central Florida. Although the class response to the implementation of active learning was overwhelmingly positive, "there were students who never warmed to the game. One student wrote, "I guess you can call me a traditional student, but I feel I learn Art History best from lecture and a slide show displaying the artist, title, and date," while another said, "The game itself and games of this nature are not in line with how I, personally, learn best. I learn best under a lecture scenario." Keri Watson, and Patsy D. Moskal, "Scaling a Reacting Game for Use at a Large Public University." *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past: Research on High Impact, Active Learning Practices*, edited by C. Edward Watson, and Thomas Chase Hagood. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 105.

11 Matthew Kennedy, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past's 'The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148'" (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014).

12 The comment that anthropologist and historian Matthew Wilhelm Kapell reports from a student evaluation on the implementation of historical videogames in his course pedagogy sums it best: "I used to think 'history' was boring, but I now see that it is just that most history teachers are boring." Kapell further explains, "the ludic capacity […] allows for an in-depth understanding not just of facts, dates, people, or events, but also of the complex discourse of contingency, conditions, and circumstances, which underpins a genuine understanding of history." Andrew B.R. Elliott, and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell. "Introduction: To Build a Past That Will 'Stand the Test of Time'—Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives." In *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of*

Most important, students soon become so engrossed in the game that, without even realizing it, they begin to spend hours seeking out additional sources for their speeches and papers.[13] Andrea, a student completing a double degree, certainly familiar with intense study and hard work, admitted, "I can safely say that I have never done as much independent research as I did in preparing for this class. And I think that's an important by-product of a game like this—the drive on the part of the student to learn and research independently, which will serve to help later in his/her career."[14] To mention just one example, Craig, dressing the part of Master Robert, leader of the Knights Templar, for the Council of Acre "researched not only his biography and background, but also the history of the Knights Templar, Christian teachings about peace and war, the view of jihad in the Qur'an, chivalry, Muslim customs, medieval military strategy, and the geography of the Holy Land." Surely most of these topics would have been touched upon also in a traditional lecture setting, and yet, he reflects, "Their in-depth study allowed me to understand better the mindset of these people, the context in which they lived and therefore the reasons behind those events."[15]

Such personal investment in one's assigned individual historical persona couples, necessarily, with a spirit of competitiveness and eagerness to win and beat the other factions. As a student recalls, "We dove into the primary and secondary sources to find treaties our opponents had signed that would negate their stance or to retrieve anything that could call their faith and credibility into question. We had no idea that amidst the mudslinging we were immersing ourselves in knowledge."[16] If the initial drive for many students is to prepare well enough to avoid embarrassment in front of the class, explains *Teaching Naked Blog*'s author José Antonio Bowen after observing RTTP role-playing in action, soon the mechanism taking place in the classroom is analogous to micro-rewards in videogames: "the potential to "win" provides motivation, […] then you immediately feel the joy of success and eventually mastery." After defending his faction's position, "the (partisan) audience roared. This was a good feeling and reinforced the idea that –when I read carefully and prepare, there is a reward."[17]

Studying history through role-immersion games proves to be more than fun: the experience may offer students

History, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 1–30, 14. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781628928259.ch-001. Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

13 Similarly, in a national survey designed to gauge students' and instructors' perceptions of the impacts of RTTP on learning and teaching, an overwhelming majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that in RTTP courses they "read assigned material with greater attention to detail" (83.2%) and "read and researched beyond the material assigned" (71.7%). Thomas Chase Hagood, Naomi J. Norman, Hyeri Park, and Brittany M. Williams. *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, 170. Such profound involvement can be defined as "meaningful engagement," that is, "internalized learning relevant to the discipline" extending "far beyond student interest, to include deep understanding of course material and practice of discipline." In a recent study, Marie Gasper-Hulvat et al. observed it to be a typical learning outcome resulting from student participation in Reacting to the Past role-playing simulation, analogous to the results elicited in students engaged in other active learning exercises. Marie Gasper-Hulvat, David M. Dees, and Anthony V. Sheffler, "Eliciting Meaningful Engagement in an Art History Survey Course: Reacting to the Past and Active Learning." *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past*, 113-126.

14 Andrea Schemehorn, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past's 'The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148'" (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014). Prof. Amy Curry echoes this comment, observing that, after taking her RTTP classes, students are strongly motivated to go research historical periods, events and characters on their own, even about things not covered in class, "especially after internalizing the kind of deep engagement with historical figures, ideas, and problems that RTTP games often promote." Amy Curry, "Using Role Playing to Keep Students Engaged." Norton Learning Blog: Dispatches from Norton's Teaching and Learning Community. December 18, 2020. https://reactingconsortium.org/books-essays-articles Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

15 Craig W. Horobik, "Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course" (final paper HIST 4910-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

16 Shane.Cavlovic, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past's 'The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148'" (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014).

17 José Bowen, "Reacting to the Past Will Revive your Teaching." *Teaching Naked Blog*, July 15, 2016. https://teachingnaked.com/reacting-to-the-past-with-revive-your-teaching/ Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

learning outcomes rarely gained in a traditional lecture setting.[18] Players are required to immerse themselves into their historical persona, their mindset and their decision-making process, allowing them to commune with the people of the past. The historical empathy that results in the process plays a central role in understanding the events of history, because it allows the historian, or the history student, through inferential thinking, to make sense of "the "why" of history: why did an individual or group of people, given a set of circumstances, act in a certain way?"[19]

"By filling the roles of our characters, we took on their beliefs and motives," explained Matthew, who during the Council of Acre simulation dressed the part of Frankish King Louis VII. "With every argument, we were forced to understand how to use our primary sources to back up our assertions; every speech was enriched by quotes to support our position. Is it justified to kill people as a Christian? Should we attack Damascus or Edessa? How about Aleppo? How exactly can we attack these cities? All these questions needed to be answered, justified, and then argued about with your peers. With each game session, we learned more and more about the interrogatives that these medieval people asked themselves and struggled with."[20]

One of the greatest obstacles to the study of historical periods like the Middle Ages is the perceived remoteness and even irrelevance to the topic: a Nebraskan college student may think they have nothing to share with twelfth-century French crusaders. Yet, without a profound comprehension of the people behind the narrated facts, without partaking, somehow, in the experience from which sources and documents stemmed, even an accurate analysis of the texts may lead to gross misinterpretations. The reader may be tempted to fill with their own twenty-first-century conceptions and beliefs those gaps left by his lack of familiarity with the mindset and mentality of the time. Conversely, the personal engagement and closeness to the crusaders' persona that the students develop through the role-playing simulations is what allows them to gain a more in-depth understanding, a greater clarity of textual analysis, and a more objective grasp of the historical events and their sources. "Ponder the experience of an atheist who plans to study astronomy and finds him/herself thrust into the Catholic Church during the trial of Galileo," suggests writer Daniella Greenbaum, assessing the merits of the RTTP pedagogy. "It's exceptionally easy to look back at eras of history that are unlike our own and thrust upon them a 21st-century label. But it is far more rewarding to attempt to inhabit the mindset of an earlier generation, exploring without value judgments why they believed what they believed."[21]

Another substantial benefit of the RTTP pedagogy is that it brings history alive: in a sense, it adds a third dimension to it. Sometimes undergraduate history instructors, pressured to cover complex and lengthy periods in only a few lessons, may end up summarizing, simplifying and overly flattening the past – and this is especially

18 Stroessner and colleagues, utilizing quasi-experimental procedures to assess the consequences of students' participation in RTTP, found that the pedagogy produced "elevated self-esteem, greater empathy with the needs and feelings of others, greater agreement with the belief that human characteristics are amenable to change across time and contexts, and improved rhetorical ability," while no such change was observed in the traditional classroom control group. As Carnes highlights, "Psychologists have found this belief in the malleability of the self to be one of the strongest psychological elements conducive to educational growth (see Dweck 2000)." Steven J. Stroessner, Laurie Susser Beckerman, and Alexis Whittaker. "All the World's a Stage? Consequences of a Role-Playing Pedagogy on Psychological Factors and Writing and Rhetorical Skill in College Undergraduates." *Journal of educational psychology* 101, no. 3 (2009): 612; Mark C. Carnes, "Foreword." *Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past,* x.

19 Stuart J. Foster and Elizabeth Anne Yeager. "The Role of Empathy in the Development of Historical Understanding." *The International Journal of Social Education* 13, no. 1 (1998). For a survey of both past and recent scholarship about empathy in history education, see Kaya Yilmaz, "Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools." *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (2007): 331–37. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036827.

20 Kennedy, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing."

21 Daniella J. Greenbaum, "How to think about the past." *Commentary*, June 23, 2016. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/american-society/college-campus-thinking-past/ Last accessed: August 13, 2023. By providing "the benefit of a sort of 'double consciousness' in which the player's identity is relaxed while the role is enacted," role-playing fosters empathy and intercultural awareness. Sarah Lynne Bowman. "Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review." In *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, 124-5; Greenbaum, "How to Think About the Past."

true in survey courses. Through role-immersion games, instead, history is seen "at a micro level – from the view of a certain person who has his or her own agenda. And this is actually how it truly unfolds. Now, when you have thirty people with their own agendas, this is where the true magic happens."[22]

Two results of using RTTP role-playing simulations in the history classroom are especially noteworthy. First, rather than an artificial oversimplification of history (good guys vs. bad guys), students are offered the possibility of empathically understanding multiple points of view. "Frequently," scholar O.L. Davis Jr. explains, "empathy springs from considerations of more than one, even several different, points of view or perspectives." And, anticipating a possible objection, he asserts, "It is robust, tough, and insightful even as it is imaginative, and it is always based upon available evidence."[23]

In the RTTP classroom, analyzing and presenting the positions of all the parts in play allows the students to realize how, more often than not, there are plenty of excellent reasons and motivating factors on both sides and how sometimes similar values or goals may nonetheless lead to different interpretations of the same text or event. This awareness, in turn, forces students to engage the primary sources on a much deeper level: documents and chronicles need to be mined to explore intentions, detect bias, or understand how an adjective may change the crowd perception of an argument, while at the same time seeking to anticipate counterpoints, objections, and rebuttals. "The game made us look at history differently, not just as dates, people, and places, but opening our minds to look at all sides of the issues to get a better understanding, trying to find evidence to back our position and counter the other factions," observed the student who at the Council of Acre was assigned the part of the papal legate, Cardinal Guy of Florence.[24]

Second, students who are asked to decide whether the target of the Second Crusade should be Damascus, Edessa, or Ascalon cease to perceive history as ineluctable fate: things, the game teaches, may have gone in a drastically different direction. Human freedom and agency always play a part in the unfolding of events, and even if, as the dice rolls used in the role-playing simulation show, unexpected circumstances and fortuitous happenstances can dramatically reverse an expected outcome, man is the true protagonist of history.[25] The King Louis VII character in the council expounded, "By actively participating in the game, I gained the understanding that events did not 'just happen': many other options could have been chosen. This understanding of history is often lost in the onslaught of 'this event happened then, this is why it happened, and this is how it happened,' whereas through this role-immersion game, it was 'any of these events could happen, but I want this one to occur because I am the King of France and this will benefit me the most.'"[26]

What *actually* happened, however, is only momentarily moved to the background. An entire "postmortem" session is always scheduled at the end of each RTTP role-playing simulations, once the final debate's deliberations are finalized. During the postmortem, students are invited to come out of character to discuss their roles, achievements, and shortcomings. In this key session, the narrative of how events truly occurred is re-established.

22 Cavlovic, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing."

23 Davis Jr., O.L. "In Pursuit of Historical Empathy." In *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, edited by O. L. Davis Jr., Elizabeth A. Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, 1-12. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2001), 3.

24 Thomas Qualters, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing: Reacting to the Past's 'The Second Crusade: The War Council at Acre, 1148'" (roundtable presentation, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, February 28, 2014).

25 On the relevance of emphasizing human agency in the history classroom, see Harry J. Brown, *Video Games and Education* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 118. Brown observes that historically inspired digital games like *The Oregon Trail* teach the "lesson of contingency" by allowing players to make individual choices and experience their effects on the historical outcomes. See also Vinicius Carvalho, "History and Human Agency in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt," *Gamevironments of the Past* 5 (2016): 109-10, on the notion of agency related to human behavior and individual action in society. Brown's and Carvalho's insights on videogames reflect what can be observed in role-immersion pedagogies like RTTP, where structured but open-ended simulations centered on decision-making and counterfactuals reinforce in students the idea that human beings are not passive recipients of historical forces but active participants who shape events

26 Kennedy, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing."

The instructor ceases to be a gamemaster and takes up once again the professorial role, to correct alternative scenarios or counterfactuals that the game designer may have included in the simulation for the sake of the debate: no, the armies of the Second Crusade did not besiege Ascalon, and Izz Abd al-Hasan Ali, brother of the diplomat Usamah ibn Munqidh, would never have been invited to attend the Council of Acre as representative of the Damascenes.[27]

Finally, what is perhaps the most critical and long-lasting learning outcome students may gain through exposure to role-playing simulations in the history classroom is an original and in-depth exposure to historical methodology.[28] The Second Crusade game in my class ran for a period of five weeks, which meant that other parts of the syllabus had to be shortened or sacrificed. "With the game taking a quarter of the course time and as a returning student paying my educational expenses out-of-pocket with an interest in maximizing my investment, I must admit that my initial thought was that the loss of traditional lecture time was steep even for the excellent educational benefits the game provided," reflected a student after taking part in the simulation. Yet, he continued, "A trip to Barnes and Noble with my daughter changed that. While she was looking for the latest 39 Clues books on which to spend her monthly $25 gift certificate, I tried to chase down some books on the Knights Templar for a future research project."[29]

Enthralled by the preparation of a custome to wear during the game sessions for the character assigned to him, the Master of the Knights Templar, this student emailed me a few days before the opening debate with quite an odd question. He was considering arriving to campus on his horse carrying his standard, and he wanted to know whether his character's family coat of arms would have been displayed on the flag, together with the Templar emblems. Unable to find an easy solution to this query, after the end of the semester he embarked on an independent study project to analyze the military orders iconography in contemporary illuminations and frescoes, in the hope of resolving the mystery of his character's banner. And so, in the middle of this quest, he continued, "What I found were five books specifically on the Second Crusade, seven more on crusades in general, and an equal number on the First Crusade. I found nothing useful on military orders. It was at that point that it dawned on me. To paraphrase a quote from *Good Will Hunting*, nothing Dr. Saltamacchia might have lectured about the Second Crusade during that five-week period could not be obtained with a checkout card from the local public library. What we lost was information that could be found in books, magazines, online, and on TV. What we gained was a grasp on how to go about reading and deciphering that information. We were taught how to gather our own evidence to support a point, we discovered how to detect bias in a source, look past it, and still make use of the document. In short, we learned how to be historians."[30]

That semester, I had divided the History of the Crusades course into three parts of five weeks each: a first part conducted in a traditional lecture format, covering the idea of crusading and jihad up to the events of the First Crusade and the establishment of the Crusader States; a second part, entirely devoted to *The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148* game; and a final third part in which I planned to return to lecture-mode to present the later campaigns, from the Third Crusade on. Yet, once the second part of course ended, my class was entirely

27 Gaudette, "Instructor Manual - The Second Crusade," 86. On the crucial pedagogical value of postmortem debriefing sessions in role-playing games, see Bowman, "Role-playing Games," 127.

28 Research shows that gamification transforms the social studies classroom from a passive space where the instructor transmits dates, kings, and battles into a fun, student-centered environment where inquiry-based engagement fosters critical historical thinking. Sergio Tirado-Olivares, Ramón Cózar-Gutiérrez, Rebeca García-Olivares, José Antonio González-Calero. "Active learning in history teaching in higher education: The effect of inquiry-based learning and a student response system-based formative assessment in teacher training." Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 2021, 37(5), 61-63. Differently from the rote memorization of traditional historical lectures, gamification enhances cognitive skills related to problem-solving and "allow[s] students to learn to think like historians by replicating professional historical practices." Elliott and Kapell, "To Build a Past That Will 'Stand the Test of Time,'" 15, Bowman. "Role-playing Games," 112-131, 122, with the bibliography referred there.

29 Horobik, "Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course."

30 Horobik, "Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course."

transformed. During the last five weeks of the semester, my lectures were constantly interrupted by several raised hands – poignant questions, provocative comments, and thoughtful considerations. In the words of one of the students: "The game changed the dynamics of the class. When the semester first started, like in most courses, people were pretty quiet: three, maybe four students per lesson (often, the same students over and over) would make a contribution or ask a question. Post-game, the three or four students who previously held all the discussion time had to fight just to get their views out. The entire class participated in the lecture, to the point that Dr. Saltamacchia would have to end debates for the sake of keeping the lecture moving."[31] I ended up deciding to keep my lecturing to a minimum, transforming the class time into a thought-provoking lab where the students were asked to analyze in-depth historiography and primary sources and discuss them, finding fallacies, highlighting persuasive arguments, and counteracting weaker points.

In short, "it did not just teach us about the crusades," as another student pointed out. "Through the papers we had to write during the game, the simulation trained us in how to form a persuasive argument. Through the delivery of our speeches in the council, it gave us public speaking experience, while interpersonal skills and team building were reinforced by the work in factions."[32] Groupwork at state schools like the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where most students have part-time jobs to pay their tuition, is often daunting, exacerbated by the fact that everyone finds it difficult to agree on a time to meet outside the classroom. In this instance, instead, the unexpected happened: "The game forged bonds and friendships that hold to this day. Since I was a member of the German faction, we met one night at the Crescent Moon, which is a German Alehouse in Omaha, to discuss the strategy for the debate of the next day: the order of our speeches, what we would speak about and how to win over the intermediates. After that, the Crescent Moon became a staple for us classmates."[33]

Using RTTP in Mixed Undergraduate and Graduate Classrooms

A peculiar challenge to the implementation of RTTP role-playing simulations arises when utilized in mixed undergraduate and graduate classrooms, those upper-level courses offered at institutions like mine with a section reserved for Master's students: how should the graduate students be engaged in the games? As experienced in my own dual-level class, several different options are possible. First off, they can all be involved in the simulations as regular players. However, given their higher educational level they may resist the idea of "playing" with undergraduates. An additional potential problem is that vocal graduate students may end up dominating the debates and intimidating the younger students with their oratorical skills. Assigning leadership roles to graduates may foster analogous concerns. One of the foundations of RTTP pedagogy, namely the student-center classroom, might be lost, since the graduate students might be perceived as teaching assistants in charge of the game, with a resulting minor empowerment of the undergraduates. One way to turn this perception into something positive might be to transform graduate students into preceptors, omniscient and impartial counselors to whom the various players can turn for help, suggestions, and indications.[34] Given the sophistication of the RTTP role-playing simulations, however, this option can probably be successful only if the designated preceptor has direct experience as a "veteran" player in the game in question or at least in similar ones.

The solution I adopted instead in my dual-level History of the Crusades class, after weighing the potential issues of the three options described above, was to assign the graduate students a substitutive game-designing project: the drafting of the handbook for a newly created game revolving around a crusade of their choice. The students were provided with a copy of Helen Gaudette's student gamebook *The Second Crusade: The War Council of Acre, 1148* to be used as a model for their final output, together with a few sample role packets from the same

31 Horobik, "Reacting to the Past in The Crusades course."

32 Qualters, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing."

33 Cavlovic, "Teaching the Crusades with Role-Playing." As José Bowen puts it, "Reacting is about relationships," and this easily fosters connections that go beyond the classroom walls. Bowen, "Reacting to the Past Will Revive your Teaching."

34 See the section on Reacting Fellows/Preceptors in "'Reacting to the Past': Pedagogical Introduction."

game and Nicolas Proctor's *Game Designer's Handbook*.[35] Proctor's text is a useful manual for developers of text-based historical role-playing games stemming from the author's first-hand experience as a game designer, teacher of game design seminars, and observer of numerous RTTP classrooms at several institutions around the country. The handy chapters proved particularly helpful for my students as they cover, in a detailed and systematic way, the multiple interlocking elements a developer should incorporate in the game (roles, schedule, etc.), providing step-by-step guidance from the initial conceptualization of the project to the final playtesting and dissemination. In addition to several individual and group meetings with me in which the graduate students were invited to formulate and present the basics of their game in development, they also had the opportunity to observe a debate on the Second Crusade game. While they were not required to be present in class during the four weeks the simulation took place, I encouraged them nonetheless to attend at least one session to gain a better idea of what the actual discussion part would be like. Indeed, assisting in one or more game periods helped them see how the role-playing simulation pedagogy looked in the classroom.

The graduate students were invited to conceptualize their proposed role-immersion games starting from the selection of an episode from the history of the crusades of interest to them. Critical for the success of the game mechanics was to choose a historical moment in which a fundamental decision took place, making possible the formulation of one or more debate-form questions. One student decided to focus on the siege of Antioch during the First Crusade, revolving her discussion around the position to assume in response to the claims of Peter Bartholomew, the French crusader who asserted that Saint Andrew had appeared to him to reveal that the Holy Lance laid buried under the ground of the church of St. Peter there in the city of Antioch. The envisioned saint instructed him to exhort the crusade leaders to retrieve it. "What will the knights do when presented with the vision of Peter Bartholomew about the Holy Lance? Will they listen to it, or will they dismiss it as a hallucination by a crazed man in the middle of war?"[36] Another student set his game at the time of the Fourth Crusade, making the crusaders debate among themselves on whether they should accept the Byzantine prince Alexius Angelus's proposal to divert the expedition to Constantinople to restore as legitimate emperor his father, Isaac II Angelus, in exchange for money and troops.[37]

After choosing the setting for the game and doing the necessary background research, graduate students then had to draft the different parts of their game handbooks, including:

- **Introduction and Setting**

The introduction is written in narrative form, with the goal of setting the context for the game and the debate. It provides all the basic information a player needs to jump into the game, even without extensive prior knowledge of the time period and the events that constitute the background for the simulation. It should introduce the scene in a way that stirs the player's curiosity and raises his or her enthusiasm. As typical in role-playing games, the introduction opens with the second person narrative ("You are…"), which facilitates the process of making the student one with the protagonists of the historical events. Images and maps of the key game locations are also included in this first section to further help visualize and imagine the facts narrated there.

- **Debate**

The debate at the center of the game is formulated as a question and ends with a vote, public or secret, that

35 Nicolas W. Proctor, Game Designer's Handbook (New York, NY: Barnard College, 2013).

36 Christina Atkins, "Antioch: The Discovery of the Holy Lance and the Fate of the City" (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

37 Derek Edwards, "The Fourth Crusade and the Proposal of Alexius" (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013). Historically, Alexius Angelus' agreement terms included, in return for the crusaders' diversion to Constantinople, the payment of 20,000 silver marks, an army of 10,000 men to join the expedition, the permanent maintenance of five hundred knights in the Holy Land and the return of the Greek church under Rome. Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades. Updated Student Edition.* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 105.

resolves the issue at hand. The main argument is also ramified in several sub-questions, or "Issues for Debates," which constitute a handy, yet not exhaustive, agenda of points the factions should prepare and discuss. For example, one student focused on the discussion that ensued during the Third Crusade after the leader of the German army, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, fell into the deep waters of the river Saleph in Anatolia and drowned. He framed the debate in these terms: "To stay or to go: What will happen to the Germanic Faction after the Death of Fredrick V, the Holy Roman Emperor?," and then detailed several issues for debates, including: Should the German Faction return home after Fredrick's death? Should the German Faction remain on the crusade? What will the Church and Western Factions do to keep the Germans in the crusade? What will the Eastern Faction do in light of what happened?[38]

- **Key Elements of the Game**

The mechanics of the game should include the basic rules and a clear explanation of how to win the game, detailing which actions or outcomes allow the players to achieve or lose points. Creative students may want to add more sophisticated elements to enrich the role-playing simulation. A graduate student who set her proposed game in front of the walls of the city of Antioch at the time of the First Crusade, for example, decided to weave within the rules the knowledge she acquired through her thesis research on the conception of masculinity in the ancient world.[39] In her simulation the crusade leaders, while debating over the most effective strategy to retake Antioch, were also required to maintain their position as knights by displaying their masculinity, expressed in four main elements (authority, piety, military prowess, and intellect) each corresponding to a certain number of chivalry points won or lost by the players in the course of the game.

- **Factions and Roles**

The protagonists of the historical episode at the center of the game are divided into a number of different factions, whose profile and main objectives are here sketched. Essential for simulation mechanics is the inclusion of the additional group of the "neutrals," who at the outset of the game do not belong to any faction and do not have their objectives clearly formulated. They are expected to form their own opinions and make their own voting decisions on the basis of what emerges in the debates and individual negotiations. For each main character, graduate students prepare a one to three-page role packet containing a brief biography and an explanation of the person's goals during the debate, with an overview of the strategy suggested to accomplish them and a clear summary of the objectives. Contemporary images and essential bibliographical indications to know more about the history of that character or the context they lived in may also be included.

- **Appendix of Historical Documents**

The appendix of the game handbook collects excerpts from the key primary sources relevant to the debate in question. Each document is prefaced with a brief introductory paragraph explaining the text, contextualizing the passage within the work, and providing brief biographical information on the author.

- **Bibliography**

Graduate students provide an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources related to the key issues and historical events explored in the simulation, including also websites, databases or other tools which can be helpful to the players.

Through this assignment, graduate students are required to explore in depth a specific moment in the history of the crusades, going beyond the basic understanding of the facts that happened and facilitating the formation of

38 Anthony J. Pruss, "The Kings' Crusade" (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

39 Amber L. Green, "The Siege of Antioch. A Game of the First Crusade" (project HIST 8916-002: The Crusades, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, Fall 2013).

an interrogatory attitude towards historical events. The conceptualization of a central debate, victory objectives, and other elements of the game forces them, in fact, to reflect upon the motivations that informed the decisions of the key protagonists, also analyzing the consequences of their actions and decisions and envisioning the potential alternative scenarios that different choices or different events might have produced. Moreover, the compilation of an appendix of historical documents fosters a mastery of the primary sources and an understanding of their significance in shaping, or reflecting, the mentality of the time. Great game ideas can be developed further, under the instructor's guidance, and then play-tested in the classroom.

"But…are they learning anything?"

"In the Fall of 2013, the three of us took a course on the crusades, where for one month we participated in a role-playing game focused upon the Council of Acre in 1148, at the climax of the Second Crusade. By the game's end in November, our entire class had researched the source material so effectively that we became emotionally attached to our characters and factions," recounts one of the students more than a year later in front of a crowd gathered to hear the adventures of three undergraduates who spent the summer volunteering at a crusader castle archeological dig in Western Galilee.[40]

"Yes, they are playing and having quite some fun, but are they learning anything as well?," colleagues often wonder. The story of these three students, albeit anecdotal, may offer an interesting insight into the potentiality of RTTP pedagogy and its longer-term impact. By the end of the Crusades class, the students had developed such a strong interest in the subject and the time period that I decided to invite them to attend the Third International Symposium on Crusades Studies in St. Louis two months later, in February 2014.[41] Ten out of thirty students decided to go, financing the trip with funds they obtained from a local senator and from the university.

At the conference, they reveled in the occasion to attend lectures and presentations. They were particularly fascinated by the archaeologist Adrian Boas of Haifa University's keynote speech, so much so that they approached him at the end of the lecture to thank him and ask questions on his research and digs at the crusader castle of Montfort, in the north of Israel. In reply, Dr. Boas invited them to join him that summer for the next season of excavation – an offer that three of them promptly accepted. After several weeks of digging for crusader artifacts in Galilee, once back at the university, the three spent most of the following fall and spring conducting research on crusader castle architecture in Israel and France.[42]

Clearly, RTTP is not a magic recipe for reigniting into the classroom a passion such as engulfed these three students. Sometimes, as Mark Carnes warns, "the magic fizzles, and class ends with bewildered students staring at the professor-gamemaster in the back of the room; and sometimes the magic is too potent, and entranced students play too hard, clinging tight to their roles," as happened to the King of Jerusalem in my Council of Acre, who, resentful that a character from another faction managed to assassinate his role in a crucial moment of the debate, decided not to come to class for the following two weeks.[43] Yet, the story of the three students embarking

40 Derek Benson, Shane Cavlovic and Matthew Kennedy, "From the Classroom to the Holy Land: The Academic Pilgrimage of Three Students in Search of Archeological Illumination" (lecture, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, March 18, 2015). On the affective dimension of this type of experiential learning, see Bowman, *Role-Playing Games*, 113, 123. Bowman argues that role-playing simulation scenarios engage "visceral, emotional memory," fostering fundamental skills and transferable outcomes such as oral communication, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and personal growth.

41 Crusade Studies Forum, https://www.crusadestudies.org/ Last accessed: May 20, 2025.

42 Research conducted by Burenkova et al. (2015) supports what the case of these three students illustrates: role-playing often sparks interest in doing deeper research within particular subject areas. Gamification in education is not just about making learning fun and engaging; more importantly, it helps students connect their classroom experience with the real-world demands of their future careers. Olga M. Burenkova, Irina V. Arkhipova, Sergei A. Semenov & Saniya Samarenkina (2015). "Motivation within Role-Playing as a Means to Intensify College Students' Educational Activity." *International Education Studies*, 8(6), 211-216.

43 Mark C. Carnes, Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 13.

from the classroom to the Holy Land is less an exceptional case than one may think, as amply documented by the dozens of analogous examples collected in Carnes' *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. "It would seem that our game cast a long shadow upon us all, for we never truly stopped learning," concluded the students upon their return from the crusader castle in Western Galilee. And perhaps, is not this what we all hope at the end of every semester, walking out of the classroom after the last session?[44]

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44 Benson, Cavlovic, and Kennedy, "From the Classroom to the Holy Land."

Sliding into Oblivion? Michigan's History and Social Studies Teaching Preparation Programs since 2010

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> Katie Newman, 40, had wanted to become a teacher since she was a child. She began her career soon after graduating from college and loved her job teaching high school social studies. But after 16 years, the last five of which she had spent at a private coed Catholic school near her home in Seattle, she decided to leave her job and is now a full-time parent to her two children, who are 3 and 6. Contributing to her decision to leave were feelings of burnout and a constantly changing teaching structure, as well as a covenant containing anti-LGBTQ positions that the staff was required to sign, Ms. Newman said. "I feel like I had to completely redo how I taught several times: first to do it fully remote, then to do a hybrid system." She also expressed concern at the way that teachers' work in the classroom was being attacked through laws targeting critical race theory in the classroom and book bans in schools.[1]
>
> Beau Thompson, 63, taught for 30 years with a maximum salary of $58,000 in Texas. As most teachers, he held a multitude of titles including social studies teacher. He left social studies teaching because he thought leaders lacked focus on learning and teachers had lost autonomy. He was particularly concerned that he was limited in discussing race, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil War. Thompson turned his skills of making history interesting for his students into an acting career. While he misses the kids, he says he "wouldn't go back for any amount of money."[2]

Reports of alarming teacher shortages in Michigan's schools have become commonplace since the COVID pandemic. Describing efforts made by the state legislature to address this shortage, a September 2023 *Bridge Michigan* article explained the state's decision to loosen pension and healthcare restrictions for retired teachers and make it easier for them to return to the classroom. The article noted "Grow Your Own" programs where paraprofessionals in schools are paid to pursue teacher certification. The state has reduced requirements for substitute teachers and lowered barriers on out-of-state teachers' access to Michigan teaching positions. In a May 2024 address, State Superintendent of Education Michael F. Rice highlighted additional teacher recruitment efforts, such as the Michigan Future Educator Fellowships, which offer $10,000 scholarships to up to 2,500 future educators, and the Michigan Future Educator stipends which provide $9,600 for student teachers. The state has also supported Teach for America teacher retention and training programs as well as approved several other alternative certification programs, such as Michigan Teachers of Tomorrow.[3]

1 Sejla Rizvic, "Teachers, Facing Increasing Levels of Stress, Are Burned Out," *New York Times*, 13 March 2023 https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/13/education/teachers-quitting-burnout.html

2 Elizabeth Heubeck, "Behind the Stats: 3 Former Teachers Talk about Why They Left," *Education Week*, 18 April 2023 https://www.edweek.org/leadership/behind-the-stats-3-former-teachers-talk-about-why-they-left/2023/04

3 Isabel Lohman, "To Help Michigan Teacher Shortage, Lawmakers May Ease Retirement Rules," *Bridge Michigan*, 13 November 2023 https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/help-michigan-teacher-shortage-lawmakers-may-ease-retirement-rules; "State Superintendent Rice Highlights Teacher Educator Programs and State Efforts Addressing Teacher Shortage," Michigan Department of

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University and college preparation programs in history and social studies have faced significant headwinds in preparing future educators including stiff competition from alternative certification programs in recent years. As this essay will explain, public and private college and university preparation programs across Michigan are facing dramatic declines in the numbers of students. A survey of five institutions and careful analysis of Michigan Test for Teacher Certification results highlights the challenges faced by history and social studies education programs within the broader context of teacher preparation in Michigan and beyond. Michigan's traditional teacher programs must respond and provide clear evidence for why their higher costs and longer completion times are worthwhile to individuals who are interested in becoming teachers and the schools that hire these teachers.

Although this competition in social studies and history teacher preparation is relatively new in Michigan, the modern era of alternative teacher certification emerged during the 1980s and its growth accelerated after passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002, which reauthorized federal involvement in state certification requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. In 1983, eight states offered alternative certification affecting just 0.06 percent of teachers. By 2016, 47 states did so and somewhere between 20 and 40 percent of teachers had pursued this route. Early on, alternative certification was generally associated with hiring practices for urban or rural school districts, but not suburban districts.[4]

In addition to addressing a growing teacher shortage, many early advocates of alternative certification believed it would help to diversify the teaching profession in terms of age, gender, and race. Ray Legler's study of alternative certification in the Midwest in 2002 found that new teachers were somewhat older than those who came out of traditional teacher education programs but not any more racially diverse. Citing studies from the late 1990s and early 2000s, Carlyn Ludlow noted that alternative certification programs had not diversified new teachers in terms of age or gender, but they did produce slightly more non-white teachers. James W. Fraser and Lauren Lefty's survey of major alternative certification programs found that one of the largest and oldest, Teach for America, prepared nearly all white and upper-middle class new teachers from its founding in 1989 through the early 2010s, but claimed to recruit increasingly non-white and less affluent young people starting in the late 2010s.[5]

Studies that focus on the performance of alternatively-certified teachers have noted some troubling trends. Linda Darling-Hammond has been especially adamant that alternative routes result in less prepared teachers. She emphasizes that "fully prepared and certified teachers are generally better rated and more successful with students than teachers without this preparation."[6] She found that traditional teacher education programs are especially important in conveying pedagogical knowledge to prospective teachers. Scholars have continued to note how the alternative programs often produce teachers who are not as well prepared as those who complete traditional programs. A 2023 study of Texas, the state with the largest teacher workforce in the nation, found that alternative certification programs produced a majority of its new teachers. The authors pointed out that the alternative programs, especially the for-profit ones, had much lower completion and retention rates than

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Education (MDE) press release, 3 May 2024 https://www.michigan.gov/mde/news-and-information/press-releases/2024/05/03/state-superintendent-rice-highlights-state-efforts-addressing-teacher-shortage

4 Ray Legler, "The Impact of Alternative Certification in the Midwest: Policy Issues," *North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Policy Issues* No. 12 (November 2002), 2-17 ERIC No. ED475775; Frederick M. Hess, "Revitalizing Teacher Education by Revisiting our Assumptions about Teaching," *Journal of Teacher Education* 60, no. 5 (2009), 450-457; Carlyn Ludlow, "Alternative Certification Pathways: Filling a Gap?" *Education and Urban Society* 45, no. 4 (2013), 441, 446; James W. Fraser and Lauren Lefty, *Teaching Teachers: Changing Paths and Enduring Debates* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018); Christopher C. Martell, "Introduction," in *Social Studies Teacher Education: Critical Issues and Current Perspectives*, ed. Christopher C. Martell (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2018), 3-4. The statistics on alternative certification come from Fraser and Lefty, p. 24. Also see Melissa Tooley, "National Scan of Pathways to Becoming a First-Time Teacher," *New America* (April 2023) ERIC No. ED627948 http://newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/national-scan-of-pathways-to-becoming-a-first-time-teacher/

5 Legler, "The Impact of Alternative Certification in the Midwest: Policy Issues," 11; Ludlow, "Alternative Certification Pathways: Filling a Gap?," 449; and Fraser and Lefty, *Teaching Teachers*, 30.

6 Linda Darling-Hammond's perspectives are quoted in "How Teacher Education Matters," *Journal of Teacher Education* 51, no. 3 (May/June 2000), 166-173.

traditional programs.[7] Despite these findings, the appeal of these programs has not abated and criticisms of traditional teacher preparation programs have not subsided.

These broader trends in teacher preparation provide the context to understand the changing landscape of teacher preparation in Michigan. Research surveys confirm the media reports of dire teacher shortages. In September 2023, Public Policy Associates, a public policy research, development, and evaluation firm headquartered in Lansing, Michigan, released its findings on statewide K-12 staffing concerns. Based on interviews with 67 Michigan district school leaders, the report emphasized a "serious deterioration in the K-12 labor market in 2022-23." The district leaders testified that the number of teacher vacancies had more than doubled between 2019-2020 and 2022-2023. Many of them said the quality of teacher candidates available was much or somewhat less in 2023 compared to what it had been in 2019.[8] In a January 2024 report by the Educational Policy Innovation Collaborative at Michigan State University, the authors found that the percentage of teachers appropriately credentialed for the courses they taught dropped between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023. Attrition rates in 2022-2023 exceeded those of any year in Michigan since 2012-2013.[9]

To explain the vacancies, media coverage has focused considerable attention on teachers, such as Katie Newman and Beau Thompson, who have left the profession. Currently, 10,000 Michigan teachers retire or leave the profession each year while fewer than 5,000 join the teaching ranks.[10] This has led to a falling number of total certified teachers. Michigan Department of Education (MDE) data shows that in 2017-2018 the number of valid teaching certificate holders was 194,335. Of that total, 73,305 (37.7 percent) held teaching positions. Five years later in 2022-2023, the total number of valid certificates had dropped to 167,365 with 83,934 (50.2 percent) holding teaching positions. The uptick in relative overall employment is encouraging, but the drop in total certificates is alarming.[11]

In addition to teachers leaving the profession and those with certification not pursuing or receiving teaching employment, another important reason for the shortage is the decline in the number of candidates in Michigan's public and private colleges and universities' teacher preparation programs. The national context as well as Michigan's situation are important to keep in mind. The number of students who completed bachelor's degrees in education declined steeply across the United States from the early 1970s until around 2015. In 1970-71, education degrees constituted 21 percent of bachelor's degrees nationwide. This percentage tumbled until 2015-16 when it was 4.6 percent.[12] Between 2009 and 2014, teacher preparation enrollments declined by 35 percent and 23 percent fewer preparation candidates completed their programs. Because of a significant gap between supply and

7 Jennifer A. Bland, Steven K. Wojcikiewicz, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Wesley Wei, "Strengthening Pathways into the Teaching Profession in Texas: Challenges and Opportunities," *Learning Policy Institute* (February 2023), 2-3 ERIC No. ED630218 http:// learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/pathways-into-teaching-profession-texas

8 Chris Torres, Nathan Burroughs, Rebecca Frausel, Jacqueline Gardner, Dirk Zuschlag, and Calandra Reichel, *Final Report: The State of the Educator Workforce in Michigan: An In-Depth Look at K-12 Staffing Challenges* (Lansing: Public Policy Associates, 2023), 30-35. Quoted on p. 30. https://mialliance.com/app/uploads/2023/10/Education-Workforce-Study-Report_092823.pdf

9 Tara Kilbride, Salem Rogers, and Jennifer Moriarty, *Michigan Teacher Shortage Study: 2024 Report* (Lansing: Education Policy Innovation Collaborative, 2024), 22, 30-31. https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Teacher-Shortage-Study-2024_Final_12-20-23.pdf

10 Sneda Dhandapani, "Q&A: Michigan Teacher of the Year fears 'mass exodus' of instructors," *Bridge Magazine*, 3 July 2024 https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/qa-michigan-teacher-year-fears-mass-exodus-instructors; Nick Rubeck, "What We Get Wrong About the Teacher Shortage," *The Michigan Daily*, 30 May 2023 https://www.michigandaily.com/opinion/what-we-get-wrong-about-the-teacher-shortage/; John Gallagher, "Solving the Quandary: 3 Root Causes of Michigan's Teacher Shortage (and What Could Fix Them")," *Crain's Detroit Business*, 28 November 2022 https://www.crainsdetroit.com/crains-forum-teacher-shortage/michigans-teacher-shortage-resists-simple-solutions

11 MDE, Educator Workforce Data Report https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/educator-workforce-research/educator-workforce-data-report

12 "Bachelor's Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions," Table 322.10, National Center for Education Statistics https://nces.ed.gov

demand, Leib Sutcher and Linda Darling-Hammond's 2019 analysis estimated that 109,000 uncertified teachers were employed in schools in 2017-2018.[13]

Although much reduced compared to forty years earlier, since the mid-2010s, the proportion of education degrees nationwide has largely remained steady. In 2020-21, it was 4.3 percent. Michigan's situation generally parallels the national story. In 2012-13, education degrees made up 6.1 percent of all undergraduate degrees in Michigan compared to 5.9 percent nationwide. Michigan's percentage fell to 3.6 percent in 2017-18 and, by 2020-21, was 3.7 percent compared to 4.3 percent nationwide. The decline in new teacher candidates is especially dramatic when one considers that over this period the total number of undergraduate students nationwide jumped from 7.4 million to over 17 million from the early 1970s to 2010s. One of the major contributing factors to the post-1970s decline was the fact that women have had many more career options available to them in recent years.[14]

While education degrees across the nation, including Michigan, have declined over the past half-century, the new teacher situation is more perplexing when one looks at the most recent MDE data. The total number of initial teacher certificates in the state has actually increased in recent years. In 2017-18, there were a total of 3,792 new certificates. This increased to 4,518 by 2022-2023. While the total has risen, the relative number of teachers who received their certifications in Michigan's public and private universities has steadily declined. The number of initial teaching endorsements granted by public and private institutions with teacher preparation in Michigan dropped from 2,593 (68.4 percent) in 2017-18 to 2,516 (55.7 percent) in 2022-23. Out-of-state certifications have also declined slightly. The percentage of out-of-state initial certifications dropped from 29.2 in 2017-18 to 28.9 in 2022-23.[15]

Alternative credentialing is primarily responsible for the overall increase in number of teaching certifications. Michigan's current provisions for alternative licensing passed in 2009 (MCL 380.1531i) and require eligible candidates to hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree, have a 3.0 GPA on a 4.0 scale, and pass a criminal background check. The state requires alternative credentialing programs to include a minimum of 12 credit hours in child development or child psychology, family and community relationships, diverse learners, and instructional strategies as well as a field-based experience in a classroom setting. Before receiving their initial license, successful applicants must also pass the Michigan Test for Teachers Certification (MTTC). Michigan's current list of approved alternative preparation providers includes Davenport University, Detroit Public Schools Community District on the Rise Academy, New Paradigm for Education, Professional Innovators in Teaching, Schoolcraft College, University of Michigan-Flint, University of Michigan-Michigan Alternate Route to Certification, and Michigan Teachers of Tomorrow. Initial teaching certifications for candidates from alternative programs leaped from 1.7 percent in 2017-2018 to 12.3 percent in 2022-2023. In particular, the Michigan Teachers of Tomorrow (MTT) alternative preparation provider has grown from providing a total of only 4 initial teacher certifications in 2017-2018 to 323 in 2022-2023. That number made MTT the single largest provider of new teacher certifications in the state.[16]

Although the total number of alternate certificate recipients statewide is still much fewer than the total of traditional certificate recipients, the number of alternate certification enrollees has exploded. MTT's rapid

13 Leib Sutcher and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Understanding Teacher Shortages: An Analysis of Teacher Supply and Demand in the United States," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 27, no. 35 (April 8, 2019), 1-36. The statistics on teacher preparation enrollments in 2009 and 2014 and uncertified teachers in 2017-2018 are found on page 4.

14 "Bachelor's Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions," Table 322.10; and "Bachelor's Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions, by Field of Study and State or Jurisdiction, Table 319.30, National Center for Education Statistics https://nces.ed.gov

15 MDE, Educator Workforce Data Report https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/educator-workforce-research/educator-workforce-data-report

16 MDE websites: https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/ed-cert/cert-guidance/becoming-a-teacher/alternative-routes-to-teacher-cert-or-endorsement; and https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/ed-cert/cert-guidance/becoming-a-teacher/alternative-routes-to-teacher-cert-or-endorsement/approved-alternative-route-providers

emergence has made it the single most important competitive challenge to college and university teacher preparation in the state. Founded in 2005, Teachers of Tomorrow is available in eight states—Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas. Their website claims they have certified over 80,000 teachers nationwide to date. In Michigan, the program is available to anyone who holds a bachelor's degree, has a 2.95 overall GPA, and has passed the MTTC. Students who meet these qualifications can take their entire education coursework online and self-paced for a total base rate of $5,899. After candidates are hired into teaching positions, they owe an additional $5,600 to MTT. However, if they do not receive teaching employment, they pay no additional fee. MTT also provides a list of its eligible teaching candidates to any school district that requests it.[17]

Michigan's teacher certification exam is another factor likely contributing to Michigan's teacher vacancies. In addition to holding a bachelor's degree in a subject or subjects that are eligible for teacher licensing, teacher candidates throughout the United States must pass a state-approved test to demonstrate subject knowledge and skills. Michigan is one of only four states—the others are Arizona, Florida, and Illinois—that does not use Educational Testing Service's Praxis II for this purpose. The Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) developed by Pearson is used instead. Compared to the Praxis II subject tests, which have ample and thoroughly developed subject study guides, the MTTC does not provide this same level of assistance. Students who take the MTTC must rely on reviewing their class materials and examining the few sample questions provided by Pearson to prepare for taking the subject exams. In the three-year period from 2015 to 2018, the initial pass rate across all MTTC subjects was 79.4 percent. Because students are allowed to take the MTTC subject tests as many times as they like (and pay $129 each time they do so), the cumulative pass rate for all subjects from 2015 to 2018 was 89.4 percent. This means that just over 10 percent of eligible college graduates had not passed the MTTC. The cumulative pass rate in some of the subjects is much worse than 89.4 percent. While Social Studies had an initial pass rate of 74.5 percent and a cumulative pass rate of 90.4 percent, History had an initial pass rate of 50.3 percent and a cumulative pass rate of 66.9 percent of test takers from 2015-2018. In those years, a total of 517 candidates took the History test, but only 346 had passed it. Those numbers dipped to a 64.6 percent cumulative pass rate—204 out of 316 test takers—in 2018-2021.

The history numbers ticked up by the 2020-2023 period with 402 taking the test with 267 passing it eventually at a 66.4 percent rate. In the 2018-2021 period, Social Studies had an initial pass rate of 71.3 percent and an 88.4 percent cumulative pass rate—511 or 578 test takers—which was also down from 2015-2018. The number of social studies test takers continued to grow significantly in the 2020-2023 period with 1,008 test takers but both the initial pass rate (66.3 percent) and 3-year cumulative pass rate dropped (83.7 percent) meaning there were 844 who passed the test in those years (See Figures 1 and 2).[18]

While the contribution of initial teaching certifications from Michigan's public and private institutions has declined rapidly, the erosion in the number of students pursuing social studies and history certification at Michigan's traditional teacher preparation institutions is even more dramatic than the national or statewide numbers suggest. The authors of this essay and many of our colleagues around the state have observed this steep decline first hand over the past decade and a half. As members of the Michigan Council for History Education, the authors encouraged the organization to sponsor a survey of statewide history and social studies university and college educators to gain a deeper understanding of the problem as well as possible avenues of reform. Based on these sources of information, we found there was an overall decline in teacher candidates even as there was a recent slight uptick in candidates at some state institutions.

17 MDE, Office of Educator Excellence, *Educator Workforce Data Report*, 2022 (Lansing: MDE, 2022), 73-74; and Michigan Teachers of Tomorrow: https://www.teachersoftomorrow.org/michigan/

18 MDE, Office of Educator Excellence, *Michigan Test for Teacher Certification, Three-Year Cumulative Report, 2015-2018* (Lansing: MDE, 21 December 2018); MDE, Office of Educator Excellence, *Michigan Test for Teacher Certification, Three-Year Cumulative Report, 2018-2021* (Lansing: MDE, 15 December 2021); and MDE, Educator Workforce Data Report, Preparation: Tests for Certification https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/educator-workforce-research/educator-workforce-data-report

Figure 3 highlights the social studies education enrollment trends at five Michigan public and private institutions from 2010 to 2023.[19] Over the period from 2010 to 2020, enrollment in the five institution's social studies education programs dropped. This is especially evident between 2010 and 2015—comparable to the overall situation for education degrees nationally and in Michigan—and, to a somewhat lesser degree, between 2015 and 2020. However, since 2020, enrollments have increased at Grand Valley State University, Central Michigan University, and Calvin University. The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and Western Michigan University experienced drop-offs since 2020. WMU's decline was due in part to the closing of its undergraduate secondary education certification programs and substitution of a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. Thus far, the MAT has not attracted many students. For example, in 2024, just two students are enrolled in Western's MAT in social studies education.

Figure 4 summarizes the history education enrollment trends at the five institutions over 2010 to 2023. In this certification area, declines have generally continued since 2020, except in the case of Grand Valley State University. Part of the reason for the erosion in history education is because the MDE has altered certification requirements in social studies. Beginning in May 2023, the state approved new certification areas in Social Studies, grades 5-9, and Social Studies, grades 7-12. At the same time, individual disciplines in the social sciences, specifically history, economics, geography, and civics, became optional as certification areas for grades 7-12 teacher licensing in Michigan. Endorsements in history, geography, civics, and economics may now be earned by candidates only after they have completed the requirements for the social studies endorsement.[20]

Figure 5 combines the enrollment in both social studies and history education for the five institutions. Over the 13-year period from 2010 and 2023, all five institutions lost enrollment in their social studies and history education programs. The declines ranged from 33.5 percent at Grand Valley State University to 94.1 percent at Western Michigan University. For context, Figure 6 provides information from the MDE on the total number of initial teaching certificates provided by the five institutions. Aside from Grand Valley State University and the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, declines are noticeable at three of the five institutions between 2017-2018 and 2022-2023, but they were much less severe overall than was the case for their social studies and history programs.[21]

Figure 5 clearly suggests that the steepest decline in social studies and history enrollments occurred between 2010 and 2015. Enrollment continued to decline at a lesser rate between 2015 and 2020 with the exception of Western Michigan University. These declines partly reflect the downward trend in enrollments among many of the state's colleges and universities in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Between 2010 and 2020, Michigan's college and university enrollment declined by 33 percent.[22] However, during the recent COVID-impacted period between 2020 and 2023, enrollments actually tracked upward at Grand Valley State University, Central Michigan University, and Calvin University. The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and Western Michigan University were the exceptions. The increases over the recent time span were moderate at the three schools, but they suggest that there may be some stability in students' interests in teaching social studies.

Graduate programs for secondary certification are available at four of the five institutions. In each case, students admitted to these graduate certification programs must hold a bachelor's degree in history or social studies. The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor offers a MAT for secondary schools that requires a full year of courses totaling 36 credit hours. This master's program has been relatively stable over the 2010 to 2023 period,

19 The MCHE survey questions were sent to all private and public colleges and universities in Michigan that offer history and social studies certification. The five institutions highlighted in this essay were the ones that responded to the survey.

20 MDE, *Standards for the Preparation of Middle Grades (5-9) and High School (7-12) Social Studies Teachers*, approved 9 May 2023, p. 29. https:// www.michigan.gov/mde/-media/Project/Websites/mde/educator_services/prep/standards/social-studies-teacher-preparation-standards-MG-HS.pdf?rev=d285062f3c814971aa7d0bdd7c8d928c&hash=5101D3A83CBFA1F0D695CD26F5784D50

21 MDE, Educator Workforce Data Report https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/educator-workforce-research/educator-workforce-data-report

22 Melanie Hanson, "College Enrollment and Student Demographic Statistics," EducationData.org, 21 December 2024. https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics

though it lost students between 2020 and 2023. In 2010, it had 10 enrollees, 15 in 2015, 14 in 2020, and eight in 2023. Grand Valley State University offers a graduate teacher certification that enrolls a few students. The program requires 27 credit hours including a full-year student teaching placement. Western Michigan University's MAT program, started in 2020, requires 35-36 credit hours including a full-year student teaching placement. From 2021 to 2024, a total of nine students have pursued the MAT in social studies. Calvin University has just started a MAT program. It has fewer than five students currently. Because students in these programs already have content area preparation, nearly all the course work in the MAT programs is centered on education topics. Given the teacher shortages across the state, graduates of these MAT programs are likely to find teaching employment. Yet the small size of each program means that they will not do much to help address the overall teacher shortage.

The five institutions have modified their programs' curricula in various ways beyond offering master's programs over the past few years. Curriculum changes at the undergraduate level have been common. For instance, Grand Valley State modified its social studies major to include more content courses in history, geography, political science, and economics at a more advanced level. Western Michigan, while no longer offering undergraduate secondary-level certification, added a new social studies major that provides a foundation in all four content areas to help prepare students who might consider applying for admission to the new MAT program. Both Grand Valley and Central Michigan are planning changes in their social studies majors to adjust to the new state teacher preparation standards. Calvin recently changed its curriculum university-wide from three to four credit courses, which meant that it could no longer require students to take both semesters of World History. Students are now allowed to choose one or the other half of the world history sequence.

Four of the five institutions surveyed are involved in or plan to start additional outreach programs meant to address the teacher shortage. At the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, faculty in the teacher certification program are working with community colleges to bring students to campus who have an interest in teaching. They are also launching an initiative to recruit faculty in the arts and sciences to be "champions of teaching" as a way to spotlight the importance of teacher preparation. Grand Valley State University, Western Michigan University, and Central Michigan University are all partnering with the statewide "Grow Your Own" initiative to encourage paraprofessionals already in the schools to pursue certification in a content area. Grand Valley State has partnered with Intermediate School Districts in Kent, Ottawa, and Muskegon Counties in a West Michigan Teachers Collaborative to help people with or without bachelor's degrees or in need of additional credentialing pursuing a career path in teaching. In the fall of 2023, up to 300 applicants were chosen for the program. Successful candidates receive tuition, fees, and supplies and are eligible for stipends of up to $20,000. Central Michigan University is partnering with area schools in a "Talent Together" program that is similar to "Grow Your Own." They also have developed a pipeline with six nearby community colleges to allow students to take coursework toward a teaching degree through online course work and help them find student teaching placements within a 60-mile radius of their community college partner.[23]

History and social studies education faculty are aware that attracting new teachers may require rethinking about how to prepare students for the realities of the classroom. The importance of content knowledge and disciplinary literacy for history and social studies teachers cannot be disputed. The 2023 Michigan Standards for the Preparation of Middle Grades (5-9) and High School (7-12) Social Studies Teachers establish what teachers need to know, able to do, and believe to be well prepared beginning teachers in the disciplines.[24] This includes focusing on disciplinary definitions in the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. Section D specifically emphasizes disciplinary concepts in social studies disciplines that need to be "caught" as much as taught through

23 "West Michigan Teaching Collaborative Creates Opportunities for Educators and New Teachers," 27 September 2023. https://www.kentisd.org/pub/news/posts/1830; Talent Together website https://mitalenttogether.org/; "A Systemic Solution to the Michigan Teacher Shortage," *Michigan Education Magazine*, Spring 2022 https://marsal.umich.edu/magazine/systemic-solution-michigan-teacher-shortage

24 MDE, Specialty Program Standards https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/ed-cert/educator-preparation-providers/specialty-program-standards

college level content coursework.[25]

In addition to content course requirements, teacher preparation programs typically require a methods course for teaching history and social studies. Methods course instructors have long struggled to provide appropriate instructional advice that goes beyond theory. The concept of pedagogical concept knowledge (PCK), which Lee Shulman first articulated in 1986, has been the major influence among history and social studies methods instructors for much of the past forty years. As Shulman explained, PCK is a "particular form of content knowledge that embodies the aspects of content most germane to its teachability."[26] PCK reflects instructors' attempts to blend both deep content knowledge and wisdom about how the teaching aspects of this knowledge can be distilled to help new teachers understand their craft.[27] Considerable work among history educators from the 1990s through the early 21st century has focused on identifying history's specific PCK. Much of the research underlying PCK in history stemmed from participant-observer studies of grade-school history teachers and their students. Sam Wineburg's *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, published in 2001, inspired many other history educators to encapsulate PCK that could be taught to pre-service teachers. Indeed, the phrase historical thinking has since often been used as the shorthand phrase for PCK in history education.[28] For instance, University of Northern Colorado history educator Fritz Fischer's "History's Habits of Mind," which elaborates on historical thinking skills, is an important teacher tool that is available on the National Council for History Education's website.[29]

Over the past decade, many history and social studies educators have called for a closer alignment between pre-service methods course material and classroom teachers' practices. Referred to as core practices (CP), the most recent emphases in methods instruction focus on connections between the theoretical emphases of teaching standards, C3, and PCK and their practical applications in actual classrooms.[30] CP practitioners advocate for methods courses taught in close alignment with students' field experiences so that there is a stronger alignment of methods with classroom practices. In these field placements, preservice teachers are asked "to observe, critically evaluate, and practice particular CPs."[31] Considerable attention focuses on identifying and refining the most important CPs.[32] One of the most often cited history CPs is discussion leadership, particularly text-based discussion. Other CPs for history instruction include using historical questions, selecting and adapting historical sources, modeling and supporting historical reading skills, and modeling and supporting historical writing.[33]

25 See, for instance, Christopher C. Martell, ed., *Social Studies Teacher Education: Critical Issues and Current Perspectives* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2018); and Bob Bain, Arthur Chapman, Alison Kitson, and Tamara Shreiner, ed., *History Education and Historical Inquiry* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2024).

26 Lee S. Shulman, "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching," *Educational Researcher* 15, no. 2 (1986), 4-14, quoted on p. 9

27 Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no. 1 (1987), 1-22.

28 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

29 https://ncheteach.org/conference/history-of-habits-of-mind/. See Fritz Fischer, "The Historian as Translator: Historical Thinking, The Rosetta Stone of History Education," *Historically Speaking* 12, no. 3 (2011), 15-17.

30 For an excellent overview of recent work in the field of history and social studies core practices, see Peter Jay Lightning, "What Do Social Studies Methods Instructors Know and Do?: Teacher Educators' PCK for Facilitating Historical Discussions," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 51, no. 1 (2023), 72-99. Another useful overview is Anthony Clarke, Valerie Triggs, and Wendy Nielsen, "Cooperating Teacher Participation in Teacher Education: A Review of the Literature," *Review of Educational Research* 84, no. 2 (2014), 163-202.

31 Todd Dinkelman and Alexander Cuenca, "A Turn to Practice: Core Practices in Social Studies Teacher Education," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 48, no. 4 (2020), 583-610. Quoted on p. 584.

32 Francesca M. Forzani, "Understanding 'Core Practices' and 'Practice-Based' Teacher Education: Learning from the Past," *Journal of Teacher Education* 65, no. 4 (2014), 357-368.

33 For examples and discussion of specific history CPs, see Chauncey Monte-Sano and Christopher Budano, "Developing and

Innovation in methods training, applying this recent understanding of CPs, may help to better differentiate university teacher preparation programs from the rapidly growing challenge from alternative certification programs, specifically MTT.[34]

In addition, the Michigan Department of Education has adopted "Core Teaching Practices" that educator preparation programs must teach.[35] These practices are based on the research and work of TeachingWorks.[36] While these are general practices, TeachingWorks gives specific examples of the importance of the different ways disciplines enact these practices. For instance, explaining and modeling content in social studies requires teachers to know how experts practice sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. Teachers of history and social studies also need to be able to answer open-ended questions to elicit and interpret individual student thinking instead of asking questions that only require students to demonstrate memorization of fact or learning a single story.[37] The preparation of history and social studies teachers to do these kinds of specific practices is not something easily learned without careful apprenticing.

Traditional college and university teacher preparation programs cannot compete with alternative certification programs in terms of cost and relative ease of access to coursework. These competitive challenges will need to be met head-on by faculty and administrators at the colleges and universities. They should directly advertise to potential teacher candidates that their programs offer expert guidance from leaders in the teacher preparation field who can specifically address candidates' questions and needs particularly about PCK in history and social studies. By contrast, MTT's online, self-paced coursework is a one-size-fits-all approach. It seems sensible for colleges and universities to let potential students know that they will pay more for their preparation but that it will provide better quality. Good teachers can come from alternative preparation routes, but curriculum and programs which have been designed by content and pedagogical experts have a better chance of preparing teachers for long-term success in the field as professional educators of history and social studies. Teaching history and social studies with success takes a high level of intellectual sophistication and a well-planned program of apprenticing through a college or university program.

In addressing candidates' questions and needs about the profession, history and social studies education faculty must be able to contextualize and explain many of the most important issues facing the teaching profession. Teaching has never been a prestigious profession in American society, and in the MCHE survey results, faculty note that society's perceptions of teachers have continued to slide. Among the concerns that faculty expressed is a disproportionate emphasis in the news media on teachers who leave the profession, instead of those who stay in it. Faculty pointed to the current divided and politicized climate of American society which influences the curriculum by contributing to an overdramatization of areas of contention. Other concerns include lack of diversity among teachers in the profession and a perceived erosion of professionalization among teachers.

The need for strong teacher preparation programs in history and social studies that emphasize disciplinary and pedagogical skills is underscored by the 2024 American Historical Association's report, *American Lesson*

Enacting Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Teaching History: An Exploration of Two Novice Teachers' Growth over Three Years," *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 22, no. 2 (2013), 171-211; Bradley Fogo, "Core Practices in Teaching History: The Results of the Delphi Panel Survey," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 42, no. 2 (2014), 151-196; and Abby Reisman, Peter Cipparone, Jay Lightning, Chauncey Monte-Sano, Sarah Schneider Kavanagh, Sarah McGrew, and Brad Fogo, "Evidence of Emergent Practice: Teacher Candidates Facilitating Historical Discussions in their Field Placements," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 80 (2019), 145-156.

34 Gordon P. Andrews, Wilson J. Warren, and James P. Cousins, *Collaboration and the Future of Education: Preserving the Right to Think and Teach Historically* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 75-118, highlights a long-term collaborative effort between Western Michigan University's social studies preparation program and the students and teachers at Portage Central High School.

35 MDE, Information for Educator Preparation Providers https://www.michigan.gov/mde/services/ed-serv/ed-cert/educator-preparation-providers

36 TeachingWorks, High-Leverage Practices https://www.teachingworks.org/high-leverage-practices/

37 TeachingWorks, TeachingWorks Resource Library, Social Studies High-Leverage Practices https://www.teachingworks.org/high-leverage-practices/

Plan: Teaching U.S. History in Secondary Schools. This extensive study sheds light on the importance of teachers as key deciders of what is taught, what resources are used, and what values are passed on in a classroom. As teachers choose materials and make curricular decisions, teachers in the history and social studies classroom play key roles. They need to be prepared for this intense work by a well-organized and intentional college or university preparation program.[38]

In the face of increasing marketing competition, history and social studies education faculty offer a variety of ideas in the MCHE survey regarding other strategies for recruiting new teacher candidates. All agree that monetary incentives such as free tuition and higher teacher salaries are especially important. School districts might attempt to recruit new teacher candidates in ways that are common in the nursing field by identifying students with teaching potential and then providing them with sign-on bonuses. New teachers who receive such bonuses would then be contracted to work for a designated period of time for their school. Schools might incentivize teacher recruitment by providing support to defray the cost of housing. History and social studies education faculty pointed out that more effort needs to be directed toward publicizing the stories of thriving teachers to elaborate on how and why they are thriving. Student teachers also need placements with outstanding teacher mentors who are engaged and committed to excellence in the classroom.

Historically, Michigan's public and private teacher preparation institutions have played an important role in providing the state and the rest of the nation with new teachers. This study shows the need for history and social studies teacher preparation programs to pay attention to the current context. Because of the increasing numbers of people who are pursuing alternative credentialing, especially from MTT, the public and private institutions need to provide stronger evidence to potential teachers of their excellence and relevance in teacher preparation. More study is needed to learn from all teacher preparation programs, understand the pipeline of teachers, and better articulate what learning happens in teacher preparation programs. In the case of history and social studies, the faculty from the five institutions surveyed in this study are both aware of this need and are working hard to provide evidence of their ability to contribute to the state's teaching ranks.

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38 American Historical Association, *American Lesson Plan: Teaching U.S. History in Secondary Schools* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2024).

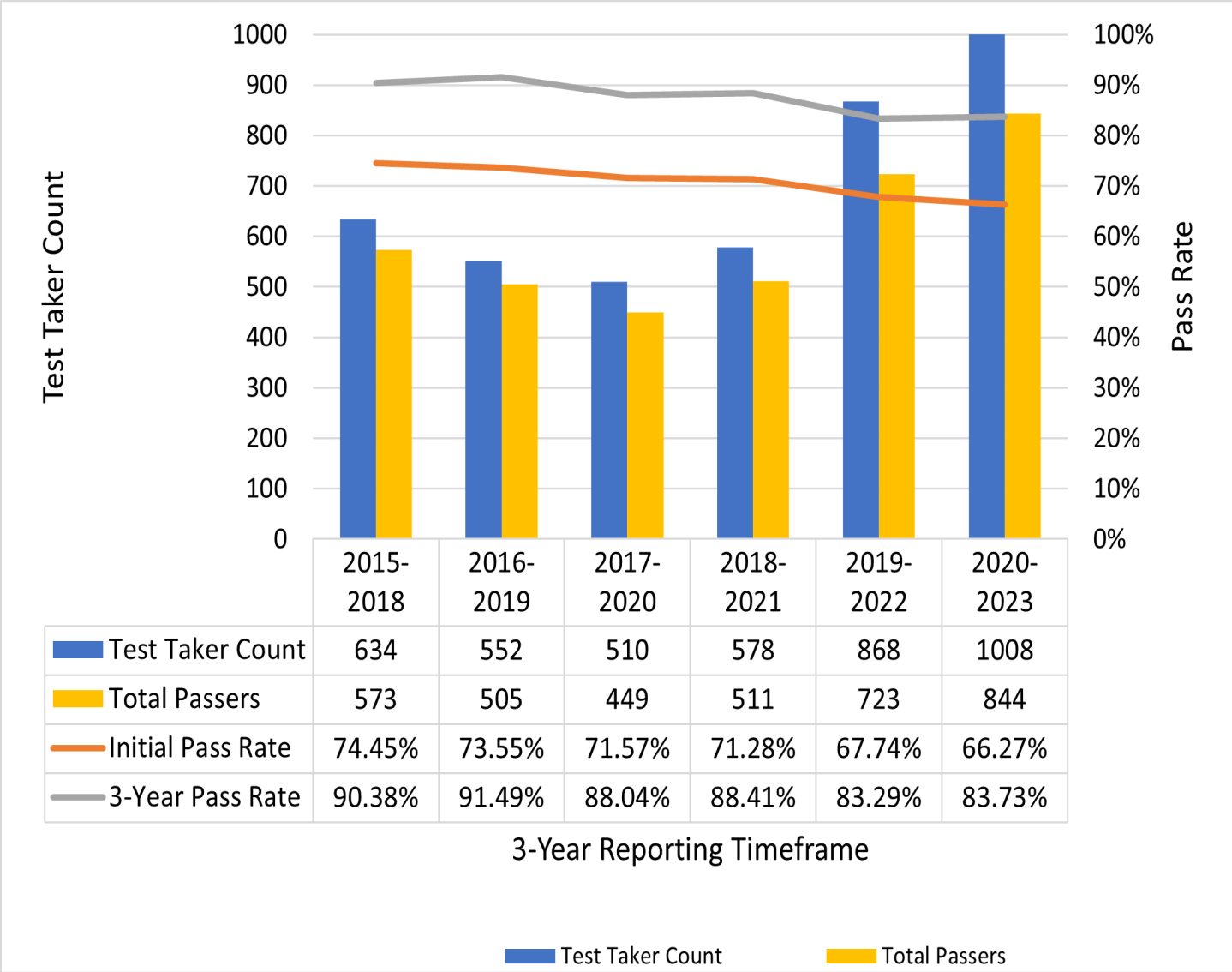

Figure 1: Michigan Test for Teacher Certification 084 Social Studies (Secondary) Results

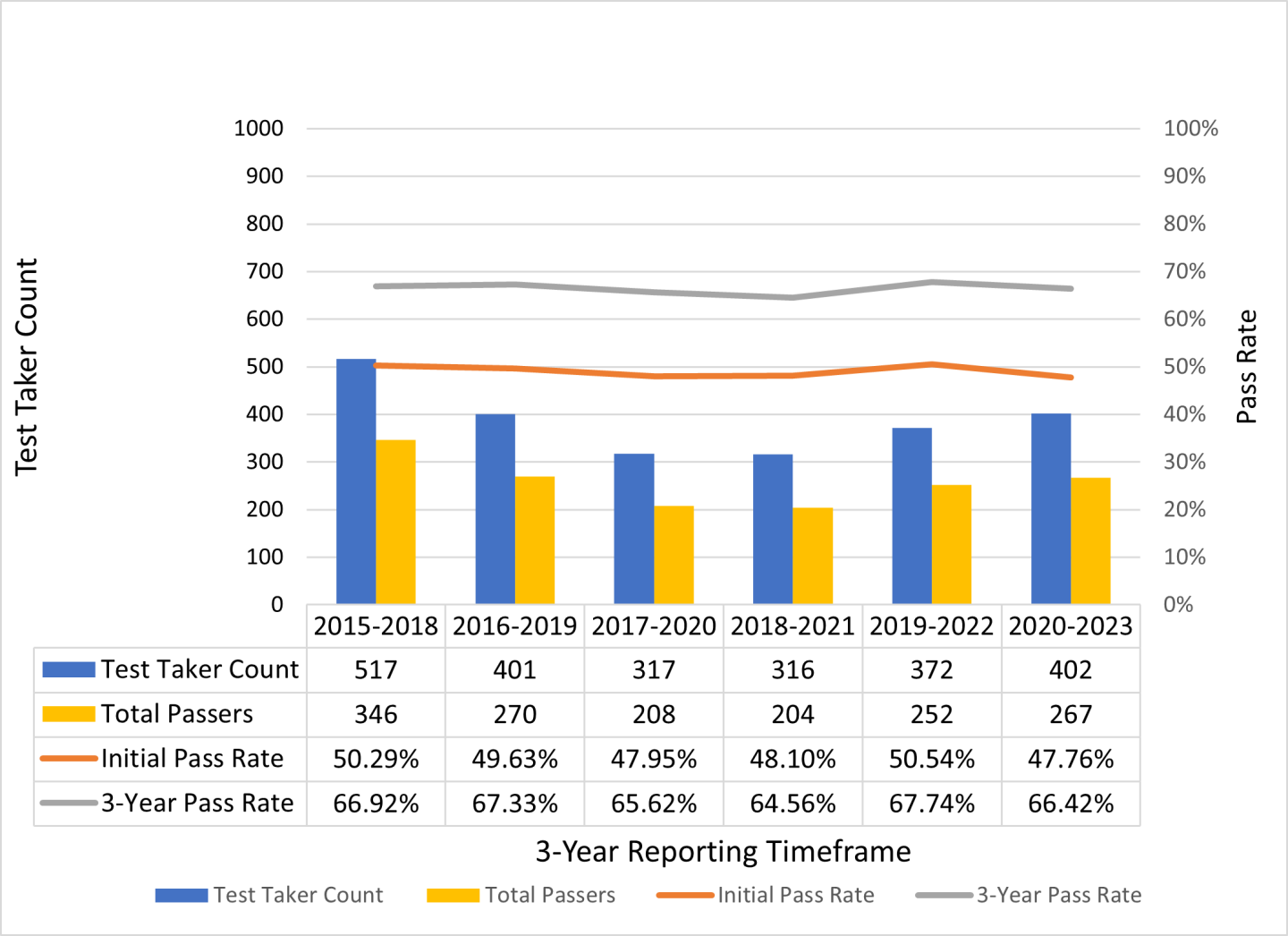

Figure 2: Michigan Test for Teacher Certification 009 History Results

Figure 3: Total Enrollment in Social Studies Education

Institution	2010	2015	2020	2023
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor*	18	7	17	7
Grand Valley State University	244	184	129	148
Western Michigan University**	155	79	23	12
Central Michigan University	N/A	N/A	59	102
Calvin University	25	N/A	23	34

*The enrollment numbers include both social studies and history.

**Western Michigan University closed its undergraduate teacher preparation programs in secondary education in 2020. WMU now offers a Master of Arts in Teaching for students interested in secondary-level teacher certification.

Figure 4: Total Enrollment in History Education

Institution	2010	2015	2020	2023
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor*	18	7	17	7
Grand Valley State University	78	28	51	66
Western Michigan University**	99	29	12	3
Central Michigan University	N/A	N/A	71	33
Calvin University	42	N/A	13	9

* The enrollment numbers include both social studies and history.

**Western Michigan University closed its undergraduate teacher preparation programs in secondary education in 2020. WMU now offers a Master of Arts in Teaching for students interested in secondary-level teacher certification.

Figure 5: Total Enrollment in Social Studies and History Education

Institution	2010	2015	2020	2023
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	18	7 (-61.1%)	17 (+142.9%)	7 (-58.8%) Overall= -61.1
Grand Valley State University	322	212 (-34.2%)	180 (-15.1%)	214 (+18.9%) Overall= -33.5
Western Michigan University	254	108 (-57.4%)	35 (-67.6%)	15 (-57.1%) Overall= -94.1%
Central Michigan University	N/A	N/A	130	135 (+3.8%)
Calvin University	67	N/A	36	43 (+19.4%) Overall= -35.8%

Figure 6: Total Initial Teaching Certificates Issued by the Five Institutions, 2017-18 and 2022-23

Institution	2017-18	2022-23 (% change)
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	136	136 (0.0%)
Grand Valley State University	304	310 (+1.9%)
Western Michigan University	188	151 (-19.7%)
Central Michigan University	238	235 (-1.3%)
Calvin University	77	58 (-24.7%)

An Interview with Kevin Gannon about "A History of Your Day"

Jessamyn Neuhaus
SUNY Plattsburgh

For the Fall 2025 issue of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, I'm delighted to include this recorded interview with Dr. Kevin Gannon describing an assignment he regularly uses when teaching undergraduate history courses. He calls it "A History of Your Day" and it is an in-class activity he facilitates during the very first in-person class meeting. I first heard Dr. Gannon describe this activity at the 2024 American Historical Association annual meeting as part of a panel titled "One Small Change You Can Make Tomorrow in Your Introductory History Course." I know that readers of *THAJM* will find it as inspiring as I did!

Kevin Gannon is Director of the Center for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence and Professor of History at Queens University of Charlotte, in North Carolina. He is the author of *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (West Virginia University Press, 2020), and his writing has also appeared in The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Vox*, *CNN*, and *The Washington Post*. In 2016, he appeared in the Oscar-nominated documentary *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay. He is co-editor of the new collection *The Campus Crisis Toolkit: Strategies and Solidarity for the Rest of Us* (SUNY University Press, forthcoming).

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Welcome, Kevin Gannon. Thank you so much for talking to *Teaching History, a Journal of Methods* today. Can you please describe the activity "A History of Your Day" that you use on the first day of your introductory history classes?

Kevin Gannon: Sure, and I do this in any introductory history class that I teach. Basically, it's a light lift exercise. In the first day of class, I ask my students to think about and free-write a little bit about what they think history is. Based on, you know, their previous experience in history classes, interest in it, whatever. And then, after giving them a couple minutes to sort of prime like that, then I ask them to write a history of their day. And I'm purposefully vague. They get really frustrated, because they're like, do I write it as a list? And I tell them, however you want to write it, however you want to present this. It's your history, right? I say, "I'm not going to give you any more guidance than that, because you're writing *your* history, you're the expert on that." I do say, "Start from when you first gained consciousness today until you walked in our classroom."

Jessamyn A Neuhaus: Right.

Kevin Gannon: And what usually happens is they will write [something] very cursory and they mostly end up as lists. Some of them [are] bullet-pointed [though] there are a few who write it as a narrative. But it's very simple, you know: "I got up, I brushed my teeth, I did this, I did that." And it all tends to focus on the very quotidian, small pieces of things.

So, what comes out of the discussion after?

I have several of them share out. And then I ask them, "What are you hearing that's similar? What are you hearing that's contrasting? Are these history?" And that's the question that kind of gets them, you know, because what will surface, to no one's surprise, right, is some students will say, "Does it count?" And I'll say, "Well, we don't

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read anything about Julius Caesar brushing his teeth, but let's assume that he practiced oral hygiene, right?" Just because it doesn't feel important, does that mean it's not history?

And so that's where the discussion really [goes] and I have them think, I have them, sort of reflect a little bit, on why did you write it the way that you did? If you wrote a list of bullet points, why did you organize things that way? They all write it chronologically, and so I asked them to think about, you know, why would the expectation be for a history that everything is exactly along the linear timeline? Just sort of, you know, pushing against what our assumptions about what history is.

And then I have them think about choices, because I'll say, you know, you didn't include *everything* that happened today, right? Like, how did you decide what to put in and what to leave out? I use the example if you drive, if you commute to campus. Like, you make the same drive every day, and if I were to ask you [to] tell me all the things that happened on that drive, you probably wouldn't be able to tell me anything, because you were on autopilot.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Right! Yeah.

Kevin Gannon: And so, does that count as history if it's something that's so routine, did you talk about that in the history of your day? And someone will say, occasionally, like, "Well, I almost got rear-ended, so I wrote about that," and okay, so now something has risen to the level of significance. What are the criteria?

Basically, it's to get them thinking largely about "what is history?" You know, the old E.H. Carr question. What counts as history depends [on] who you ask. What's important depends [on]who you ask. And then I have them compare and contrast what they've produced with the history that they've read. Or been assigned in previous courses. And mostly it's contrasting, right? I ask them, "What are the main differences?" And [they answer with] some variation of, "Well, those were important people."

And so that's a great opportunity. What makes historical significance? Like, I think all of you are pretty significant and important, but because you don't think so, does that mean you don't have history? Right? And I actually introduce them, I give a couple quotes from Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History*.[1] As kind of a couple thought points, like, who gets to have history in the way that we approach history with a capital H. So, it's kind of a free-range discussion, because a lot of it does sort of springboard off of what the class has written, and then who shares. But we usually, in fact, in my experience, we've always ended up at a place where students get to an understanding that everything has a history, to quote the AHA. And that what we tend to think of in terms of important or significant, or the ways that we've accessed history, particularly U.S. history, has been heavily filtered. And so, then I invite them to think, well, what do we do about that, right? You know, what are the implications of that? You know, for you, not just as a student or as a learner, but as a person? Like, how does this make you feel? Do people who look like you count?

So, it's really interesting, and I do this right off the bat. Like, we do some brief introductions, and then we jump right in, because my goal is to immediately problematize

the assumptions they bring in about what history is and how you study history. And very quickly, it helps us get [that] out. I think some of the chief work that it does short-term is it conveys very clearly that this is not going to be a "names and dates" class.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: [laughs] Yes.

Kevin Gannon: I'm very clear that this is not a class where you will have to memorize names and dates. The palpable relief! I mean, seriously. I was absolutely surprised, the first [time]. I was like, Jesus, who hurt you? [laughter] And, you know, there's a variety of reasons for it, right? Like, standardized testing, AP mania, I think, is a big one.

1 Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Yeah.

Kevin Gannon: And so, to get to a place where we could immediately address that, and say this is not how we're gonna do it. This is not really, you know, how history is. The broad and rich set of habits of mind and practices that it is. And so, letting that pressure off is actually some of the most important work this exercise does right away.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Yeah, great. So, you described how students respond that day during discussion. Does it ever arise later, or do students comment on it a bit later in the semester, or in conjunction with other reading and assignments?

Kevin Gannon: It bubbles up from time to time, but I think one of the things I would like to do better at is intentionally coming back [to it]. I refer back to it at several points throughout the semester. But I'd like to be more intentional about that, and kind of build that into the course [more] systematically and have students kind of draw some of those connections. I think there's room and opportunity space to do that in the primary source work that we do. For example, I do a lot of social annotation. You know, like, with Hypothesis,[2] for example, or we'll, you know, kind of do some close reading in class, either in groups or as a whole group, and I think there's space there where I can be a little more intentional about having them connect to that particular activity, and then seeing where that resonates with the sources that we're looking at in the context of those sources.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: You could even collect them, and then hand them back late in the semester, and ask them to revisit it, and would they do anything differently this time?

Kevin Gannon: Yeah! The next time I teach a history course, because teaching is not part of my regular duties, and when I do teach, I teach in our new student seminar program. But I will have an opportunity to teach some history at some point soon, I think. And what I'm gonna do is I'm actually gonna rerun the activity again at the end of the semester. Yes. And have them think [about] what are the different choices that you made now? How does your history now reflect what's happened this semester? So again, I'm thinking about it cognitively, but also a very intentional way of showing [that] you have a much more sophisticated and complex [answer to] this question now than you did 14 weeks ago.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Right, yeah!

Kevin Gannon: Pretty cool stuff, right? You know, because a lot of times we sort of assume that students see, oh, I've learned things. Yeah, but can they name those things explicitly? Can we help them name it? And I feel like this is an opportunity to do that.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely, and they will recall the activity very specifically, so it's not a vague something we did that's been lost in the shuffle.

Kevin Gannon: I will share one thing, too. When they talk about all the, you know, the quotidian things, I mentioned the brushing the teeth thing, because almost everyone includes that. And so, I'll make it, like, all of you who've shared, "How many of you included brushing your teeth in the history of your day?" And almost everyone will raise their hands. And I'll say, "Okay, great, right? Like, I'm happy you did that, and so are the people sitting next to you. But why?" For a lot of students, it's, "Well, that's the first thing I did that I could remember after getting out of bed." And, you know, and that's a legitimate reason, and an interesting reason. But then it's also like, you know, did you put that down there because you were worried that if you did it, how people

2 Hypothesis Online Annotation Tool, https://web.hypothes.is/.

might look at you? So, we talk about motivations and choices about what to include, but the brushing the teeth thing becomes kind of a running gag in some of the classes, right? And so that's kind of fun, to have that as a little thread that weaves its way through.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: And historical specificities, there are times in human history where that would not have been the thing people did.

Kevin Gannon: Nope. And so, when I teach my Ancient World class, for example, we talk about Greek habits of hygiene, you know, like, let's bathe in olive oil!" It seems ludicrous. But I'm like, it worked! Barely, you know? So, yeah, it's just, it's kind of fun to be in that space, and for them to enter it in kind of a playful way, which I also think is really important.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Well, on a slightly less fun note, in what ways is "A History of Your Day"

useful way to introduce students to studying history right at this particular moment [in] 2025? In other words, how does it potentially lay the groundwork for learning about reliable primary sources and historical facts in this era of truth decay and the rise of generative AI?

Kevin Gannon: So, I have not done this exercise since large language models have really exploded onto the scene, but when I do, I'm gonna ask them to think about what would this have looked like if you'd have entered it as a prompt in ChatGPT. I don't integrate Gen AI into my own teaching for a lot of reasons. But I don't think it's a constructive strategy to pretend it doesn't exist, and I think that there's an opportunity for some rich conversation there. Because then it gets into, and I quote E.H. Carl, I still love *What Is History*? I think that book, it made such an impact when I read it as an undergrad.[3] But the idea of, you know, there are facts, and then there are *historical* facts, the distinction he makes. You know, lots of people cross the Rubicon, but we always talk about Caesar. Why?

So, I use that example to think about, well, lots of people brush their teeth, right? You know, or whatever. [Students] see themselves as a primary source. So, I ask if someone else were to write the history of your day, what would that look like? Because they wouldn't have been there for, like, the brushing your teeth part, right? Or maybe, if it's a communal bathroom. [laughs] But just getting them to think about, like, positionality, observation. Our primary sources, you know, sometimes [students] come to us with this idea that primary sources are the gold standard, and it's like, well, not the *only* source, and sometimes they're not all they're cracked up to be, and let's talk about why that is, And so that's a good way to get into that conversation a little bit as well.

But it also, I think, opens up, and this is to the point of the question, and the important work that [the assignment] does. It opens up the idea that it's not just history, it's histories.

And so perspective matters; positionality [matters]. I try to do in this [to help them] get them away from this sort of all-consuming fetish for objectivity. Right? Everybody's biased, right? The very act of choosing a topic is an act of saying this is more important than other things, right? So, objectivity with a capital O doesn't exist in history. That doesn't mean history and historical scholarship is invalid, but it means we have to approach it in different ways. The history of your day is a history with a capital H.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Right.

Kevin Gannon: It is a research product, right?

Jessamyn A Neuhaus: Yes.

3 Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1969).

Kevin Gannon: It is a synthesis of primary sources and content, but it looks different than the people at your table. It looks different from the history that's on sale at Barnes & Noble for Father's Day. So, what do we do with that understanding? And I think for this particular moment, it equips students to sort of critically analyze why is something produced, for what ends, and for what audience? As a genre, what's the audience? And it gives them the information fluency and metacognitive tools to approach not just sources we might be looking at in class, for example, but, like, something they see online, or something they [read] in another course. And ask those types of questions that we ask as scholars of history, and I think as historians we are not uniquely but close to uniquely [qualified] to really navigate this complex epistemological landscape. And so, I think the more of those habits of mine, my students are able to discover and practice and apply. Then we're doing some really important work.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: I love how it starts with, not just their perspective or their experience, but actually their agency as producers of knowledge. And I've never thought before about how that step can help them better understand other [kinds of] knowledge production.

Kevin Gannon: Right. It positions them as the expert right away, and I point this out right away, like, you're the expert on the history of your day. No one else has seen every moment of that history like you have. And so, you know, this sense of agency is [important] but also, like, what is expertise? Well, it's fluid. It's not something, you know, that I have that you don't, [that] you'll never have. So many of them come to us with most of their schooling in history, [not always] but certainly a lot of times, that it's been something taught *to* them, rather than done *by* them. And so getting that shift in place right away is, I think, crucial.

Jessamyn A Neuhaus: Yeah, thank you. So, you have touched on it, but was there anything else you wanted to say about what you most enjoy about facilitating this activity?

Kevin Gannon: This is gonna sound bad, but I'll explain. It's easy, right? I literally came up with the idea on the way to the first meeting of a class one semester, realizing that the stuff I was doing on the first day wasn't doing the work that I wanted it. And so I was, you know, I mean, walking [and] it's a small campus, so I didn't have much time to think, right? And I'm just like, what the hell am I gonna do? It kind of popped into my head, because I was thinking about, how do I get them out of this place where, again, where history, where teaching has, or learning has been something done *to* them rather than *by* them? So, I was like, well, shit, we'll start with something by them and see what happens. And I also knew it couldn't be anything too involved, because I [only] had what I was carrying! So, it was absolutely, you know, necessity, the mother of invention and all that.

But it worked so well when it happened. I mean, it was a chaotic discussion there that I've sort of refined and changed [over] years as I've done it, but that first time, I was like, this is the energy! And also you could see [students getting the idea that] everything has a history. Everyone has a history. We don't always hear about it. Why not, right? Like, those connections were happening. Which is what we want to do in a history course, but right off the bat, it was already starting. From that point forward, I was a convert, and I love… and I share it with colleagues, because I say, you know, it doesn't have to be something that you have to, you know, redesign your course over. Like, Jim Lang's small teaching stuff, right?[4] Like, that's… that's exactly what this is.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Yeah! And such a prime example of taking care of your pedagogical well-being. It's great for students, it's a really productive learning activity, but it doesn't take a huge, huge lift for you, and in fact, is energizing and inspiring, because it touches on all these things that drew us to the study of history in the first place, and gets us energized for the semester. Good for students, and good for us.

4 James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. Second edition. (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, 2021).

Kevin Gannon: Yeah, and, I mean, I could have assigned them Carr. But that wouldn't have nearly the [same impact].

Jessamyn Neuhaus: That's right.

Kevin Gannon: So, trying to get at that thing and demystified. That's the other thing, you know, agency, and that's kind of the lodestar in my teaching, right? This isn't some walled-off province for us PhDs, right? You are *doing* history in this course. You are a historian. I can give you a, you know, a certificate if you want, right? [But] we are doing this thing and so let's think hard about what that means. And what that means for you.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: It's the opposite of gatekeeping.

Kevin Gannon: Exactly, exactly. Well, what's the old, was it Carl Becker, "Every Man a Historian?"[5] I had to read that in, like, every historiography class I ever took in grad school. But I say that and joking because it was a very boring article, but it was also in the early twentieth century what he's doing [as a] progressive historian. But it's also a reassuring reminder that this isn't new. I'm certainly not doing anything revolutionary. I've just sort of found a way that works to get at these larger things that I think most of us in the classroom are trying to get after.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Yeah, absolutely. Do you have any specific advice for other history instructors who would like to use this in their class?

Kevin Gannon: Yeah, I think the crucial step [is] not to give them too much guidance. And tell them, I'm doing that deliberately. I'm interested in what you show me.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Transparency.

Kevin Gannon: And then allow sufficient time for the sharing and discussion part to sort of emerge organically, which is easier in some class situations than others. But there have been some semesters, I think, where I've done this. And people were reticent to participate for whatever reason, and I don't think I gave enough space for the discussion to really launch.

And so, it became more didactic than discussion, and it wasn't as satisfying. So especially for someone who might be trying something like this for the first time, don't be afraid of the silences, right? The first day of class, it's weird, you know? People aren't sure if they want to participate. Allowing extra time to do that is really, really important if this activity or a similar one, is going to do the type of work that you want it to do.

5 Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932): 221–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/1838208.

Review: Holly Miowak Guise. *Alaska Native Resilience: Voices from World War II.*

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Holly Miowak Guise. *Alaska Native Resilience: Voices from World War II.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. Pp. 300. $30.00.

Academic historians tend to silo their research and teaching. As a result, we read deeply, but not necessarily widely. Secondary teachers, whose curricula are much broader, rarely have time to delve deep into the latest scholarship. Holly Miowak Guise's *Alaska Native Resilience*, therefore, is not a book I likely would have picked up on my own as either a teacher or a researcher – much to my detriment. This book's approach, content, and even its pitfalls, are a wonderful reminder of the perils of drawing hard boundaries.

Guise's goal was to understand the Alaska Native experience of World War II – no easy task given the diversity of the region's population. Guise points out that the United States currently recognizes 228 tribes in present-day Alaska. These Nations can more or less be categorized by geography and language into three umbrella groups – Iñuit, who historically inhabited the Arctic Circle and Alaska's western coast; Aleut, from Alaska's many western islands; and Alaskan Indians, whose ancestral homelands are further inland. Through significant archival research and over ninety(!) oral history interviews, Guise has constructed a personalized story that first and foremost acknowledges the diversity of her subjects. Different tribal groups experienced the war differently – but so did different individuals within the same Native Nation. This book's first lesson for educators, then, is the importance of avoiding the overgeneralization that can result from overcategorization.

Its second lesson is a reminder that we cannot ignore what Daniel Immerwahr, in his fantastic *How to Hide an Empire,* terms the "Greater United States."[1] Including the complex histories of American colonies complicates easy narratives and offers needed depth to our understanding of American history. Alaska is and has been a colonial space. As Guise explains, Indigenous Alaskans faced waves of colonization from Russia, Japan, and the United States and were often caught in the middle of competing imperial interests. World War II, when all of these powers came into conflict with each other in one way or another, then, offers a stark example of the ironic – and devastating – consequences wreaked on the Native inhabitants of the contested space. Native Alaskans, members of their own sovereign nations but also inhabitants of a U.S.-controlled territory, once again found themselves pulled in multiple directions. Their decision to support the United States's war effort, ultimately, was a choice, not a foregone conclusion.

Japan became an army of occupation after its 1942 invasion of the U.S. controlled Aleutian Islands, land that had once been claimed by Russia. Native Alaskans and U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs agents both came under attack. Ultimately, the Japanese military captured forty Unangax̂ people from the island of Attu, including children and elders, many of whom bore Russian surnames, and sent them to a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Otaru to perform forced labor in support of the Japanese war effort.

Meanwhile, also during the first half of 1942, the U.S. military, under the authority of President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, began the project of removing people of Japanese descent from so-called military zones of exclusion. Ultimately, 122,000 men, women, and children, more than half of whom were U.S. citizens, were incarcerated in "relocation" camps away from the West Coast of the lower 48 states. Most Japanese Hawaiians avoided deportation because their sheer numbers as a percentage of the Hawaiian population made such a move

1 Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019).

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impractical.[2] But Japanese Alaskans *were* sent south to the camps. More often than not, incarcerated Japanese Alaskans were also Indigenous Alaskans. The U.S.-run Alaska Defense Command, argues Guise, determined who was "Japanese" based on its own conceptions of gender and race. In marriages between Japan-born men and Native Alaskan women, men were forcefully relocated and their wives prohibited from accompanying them. When the wife was of Japanese descent, however, she was permitted to remain in Alaska with her non-Japanese husband. Mixed-race individuals confounded officials even further. What to do with adults, raised in Native Nations, who had two Japanese grandfathers, for example? In Ipnatchiaq (also known as the city of Deering), some Iñupiat people were removed to Idaho, but others were not.

And finally, as Guise ably explains, while the incarceration of Japanese Americans is better known today than it has been in the past, most American students still have no idea that Aleutian and Pribilof islanders, especially the Unangax̂, were also forcefully relocated to incarceration camps, albeit for different reasons than Japanese relocation. After Japan invaded parts of the Aleutians, the Alaska Defense Command issued orders that allowed Caucasian men to stay in those areas still under U.S. control to aid in defense efforts and support incoming U.S. military forces. White women and children were evacuated from the islands with a large luggage allowance and then given the opportunity to join family elsewhere. Unangax̂ Alaskans (legally measured as those with ancestry of more than 1/8 Native blood quantum), however, regardless of age or sex, were forcefully relocated to hastily constructed camps in Southeast Alaska, near Juneau, where they faced similar hardships as Japanese Americans in incarceration camps – poor food, lack of privacy, limited running water, and disease. Unlike Japanese Americans, whose relocation was justified by U.S. officials as an ostensible national security measure, Alaskan officials justified Unangax̂ relocation as necessary for the people's own protection.

The rationale was different – paternalistic rather than militaristic – but the impact of racism was the same: loss of land and property, fraying of family ties, and forced labor. In Alaska's case, a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the private Fouk Fur Company, resulted in Unangax̂ men being coerced into labor, ironically, back in the warzone, from which they were otherwise excluded, hunting seals and preparing pelts for the war effort in return for laughably low wages.

Guise's purpose in her book is not to linger on this hardship. Rather, it is the importance of her argument that brings us to the work's third lesson for educators – Native peoples have never been passive victims of American colonization. As the title implies, Alaskan Natives faced the circumstances of World War II with more than resistance; they chose resilience. Guise introduces the concept of "equilibrium restoration" to describe "the actions taken consciously by Indigenous Alaskan women and men during World War II to restore an Indigenous order that disrupt[ed] colonial actors, thereby thwarting colonial efforts of complete control" (2). The bulk of the book consists of chapters outlining how Indigenous peoples "shaped colonial structures, finding ways to maintain Indigenous spaces while retaining Indigenous sovereignty" (13).

Specifically, Guise focuses on how Indigenous Alaskans built connection within and between their Nations through the development of mutual aid organizations, political advocacy, and military service. Ultimately, she argues, Native Alaskans chose to support the U.S. war effort because they viewed U.S. rule as less harmful than Japanese rule, but they never stopped challenging U.S. efforts to destroy their cultural and political sovereignty. The book is full of examples, but one will have to suffice here. As Guise explains, in 1942, the Alaskan Territorial Guard (ATG), itself a primarily Indigenous organization, asked women to help guard the town of Utqiaġvic, also known as Barrow. Iñupiaq women like Irene Itta, who took a pistol and her nursing baby up into a guard tower to watch for Japanese invaders, did so not as a marker of patriotism against an invading enemy but as a way to protect her people's customs, history, and livelihood. Her people needed her in the guard tower so that the men, including her husband, could partake in necessary whaling expeditions. Concludes Guise, in coopting "the colonial institution of the U.S. military," "Native communities refashioned a colonial organization like the military and amended the ATG platoons to fit their community needs" (100-101). Beyond exhibiting agency, women like

2 See Jonathan Y. Okamura, "Race Relations in Hawai'I during World War II: The Non-Internment of Japanese Americans," *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): 117-141.

Itta built resilience, protecting her people's Indigenous ways.[3]

As a historian of military manpower, I had a bit of trouble with the chapters on military service. I could not tell if Native Alaskans volunteered or were drafted into the ATG or the nature of the relationship between the ATG and the U.S. military, in part because Guise was not as concise as she could have been with some of her language choices (there is a difference between volunteering for the military and being inducted into the military, for example). But therein lies the fourth lesson for educators – don't stop at one work on any given subject. There is always more to learn. Drawing hard boundaries – between U.S. and not-U.S.; Indigenous vs. not-Indigenous; Aleut and Iñupiak; military history and Indigenous studies – limits all of us.

Native Alaska Resilience, therefore, has much to offer educators, especially those not familiar with this history. By crossing boundaries – between fields, between nations, and between Indigenous Nations – it offers new ways to conceptualize the single lesson or two most of us are able to devote to World War II. It broadens our idea of "the homefront," where the United States begins and ends, reminds us that the Japanese Empire was not the only empire operating in the Pacific theater of the war, and, perhaps most importantly, introduces the idea of "resilience" into our curricula.

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3 The concept of "resilience" as separate from "agency" is growing in certain circles of the historical profession. The January issue of the *American Historical Review*, the journal of the American Historical Association, for example, ran a special feature on resilience in its December 2024 issue. See articles in *American Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (December 2024): 1381-1701.

Review: Erika Bsumek, Matt O'Hair, Ian Diaz, Braeden Kennedy. *ClioVis*.

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Erika Bsumek, Matt O'Hair, Ian Diaz, Braeden Kennedy. *ClioVis*. Online, https://cliovis.com/. 2025.

ClioVis is online software that provides a multi-visualization tool for creating digital mindmaps, timelines, and presentations in the classroom. University of Texas-Austin historian Erika Bsumek created *ClioVis* to be used across academic disciplines, but its use as a timeline tool lends itself well to engaging students in the history classroom. *ClioVis* is designed to be collaborative, allowing students to edit and contribute to a timeline simultaneously. There is a no-cost basic version, while other versions are available with flexible paid subscription options. Instructors can embed *ClioVis* in Canvas or other LMSs (typically in the paid version), but instructors can reach out to the Bsumek and her team and discuss different use cases that can be made available through free-to fee-based options.

I have used *ClioVis* several times in my own undergraduate teaching, and I have found it to be an effective and engaging tool that enhances the student learning experience. It pushes my students to explore historical content, synthesize big themes of history, and engage in low-stakes historical research and analysis.

The timeline tool provides multiple ways to teach with chronology and deepen students' historical knowledge. On a basic level, students create timelines with event nodes. Each node can be titled, with a place for students to describe the item, along with a date (or date range). They can include an image (with caption), video, audio, and add sources to the node. From there, students can also create connections between nodes and add eras and color-coded categories to produce additional layers of depth to the content displayed (see figure 1). The *ClioVis* timeline tool also prompts students to include references, which can be helpful for ensuring they get into the habit of properly citing their sources.

ClioVis is simple to use, and within a couple of weeks of receiving coaching and feedback, students are able to produce good timelines on a regular basis. The number of options and fields presented is limited enough that students are not overwhelmed by these choices. In addition to a traditional timeline view, there is a simplified view which shows the events in a more linear way, in a vertically scrolling format. (I often prefer this simplified view for grading, since it is less visually overwhelming and easier to make sure that I see all of the timeline elements). It can also be used to facilitate greater accessibility. The linear format works better for screen readers and keyboard-only webpage navigation. It is also easier to zoom in and adjust browser font size in the linear view. One missing feature is that there is not a "username" associated with items added to the timeline—the tool does not indicate who contributed each piece. An easy workaround to this is to have students add their name or initials to the text they include in each event and connection they make.

ClioVis is effective at empowering students to become "experts" on themes over the course of a semester. In a small course (15-25 students, majors and non-majors) I teach on 20th-century U.S. history, students work in groups of 3-4 to create a single timeline each week based on a theme they have chosen for the semester: Race, Citizenship, & Migration; US & the World; Class, Gender, & Identity; Culture, Media, & Religion; Capitalism, Business, & Labor; and Politics, Law, & Activism. As homework, I task students with using a chapter from *The American Yawp*, a collaborative open U.S. history textbook, to identify three events they each want to add to the group's timeline. For each event, students also choose an artifact (any primary source) to spotlight, which provides an opportunity to practice contextualizing and analyzing primary sources.

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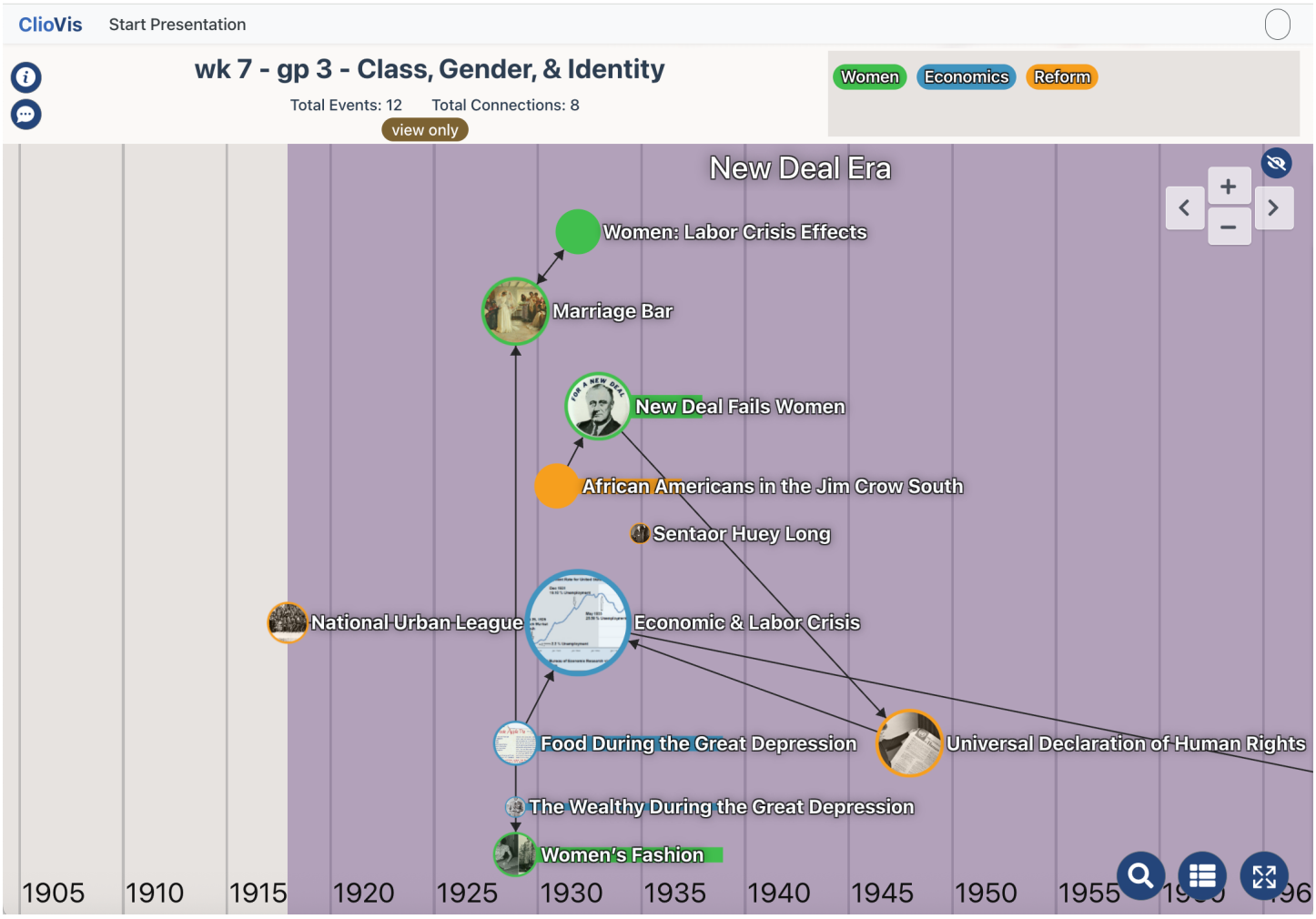

Figure 1. Timeline on "New Deal Era" created by students. Each event node includes a title and is plotted by date; some also show a thumbnail image. Students can also color-code event nodes by categories to identify themes. In this figure, students color-coded nodes by "women," "economics," and "reform." (Image courtesy of Annabelle Rodriguez, Kaylee Bryant, Tate Waller, and Vanessa Treviño).

One of my favorite ways to use the timeline is to have students use the connections feature to analyze the relationship between events. For example, a student could create a connection between events like "bloomers" and "women's bicycles" to show that clothing innovations made bicycling possible for women (see "Cycling to Suffrage" example on *ClioVis* website: https://cliovis.com/examples/). This feature is a straightforward one – students click and drag a connection between the events, and then determine if they want the connection to appear on the timeline as an arrow (forward, backward, or bidirectional) or just a straight line. Then they analyze the connection. While simple, this creates an opportunity for students to extend the preliminary work they did in considering chronology to engaging in more complex thinking about relationships between items on the timeline. In addition, the instructor could add in-class assignments to deepen students' analysis of these connections by asking them to choose one to elaborate upon through further research or by providing all students with a pair of events to brainstorm multiple connections.

As a group, students work toward developing an argument for the timeline. First they create categories, eras, and a description of the timeline, synthesizing and analyzing all of the timeline elements. I encourage them to start the conversation around the bigger themes of the week and to communicate with each other regularly to avoid duplication. In a "timeline description" field, students collectively write a thesis statement that captures the work they did on the timeline for that single week. This thesis statement often provides an analytical pay-off, moving

them from synthesis to argument and critical analysis. While the assignment is to create a timeline, building a chronology is really just the first step in encourging students to advance their thinking with my assignments using *ClioVis*.

Using the *ClioVis* timeline tool in this way empowers students because it gives them the freedom to explore each week's *The American Yawp* chapter through the lens of their group's theme. Instead of reading an entire chapter with no clear direction, students instead can read with purpose toward building their knowledge in their

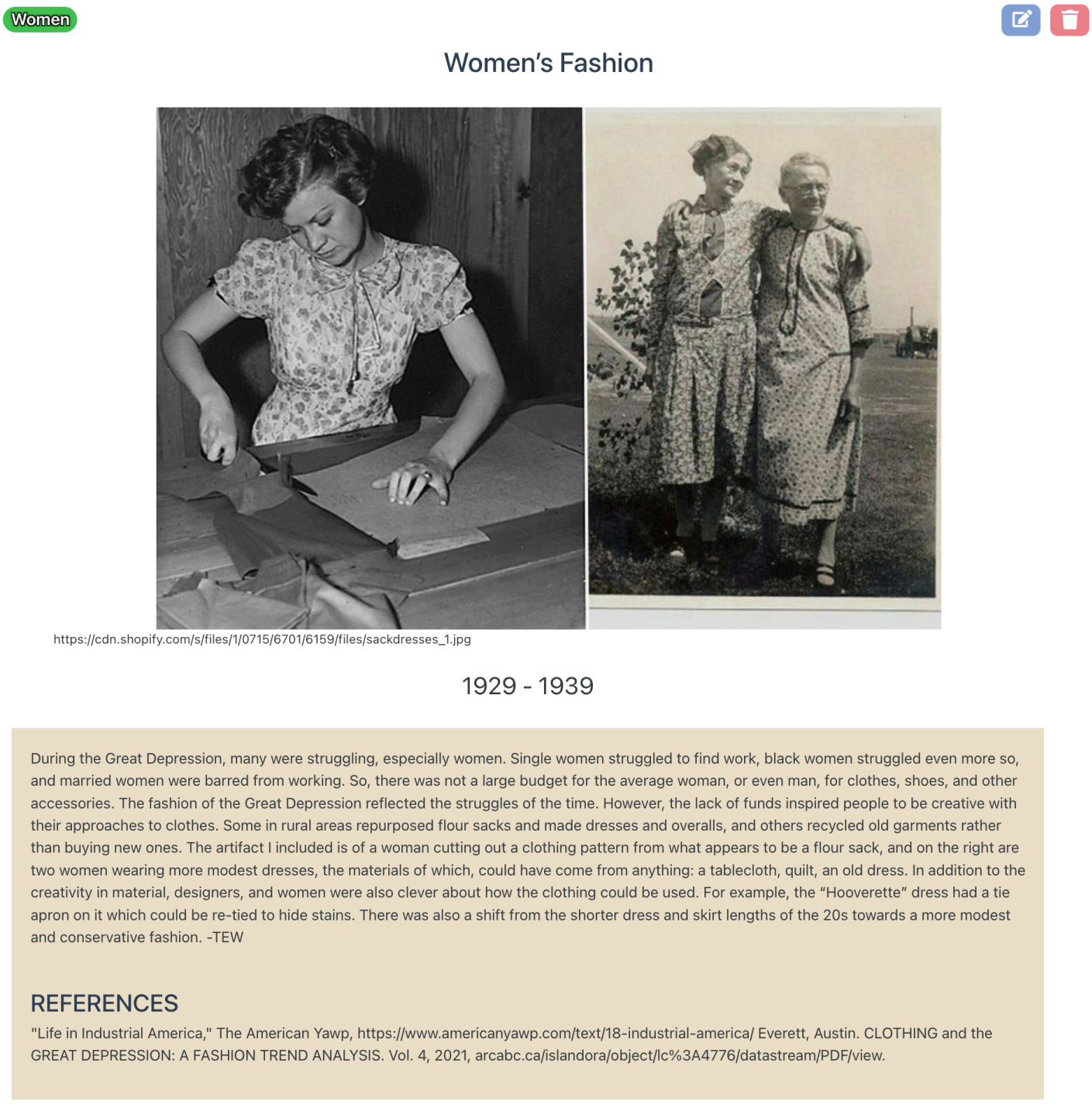

Figure 2: Clicking on an event node in the timeline opens the full text description, media, and reference students included in the node. The simplified view, like the one pictured here on "Women's Fashion," shows the events on the full screen. (Image courtesy of Tate Waller).

thematic area. Once they finish their group processing for the week, we do a variety of discussion-based activities where groups can share their expertise with their classmates. For example, we do a "speed scholar" activity where students each have one minute to share their thesis and a key event from the group timeline that week with a student from a different group; then they switch and talk to a student from another group. We also have full class discussions where they share examples from their timelines that week, exposing students to a wider breadth of content beyond their group's dedicated theme.

With a group's sustained focus on a specific theme, we can have thoughtful and precise discussions about continuity and change over time. We also think critically about the pros and cons of timelines, and how they influence the way we interpret and share historical narratives. My students also appreciate that they can do "deep-dives" into topics that interest them: they use *The American Yawp* as their starting point, but they can explore additional sources to find their artifacts or do additional research into a topic.

The *ClioVis* timeline tool could also be adapted for use in a large lecture class to provide smaller groups of students opportunities to engage with the material and discuss content. In a thesis or capstone course, students could use it to collect and annotate their primary sources or create an initial timeline for a larger historical research project. Students can also use audio or video narration in their timeline to create a different type of engagement with their thesis or capstone project. Lastly, while not discussed here, students can also use *ClioVis*'s mind-mapping feature for brainstorming, studying, and note-taking.

There are many ways to export and share *ClioVis* timelines for instructor grading and student presentations. Students can export timelines as URLs so they can turn them in as assignments on Canvas or Blackboard. *ClioVis* also includes a presentation mode that is akin to presentation mode in PowerPoint, allowing students to share their presentations in class or in other public settings. Presentation and export options also provide students opportunities to produce more polished products, and the timelines can also be embedded on websites or shared publicly online, which could be used to create public-facing projects.

Though *ClioVis* has thus far proven reliable and fairly easy to troubleshoot, there is a wealth of support available for instructors adopting this tool, including a thorough page of video tutorials (https://cliovis.com/tutorials-and-instructions/) and instructions for both students and teachers. Additionally, Bsumek and her team are readily available for consultations. The *ClioVis* team has helped me solve minor problems that have arisen (and which were the result of user error on my end). The best way to get a feel for what *ClioVis* has to offer is to visit the "Examples" page (https://cliovis.com/examples/), which allows for exploration and interaction with sample projects. The website also includes student-produced videos, featuring timelines on the *ClioVis* YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/@cliovis9344).

Overall, I have found *ClioVis* to be an incredible addition to the classroom in offering students frequent low-stakes opportunities to practice analyzing primary sources, understanding chronology, contextualizing historical events and exploring big themes in history, collaborating with classmates, and practicing other historical skills. Students often report that creating timelines with *ClioVis* is one of their favorite history class activities because it allows them to explore topics of interest and engage with content more deeply. Moreover, the online software is relatively easy to use, with a low learning curve, and flexible pricing options that make this accessible to instructors and students across a range of institutions. More than just about building chronologies, *ClioVis* offers an accessible tool with numerous possibilities for use that can help challenge students to practice deeper historical analysis in the products they create.

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Review: Donald Yacovone. *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*.

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Donald Yacovone. *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*. New York: Vintage Books, 2022. Pp. 431. $18.60.

In 1866, a year after the end of the American Civil War, school children encountered a new textbook entitled, *A Youth's History of the Great Civil War in the United States*. Attributing the war to an anti-slavery conspiracy that involved British efforts to undermine American democracy, *A Youth's History* argued that Republicans forced the South to secede despite a harmonious slave society that included benevolent masters and loyal, contented slaves. The authors, John H. Van Evrie and Rushmore G. Horton, were northerners and their book was yet another example of an immense and sustained effort in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to shape a national white identity via a white supremacist historical narrative. In the recently published *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of National Identity*, historian Donald Yacovone examines school textbooks and other historical accounts to argue that "northern white supremacy," rather than slavery, became "the more enduring cultural binding force" that dominated history classrooms until the 1960s (5).

Despite the book's use of John Gast's painting *American Progress* on the cover and brief references to Native Americans and immigration, Yacovone's more narrow focus is a scathing indictment of specific efforts before and after the war, often led by northern elites, to reframe the history of slavery, abolitionism, and Reconstruction around white supremacy. He describes the prolific author Van Evrie as the "nation's first professional racist" and provides ample evidence that northern elites ranging from Horace Mann, Daniel Webster, and Emma Willard in the antebellum period to historians such as Charles Beard, Samuel Eliot Morison, and Henry Steele Commager in the twentieth century perpetuated destructive racist narratives. (43) Together with David S. Muzzey and Thomas Bailey, whose reputable textbooks found their way into the hands of millions of American students throughout the twentieth century, such historians "cauterized the consciousness of most Americans North and South." (15). In aiming to better understand the persistence of white supremacy in American history, Yacovone eviscerates conventional assumptions about racism as a distinctly southern phenomenon and, instead, underscores the foundational role of Northern leaders, educators, and publishers in perpetuating a racist collective memory of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.

Textbooks as a gauge for intellectual history are always problematic. Readers will have to reconcile countless studies that suggest students learn very little from textbooks with Yacovone's assumption that such textbooks, starting as early as 1825, were "the perfect vehicle" to promote white supremacy. (*xv*) Regardless, Yacovone's sweeping account is a compelling instructive window through which to analyze the evolving historiography of race and its place in American education. The book's many examples of white supremacist narratives stemming from places such as Harvard University, New York City publishing firms, and the American Historical Association help students challenge easy assumptions about race, class, and region. In fact, the author, a historian at Harvard, identifies Massachusetts as the "birthplace of Jim Crow and white supremacy" where abolitionists were most often a "despised minority." (25) Yacovone is at his best with the anti-slavery movement, often centered in Boston, as his accessible analysis helps students assess the widely varying interpretations of individuals such as William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and Wendell Phillips. *Teaching White Supremacy* contends that northern historians, beginning in the mid nineteenth century, often characterized abolitionists in textbooks as irrational extremists responsible for instigating the costly Civil War. The consequence, according to the author, was generations of

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Americans, including many with links to prominent abolitionists, who lamented the history of America slavery while popularizing an American past that left little room for African Americans in the nation's future.

Yacovone's fusion of cultural, intellectual, and educational history holds great potential for teachers in both higher and secondary education. United States history textbooks since the antebellum period provide an illuminating account of an evolving and contested historiography that highlights the nature of the discipline and its important but problematic relationship with collective memory. Preservice teachers can also use *Teaching White Supremacy* to assess textbook narratives, online resources, and state standards. Yacovone's work is especially helpful to secondary teachers as they construct classroom inquiries that ask students to use primary source evidence to corroborate existing narratives of the past. Teachers at any level will find *Teaching White Supremacy* to be a provocative and critical lens through which to navigate the array of assumptions about race and American history that students and adults bring to the classroom.

Moreover, *Teaching White Supremacy* will become required reading for contextualizing the current landscape of the history culture wars. Yacovone highlights the existence of what he refers to as "Emancipationist" textbooks that "repudiated such fantasies of racism and white supremacy." (*xix*). Yacovone notes that the overwhelming tide of white supremacist historiography in the wake of Reconstruction was never unchallenged as writers such as Hezekiah Butterworth, author of *Young Folks' History of America* (1882), provided counternarratives that recognized the humanity and contributions of African Americans and the importance of slavery in shaping American history. *Teaching White Supremacy* includes brief accounts of African American historians such as Edward A. Johnson and details how the work of authors such as William Cullen Bryant reminded readers that the Civil War was a slaveholder's rebellion ultimately countered by the efforts of African Americans in both the North and South. Such efforts underscore how cultural warfare over the nation's past predated the war and that both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries included educational materials that foreshadowed later efforts such the 1619 Project and Teaching Hard History. Ironically, while U.S. history textbooks are often criticized for their focus on American progress, the history of such textbooks, especially in the late nineteenth century as the myth of "The Lost Cause" increasingly became the unquestioned dominant narrative, provide students with a provocative example of the fragile and contested nature of historical interpretation, national identity, and the long and torturous struggle for racial justice.

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Review: Tore C. Olsson. *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past*.

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Tore C. Olsson. *Red Dead's History: A Video Game, an Obsession, and America's Violent Past*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2024. Pp. 288. $30.00.

In the Preface of *Red Dead's History*, Tore Olssen notes, "one thing a History PhD can do is ruin a great deal of historically themed pop culture" (*x*). As a historian who is often guilty of ruining pop culture but who is (at best) a hesitant gamer, I approached Olsson's book with curiosity and a bit of uncertainty about how to engage a book about a wildly popular video game. Fortunately, one of the great strengths of Olsson's work is in how he invites in all kinds of readers to the virtual historical world of *Red Dead Redemption II,* including "diehard gamers," students who have not previously found history classes engaging, and history instructors who have not yet considered video games as pedagogical tools (6).

Olsson's entry into the world of *Red Dead Redemption II* came by way of a personal, pandemic-era return to gaming and a course he developed in 2021 at the University of Tennessee titled "Red Dead America: The Real History Behind the Hit Video Games." In the book, Olsson focuses on *Red Dead Redemption II,* part of a franchise of video games developed by Rockstar Games. Released in 2018, *Red Dead Redemption II* takes place in 1899 and centers the protagonist-outlaw Arthur Morgan and the "van der Linde gang" as they travel through the landscapes and towns of the U.S. West, the Deep South, and Appalachia. (The game also spends time in fictionalized U.S.-Mexico border states and the Caribbean, but Olsson does not cover those.) Olsson introduces his readers to the premise of *Red Dead* in the Preface and Introduction. The structure of the book then follows the geography of the game, and each chapter weaves in vignettes from *Red Dead* as points of departure for Olsson's broader historical contextualization and historiographical analysis of key themes in U.S. history during the Gilded Age.

Olsson's stated goals are twofold: first and foremost, to delve into histories not covered by the game and flesh out the game's historical world, circa 1899, and second, to assess the accuracy of historical depictions in *Red Dead*. One of his central critiques of the game is its asynchronicity. While the game takes place in 1899, Olsson argues that *Red Dead's* world more closely matches the American political and social life of the 1870s. Olsson also critically examines the graphic violence in *Red Dead* and its relationship to historical violence during the Gilded Age. While affirming that Appalachia, the Deep South, and the U.S. West were "unusually violent places" in the late nineteenth century, Olsson underscores that the game consistently exaggerates violence (4). One of the book's strengths is its attention to specificities in chronology and region which all too often get lost in popular culture portrayals and broad national narratives of the post-Civil War United States. Throughout *Red Dead's History*, Olsson persistently and meticulously debunks common historical misconceptions, using examples from *Red Dead* when applicable to assess the game's accuracy and explore the gaps between myth and reality in U.S. historical narratives.

The book's first section, titled "The West," explores the genre of the western and the history of ideas about the West. The seven chapters in this section cover topics ranging from Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, railroads and cowboys, the Pinkertons, and Indian Wars. While noting the persistent problem of asynchronicity in *Red Dead's* portrayal of the U.S. West circa 1899, Olsson argues that most of the topics covered in the first section reflect the long "political and economic campaign" to "harness" the West (23). According to Olsson, violence was a key feature of that process, although not with the ubiquity and randomness portrayed in *Red Dead*, where an "honorable" playthrough (playing the game from start to finish with minimal violence) still results in more than

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900 killings over the course of the game (4). Instead, Olsson argues, historical violence in the West was political in nature and intimately tied to increasing capitalist exploitation of the region and resultant backlash, in places such as "boom towns, mining camps, and contested ranching country" (58). While these places in the Gilded Age West could be "strikingly violent," Olsson underscores that in reality, they "never produced *Red Dead Redemption*-style body counts" (58). Collectively, the chapters in this section paint a kaleidoscopic portrait of the imagined and real U.S. West from the Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century.

In the second section, Olsson follows Arthur Morgan and his gang into the Deep South, where they encounter the postbellum New South's agricultural and urban landscapes (including the New Orleans-inspired city of Saint Denis). Olsson takes on some of the thorniest topics in the book in this section as he explains the promises and failures of Reconstruction, lynching and racialized violence, and the Lost Cause myth. Olsson also devotes a chapter to gender, both in contemporary gaming culture and the historical world of *Red Dead II*. Regarding the latter, he focuses on the intersections of white supremacy and the women's suffrage movement. Olsson also comes down unequivocably against racist and white supremacist misconceptions about the post-Civil War South, especially when *Red Dead* gameplay replicates harmful stereotypes. Here he is effective in doing so in a way which invites in students and readers, whether gamers or not, who might be encountering those ideas and critiques for the first time.

Though Olsson consistently praises the nuance and complexity of *Red Dead's* portrayals of the West and the Deep South, he is much more critical of the game's historical rendering of Southern Appalachia, which he covers in the book's third and final section. Olsson deconstructs the myths of Appalachian isolation and blood feud violence, recasting the history of the region as one of capitalist extraction and natural resource plunder, which fueled national industrial growth. While this is the shortest section in the book, it provides an important reframing of the history of a region which may be less familiar to many students and general readers.

Olsson's approach in *Red Dead's History* offers several ways to invite undergraduate students into the discipline of history. From his unconventional book promotion events, such as hosting an "Ask Me Anything" thread on Reddit and launching the book at San Diego's Comic-Con with Roger Clark, the voice actor for the game's protagonist, Olsson has taken a thoughtful and creative approach to reaching an audience of readers who may never have picked up an academic history monograph before. The book integrates, for instance, primary sources by opening each chapter with a historical photograph—immediately introducing novices to the essentials of studying the past. As Olsson acknowledges, however, the visual design of the video game itself is stunning and transportive, and readers might have benefited from more visual representation of gameplay and characters.

Red Dead's History could be used in introductory or specialized topics courses. Beyond his integration of the video game, Olsson's approach to debunking myths and misconceptions about Gilded Age U.S. history makes it a useful resource for designing units or writing lectures on Reconstruction and the U.S. West. Olsson also offers some glimpses of how he has implemented video games in an undergraduate history classroom. In the Preface, Olsson briefly outlines his teaching methodologies for his *Red Dead* course, including combining lecture with YouTube videos and hands-on gameplay of *Red Dead*. He also describes a clever primary source assignment, in which he has students compare front pages of historical newspapers to *Red Dead's* fictional newspaper. An appendix in the book or supplementary digital teaching resources would have been a helpful addition for those interested in teaching *Red Dead* or other games. Still, the Preface is a rich resource for instructors wanting concrete examples of how to incorporate video games into the classroom.

While many history instructors, especially the non-gamers among us, may not feel comfortable making gaming a central component of a course, Olsson's book has inspired me to consider smaller ways of incorporating games into my teaching to engage students in an unconventional modality and explore the intersections of historical memory and popular culture. The potential for integrating video games into the undergraduate history classroom seems especially promising for courses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S. and environmental history. In addition to teaching Olsson's book and *Red Dead Redemption II*, for example, one could pair Sarah Keyes's *American Burial Ground* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023) with the *Oregon Trail* game. Other

possibilities include Alice Bucknell's *The Alluvials* (2023), a video game about climate change and drought in Los Angeles, and *Rising Waters: A Game Based on the 1927 Mississippi Flood* (Central Michigan University Press, 2023), a board game designed by environmental historian Elizabeth Blum and winner of the American Society for Environmental History's 2024 Public Outreach Award. Lastly, a new historical mystery game, *Blackhaven* (2025), explores history and memory on a former plantation-turned-historical museum. *Blackhaven* could be paired with a monograph on histories of enslavement and historical memory, such as Tiya Miles's *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Ultimately, Olsson's *Red Dead* project makes a compelling case for integrating popular culture and our non-academic interests into our teaching and offers a reminder that fun and rigorous history in the classroom need not be mutually exclusive.

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