

# Working-Class Students and Historical Inquiry: Transforming Learning in the Classroom

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FOR THE PAST TWELVE YEARS, I have been teaching a lower division introductory historical methods course that uses active learning to introduce students to the issues and practices of historical methods, the “how to” of historical inquiry, research and writing.<sup>1</sup> While there are many models for such a course, including the one described by Jeffrey Merrick in the February 2006 issue of this journal, the design of such a course at my institution requires consideration of an often-overlooked dimension.<sup>2</sup> The student body at Rhode Island College (RIC) is primarily working class, mirroring a significant transformation in the traditional college student population prompted first by the 1944 GI Bill and then the 1964 Higher Education Act, the latter almost doubling the number of low-income students entering college. In 1999, the Department of Education estimated that forty-seven percent of all undergraduates were enrolled in community colleges.<sup>3</sup> Sherry Lee Linkon, cofounder of the Center for Working Class Studies at Youngstown State University, contends that “more college students attend ‘working-class institutions’ (schools that serve largely commuter populations, schools with students who are among the first in their families to attend college and who work at least part-time if not full time in jobs such as retail clerk, factory laborer, or waitress; many of those students have spouses and children) than attend

‘regular’ colleges.”<sup>4</sup> This definition aptly describes my students and my institution. In my methods course, I am working to take into account the perspectives and expectations of working-class students as well as the skills they bring to the classroom.

My working-class students, the majority of whom are white, come to college with little experience in intellectual inquiry, analysis or discussion. Much of this can be attributed to their previous schooling. Many of the students at RIC come from high schools that have not prepared them for a curriculum that focuses on critical thinking. Most have never taken essay exams, written research papers, or undertaken writing more than a few pages. Few have learned to go beyond reading mechanically for factual data, and they have rarely been invited instead to search for argument and meaning or to interrogate, interpret, or draw their own conclusions from material. Jean Anyon’s study of the classroom experiences of working-class fifth graders demonstrates the origins of these practices and illustrates what my students may have encountered in the elementary classroom. Anyon contends, on the basis of her observational studies, that for working-class children, classroom work involved rote behavior and following directions. In science and social studies, the teacher did not encourage students to seek explanations, ask questions, or work with concepts. Most significantly perhaps, the teacher controlled the process and the materials of learning and set the expectations. Students had little opportunity to reflect on the content, to pursue their own interests or to make decisions about the material or their work.<sup>5</sup>

Classroom experiences like this suggest that there is far more behind my students’ attitude towards the classroom and learning than weak analytical skills. More significantly, though less understood by faculty, are the learned attitudes and habits that have circumscribed my students’ connection to the classroom, to education, and to their own interests, attitudes and habits. These often put them at odds with the goals and activities of college learning. Working-class students typically do not see education as a lifelong activity, as faculty typically do, but as a means to improve their circumstances. My students are bewildered by the idea of college learning as a process of inquiry that involves questioning the material and finding their own meaning. Their experiences have taught them to focus on the grade and the degree rather than on learning and individual development. This translates into mastering the text and uncovering the teacher’s ideas to give them back on an exam. Moreover, research shows that the experiences of these working class students, both inside and outside of the classroom, have negated the knowledge they bring to learning, demeaned their individual voices, and taught them to follow “the rules.” The attitudes of our culture that disrespect working-class practices and voices and instead teach habits of deference further impede student engagement with the college material. As a result, working-class students have learned that doing well is predicated

on minding the authority and denying much of their own world.<sup>6</sup>

This powerful and unspoken ideology has been internalized through students' K-12 schooling and constrains their college learning.<sup>7</sup> My students carefully follow course requirements, but they often remain disconnected from the process of learning, and therefore the material, because learning in the college classroom is based on discussion, collaboration and making meaning—all practices that many find unfamiliar and even unpleasant. Janet Galligani Casey reminds us that working-class students have had little experience with speaking freely during classroom exchanges that are not geared to a known conclusion and, as a result, these students cannot easily meet our expectations for discourse.<sup>8</sup> This describes my students who are wary of engaging with the material and instead censor themselves and defer to what they see as the authority. Casey explains further that these students may be perplexed by courses organized as seminars because “the model for such courses, based on dialogue, seems pointless to them and the problem is exacerbated by disciplinary emphases on interpretive rather than quantitative modes of analysis.”<sup>9</sup> She challenges us to see that quiet students “may not be shy or intimidated so much as stymied by an implied value system that is entirely unfamiliar, and that remains unarticulated.”<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising then that many of my students are unwilling to challenge the text and uncomfortable with open-ended conversation. They even appear to distrust my claim that discussion and the exchange of ideas is central to learning for all of us, perhaps regarding such claims by their professor as another way for me to present the material or to informally test.

I have designed the methods course around the learning experiences of these students to address three separate yet inter-connected objectives. One goal is to provide students a systematic examination of the issues and skills involved in historical inquiry or, as Merrick writes, to develop students' abilities to be “more careful, critical and creative consumers and producers of history.”<sup>11</sup> This is not to suggest that these issues are neglected in other even introductory courses. Certainly most of us design our history courses to promote critical inquiry and to challenge students' certainty about the historical narrative. We select readings and primary sources to demonstrate that history is not a single, authoritative text and create assignments and encourage discussions that improve analysis, collaboration, and intellectual skills that can affect student learning across the curriculum. Yet content-driven courses often restrict and even sideline these goals and do not allow students to investigate and practice historical inquiry before they begin work in the major. To give primacy to the elemental issues of critical inquiry, rather than deferring them to a capstone class or folding them into content-driven courses, my department created the methods course, “The Nature of Historical Methods,” to be taken at the lower division level. It has been a required course for history majors

for over thirty years now.<sup>12</sup>

The second objective of the course is to work intensively with students on the analytical skills that promote success in college but are often poorly developed among our students. I learned the importance of this from my first attempts at this course. Those early classes were far from successful in part because I stressed historical methods almost to the exclusion of any consideration of student abilities to analyze, read, and write coherent essays. Students completed the work but showed little enthusiasm for writing, reading complex texts, grappling with historiography, or discussing the subject they all claimed to love. I was puzzled with this lack of engagement but over time came to realize that my students had neither the ability nor the confidence to analyze texts and create meaning. With the learning experiences and habits of my students in mind, I have reshaped the course to explicitly strengthen critical inquiry—reading, writing and discussion—so they can better connect to all their coursework.

My final goal for the course is to provide a much-needed transformative learning experience, that is, to shift students' views of learning and of themselves as learners. Working-class students often feel like imposters in college because they fear "they possess neither the talent nor the right to become college students."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, because most of these students do not see themselves as critical thinkers and do not believe it is their place to practice critical thinking, it is not enough to ask them to join in the work of analyzing and constructing meaning. In fact, my students are not easily convinced that what they assume to be the basic template of education—mastery of a known product—may have changed. They need an apprenticeship to learn about themselves and about learning. It is my experience that an inclusive student-centered classroom can transform the way my students think about their own learning. This can be achieved by grounding the process and subject of the course in the student's own experiences, explicitly recognizing and valuing their sensibilities and knowledge, and creating an environment devoted to collaboration and discussion. There is no set text to learn or authority to study but a variety of demanding skills to practice and challenging ideas to discuss. In this way, the course helps disabuse many students of the notion that knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student and that students have little to contribute. They are beginning apprentices as historians and as critical thinkers. Hopefully they come to see that the experience of learning depends on their ideas and participation.<sup>14</sup>

### **Course Format**

The course takes the form of a seminar of twenty students and addresses a variety of topics: the value and purpose of history, perspective, source

analysis, reading for thesis and argument, formulation of interpretation, précis writing, information resources and their evaluation, primary research, note-taking, outlining, and writing. Most of these topics are geared to the completion of a draft and final version of a research paper. That the course has been of value for history students is evident in increasingly substantive daily discussions, marked improvements in students' analytical and writing skills, sharpened awareness of the nature and process of history, and the application of these skills to other courses, often to the students' astonishment. In addition, for those anticipating a degree in secondary or elementary education—more than half of our majors—this course presents an opportunity, first of all, to consider what history is, how it is taught, how it is learned; and second, to ponder their own objectives as future history teachers.

The success of the course in engaging my working-class students and promoting learning hinges on the format. Each topic we examine is done at three levels of examination: readings and discussion, discrete assignments or exercises that require students to apply skills, and in-class consideration of the work completed by each other. This highlights common problems and variations in approaches and promotes reconsideration and reflection. This last step is crucial. The work of “doing” history creates tension between students' beliefs about history and their ideas about themselves as learners. Reflecting on a completed assignment gives additional time to reflect and time to rethink, further articulate, or work again on a method or concept. Time for reconsideration tells students that learning is as valuable as, perhaps more valuable than, the final product, and it fosters productive classroom discussion. Mandatory revisions, when I ask for them, also signal that I am interested in their learning. This is helpful for students who have not had many experiences where process and improvement is respected. Reconsideration also produces great epiphanies. Students have suddenly proclaimed that history is not just facts, that primary sources tell more than a narrative, that outlines really do work, and that finding the thesis does bring more sense to the reading! Of course, some students hold fast to their view of history as facts and to their belief in objectivity, but these positions serve to further enrich our discussions.

The class depends on an informal and welcoming atmosphere where students will be both teachers and learners. A hospitable climate is vital for many of my students whose experience has taught them that classrooms are neither safe nor receptive to their ideas or to their learning. The course's reputation as grueling work helps because students quickly make friends to better survive their shared plight. To demonstrate that this course is different from high school learning, and therefore has different expectations, I work actively in the first days to shift the focus from myself to the students. I refuse to provide definitive answers, listen more than talk, and show that

differing views and perspective, especially their own, will be central to the study and writing of history. Open-ended discussion and debate, peer review of written work, and group projects, though initially disconcerting to most, in time minimize the students' anxieties so that even the most reluctant learn to share their work. I vary the way the class takes up each topic—informal and formal writing, group work, debate, discussion—which allows students to find a comfort zone where they can best participate.<sup>15</sup> Most important, the workshop climate produces more than one teacher because students encourage, challenge, seek help, and assist one another, in and out of the classroom, to a degree that seldom occurs in other courses.

I have found that working without an authoritative text also sends an important message to students. Although there are countless brief “how to” guides for history students, a text of this kind would work against my objective of enabling students to make their own determinations about our topics. In the years that I have assigned a text, conversation has been noticeably subdued, perhaps because the presence of a text implies that students must absorb its perspective. Instead, in this course we investigate each topic together through a mix of short readings, brief presentations, in-class exercises, group discussions and weekly writing assignments. Over time, students come to understand that the learning is produced by the class, not by an external authoritative voice, and that their ideas do matter. Employing short readings that pose questions rather than answers has been instrumental in the high rate of student involvement and in suggesting to students that education is all about the inquiry. This is far more labor intensive for the instructor than assigning a text but the payoff is well worth it.

Finally, the course has a single historical focus to model the sequential process of historical inquiry and research and to provide context and continuity. For many years, I was not very discerning about the subjects brought into the study of methods. I used exercises on interpreting primary sources about medieval Europe or a study of competing historical perspectives that drew on studies of the American Revolution, and the final project came with no topic restrictions. This historical smorgasbord proved problematic as students' unfamiliarity with each new narrative diverted attention from the work on methodology and restricted collaboration. The disjunction in focus also artificially divided the course into two projects—one of skill-building and another a research project—and failed to demonstrate the connection between methodology and application. In addition, the absence of guidelines for the research project shortchanged students, actually prohibited collaboration, and taxed my energy and skills as I struggled to help develop and monitor twenty different research topics.

Six years ago, a colleague and I realized that we could enhance student learning by focusing the entire course on a single historical problem that was broad enough to generate dozens of research projects. This revision

brought coherence to the course and vastly improved student collaboration. All of the work on methods now focuses on this single historical problem which allows students to build their knowledge together. My colleagues and I have since used various subjects to bring a single thread to the course. We tried nativism and immigration at the turn of the century, Cuban-American relations, the Depression and the New Deal, United States annexation of the Philippines, and women's suffrage. However, in recent years I have concentrated on working-class life. There is no doubt that my students have greater interest and curiosity about subjects that have a connection to their own lives. Borrowing from the "principles of inclusion and recognition that have been so important in creating spaces" for race, ethnic and gender studies, my course now puts working people, through subjects like immigration and the 1929 depression, at the center.<sup>16</sup> While I would not disagree that history provides ample connecting points for students, the study of working-class life seems particularly suited to my goal of encouraging student voices and demonstrating that their knowledge and perspectives are vital to their own learning.

### Methods

Most of our students have little preparation for work in their history major and harbor common misconceptions about the discipline of history, for example, that it is an authoritative, objective voice that discovers and presents a cohesive, unitary narrative. We need to convince them that history is founded on particular skills of inquiry and analysis and is instead an intellectual work of analysis and interpretation, reshaped constantly by new voices and questions, including that of each student. In the first weeks of the course, the class engages in a wide-ranging conversation on the nature and purpose of history, bias and perspective, whether history is facts or meaning and how history is taught and learned. All are issues students have never considered and questions that students believe have one clear answer. Conversation in these early weeks often moves haltingly, in part because these topics challenge long held notions, but also because most students are unfamiliar with open-ended exchanges and even view them as a contrivance. They often cannot grasp the role of the historian in producing history. They view any "perspective" as bias or distortion. There are numerous texts that explore these issues. Many of the AHA Presidential Addresses tackle the nature and function of history. Carl Becker's 1932 essay investigates the role of history in daily life. Selections from John Tosh's *Historians on History*, particularly those by Howard Zinn and Michael Howard, ask students to consider the purpose of history and their goals as historians. The engaging film *Class Dismissed* features James Loewen, Zinn, and high school students reflecting on the teaching and learn-

ing of history, and prompts students to consider the objectives and impact of the history they have been taught. Finally, Eric Foner's 2002 article, "Changing History," presents the interests and concerns of historians as central to the "making" of history.<sup>17</sup> A dramatic way to raise the issue of perspective came from my late colleague George Kellner, who would stage a loud encounter with a colleague in the hall at the start of class, continue the argument as he walked into the classroom, perhaps spilling his coffee, tripping, dropping his books, drawing students into the conflict, and then turn to students and ask them what had just happened. Needless to say, students' perceptions or histories of this event rarely matched. The role of interpretation in history is difficult for students to process because it directly challenges their preconceptions and, as a consequence, we return to this issue regularly throughout the course.

To continue what becomes a semester-long discussion about how perspective shapes the history we teach and write, I ask each student what topics they would investigate and what questions they would pose if asked to do a history of, say, the Vietnam War. Explaining why they chose those questions forces them to make a connection between their own experiences and their historical interests (The time we made this the focus of the class, the number of research problems that emerged illustrated the role of the historian's interests and perspectives in making history). Early on, however, students write a brief essay considering the nature and value of history and how it may have shaped their own identities or experiences. We encourage them to identify themselves in terms of multiple roles—returning student, worker, single parent, immigrant, etc. Typically, it is difficult for students to articulate their various identities and perspectives at this point, but the assignment and subsequent discussion helps them to pinpoint the factors that have influenced them and broadens the inquiry into identities, perspective, and the relationship between the historian and history. Students frequently revise these essays substantially after our discussion, an indicator that they have reconsidered their ideas.

We begin the next topic, analysis of primary and secondary texts, by talking about how we read and what we read for. The goal here is to reveal that texts often contain several kinds of material, such as evidence, argument, perspective, and a broader meaning. This is eye opening for students who have learned to look for factual material and cannot separate thesis from supporting arguments, nor from meaning. To distinguish between the evidence and meaning, the students work in groups with newspaper editorials, sections from history textbooks, and short articles. Most students find this difficult but their work improves immeasurably as they write several *précis* and then consider them in class. Reading and debating three or four texts, primary and secondary, on the same event or issue helps students see how historians present meaning. This helps to



isolate the various meanings and gives rise to great conversations about how historians use data and find meanings. One of Merrick's ideas which would work well here is for students to work in groups to produce a brief history of a familiar event, like 9/11, or the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Developing several histories of the same event would underscore the role of perspective, meaning, and language in the construction of history, thus challenging their notions of bias. Yet the opposition that students see between meaning and facts and their discomfort with the notion of perspective cannot be settled in two weeks. These essential issues are examined again and again as our inquiries continue.

From these investigations, we turn to interpretation and the multiple levels of meaning in primary sources. I start by hoisting a desk onto the seminar table and asking students what it tells us about the society that created and used it. Students begin to describe it—its various parts, multi-colored wads of gum, the graffiti, the message of the graffiti, the construction materials, the method of construction, the broken part, the RIC sticker—and we try to understand what the desk reveals about this culture and its people. We then construct a list of unresolved questions that would require further research. It is not easy for students to see the hidden clues in this mysterious artifact, but this exercise, guaranteed to be good fun as students deduce various purposes for the artifact and various meanings in the arrangement of the gum, is a great introduction to interpretation. From here we easily move to codify analytical strategies for approaching primary sources and then apply them to sources from unfamiliar periods or subjects.<sup>18</sup> Documents on medieval guilds or nineteenth-century working-class songs, for example, more readily reveal unstated assumptions and values than contemporary documents and also demonstrate the different layers of knowledge to be found in sources. This work is continued with primary sources that deal directly with the historical subject for the semester.

Yet analyzing sources and using that material to construct an argument are two very different projects. Many years ago, I discovered that my students' poor use of primary sources and their weak argument in the final research papers indicated the need for a low-stakes practice exercise early in the semester. That assignment, due about the fifth week with mandatory revisions, is a four to five page essay in which students analyze and use evidence from primary sources to support an argument. For example, when the subject is the 1929 Depression, I prepare a package of about a dozen sources and ask students to discuss the various proposed remedies for the depression and how each remedy reflected a contrasting idea about the role of government. This topic has proven to be provocative for my students in part because they have trouble reconciling their belief in individualism with what they know about the everyday lives of working people. Yet despite successive weeks of work on argument, outlines,

and note-taking, the majority of students produce extremely weak first drafts. Many organize this essay by source, listing the evidence in each and neglecting to make any argument or present any meaning. Students critique each other's work and we discuss the papers, both the drafts and the revisions, concentrating in particular on how organization and topic sentences bring meaning to the material. Poor first drafts at times lead me to be very critical of my own effort, apparently not successful, to prepare my students for this exercise, but the revised versions are proof that experience is a great teacher. The revisions show huge improvements in argument, interpretation, organization, and use of sources. The best part is that the students can see their own growth and that of their peers.

At this point, we begin the research project, which takes us to the library. Because my students have little understanding of information resources, consider the Internet a viable research tool (but lack essential evaluative skills), and feel out of place in a library, teaching library resources is both essential and challenging. The library instruction sessions, designed over several years in collaboration with reference librarian Patricia Brennan, now introduce students to tertiary, secondary, and primary sources with the aim of developing students' research expertise and historical context in steps. The process is critical, and the two class sessions are grounded in hands-on activities, the information resources introduced are geared to our subject, and brief assignments build familiarity with the resources. Following the session on tertiary and secondary material, each student is asked to produce a piece of general information about the subject, such as a timeline, major legislation, central figures, relevant organizations, or key positions. The search then begins for other information, and students share their work in class, a process that builds knowledge and confidence, helps students brainstorm about topics, and prompts further research forays. All of this relates to the general topic I have chosen for the class, but students must begin thinking of the specific aspect of the topic they will do their papers on. A few weeks later, preliminary topics in hand, students return to the library for guided work on primary sources with an assignment that sends them searching for sources. Because students are just beginning to understand the importance of matching topics to sources, sharing these results is productive. Students tell us in course evaluations that these sessions reduce their dread and improve their facility with information resources.

Topic selection is now well underway. Because this is the first primary research project for most, we play with topics for several sessions, narrowing subjects of huge scope into discrete research questions, matching questions to available sources, and keeping sight of historical importance. Students are guided, even pushed, through this process by a progress report which requires them to develop their topic and their approach in steps. They must advance quickly from their preliminary ideas to a spe-

cific topic or problem, the particular questions to be answered, necessary background research, and a primary and secondary source bibliography. Progress reports are revised weekly and this encourages collaborative work for the remainder of the semester. Research dilemmas provide the best learning experiences. Initial project ideas invariably surpass time and source limitations; sources may not address the topic; sources may redirect research agendas; hoped for sources cannot be found; secondary material can either be neglected or, alternately, becomes the guide to sources and to conclusions. Collaborative work and discussion is more valuable in project development than conferences with me. This is because, as Casey points out, a student “whose cultural background teaches a sink-or-swim philosophy, emphasizing emotional toughness (if not a well-honed capacity for accepting punishing circumstances), [is] unlikely to reach out to a faculty member when he or she is failing.”<sup>19</sup> But fear and deference does not apply to their peers. Hence it is very productive for students to present their drafts and to hear analysis and suggestions about their work from each other. At the same time, students receive valuable analytical experience in problem-solving and critiquing the work of others. I observe the process to make sure they are on track, holding three individual conferences with each student on topic, sources, and argument.

While students pursue their research independently, the class concentrates on the activities that precede the work of writing, such as outlines, thesis, note-taking, and topic sentences. The first step is for students to produce a thesis statement and an outline, both of which undergo class scrutiny and revision. Students emerge from this assignment a bit more certain of their ability to communicate their thoughts simply because they now understand the several parts of an essay and how they work together. One subsidiary assignment requires students to outline an article in a scholarly journal, asking them to identify the structure of the article and show the contribution of topic sentences. Having them outline a text with a complex thesis and several supporting arguments is designed to teach them the importance of argument, structure, and topic sentences as compared to mere data, and to helps them to rethink. Note-taking is another unfamiliar habit as most students expect to photocopy their sources and write their essay from passages that they have highlighted. In order to get them to digest and analyze the source material they are required to take notes on cards organized by topic rather than source and to hand them in with the first draft. They have had some practice with note-taking dating back to the first essay they wrote in the fifth week of the course. But taking different kinds of notes—that summarize or paraphrase rather than just copy quotes—and then using them to write remain troublesome concepts for them.

The most common sticking point in constructing an essay is argument. Most students do not understand that even stating a thesis is to state an

argument, nor do they at first see its connection to the body of their essay, or how to carry it through an essay. Examining opening paragraphs of historical articles is one way to demonstrate the distinction between subject, topic, thesis, and context, and to provide much-needed models. Yet from many years of reading students' first drafts, it has become clear to me that these are complicated concepts to learn and to employ in the short time available in the course. In too many papers, the body of essay had little connection to the thesis. The essay was a narrative without a clear argument. It finally occurred to me that monitoring the early stage of writing was necessary so now I ask students to hand in the first few pages of their essay before completing the draft. Reviewing these initial pages, where argument and direction should be apparent (though often revised once the paper is completed), affords me the opportunity to redirect and guide students at a critical juncture, and to reduce the number of weak first drafts. Doing so is also important for reassuring students who are in unfamiliar and unnerving territory.

We also take time to return to some of our earlier topics. Students are not yet convinced or comfortable with the idea that historians assign meaning by their pattern of research, their interpretation, and their writing. Another way to demonstrate the importance of finding meaning in what we read and write is to jumble sentences from a paragraph of an article, preferably from the opening paragraph, and ask students to reorder the sentences. There may be several different ways for the paragraph to make sense but only one that matches the historian's intention. This exercise also reinforces the importance of a thesis and topic sentences in writing. Because many students still insist that history is objective fact, I ask them to underline the words in each sentence that can be considered only fact. Needless to say, students come to dispute almost each phrase for its hidden perspective or interpretation. Recognizing assumptions when reading sources also does not come easily to students. For this, the class works in groups on some of the sources that students have found for their projects. There is a great benefit in hearing other students' interpretation of the sources they are using. To once again address historical perspective, I like to assign two articles on the same topic that take different positions or ask different questions. Most students have never read a scholarly article but by this point in the semester they are better able to grasp thesis and arguments. Subsequent discussions of perspective and reading tactics are usually very rewarding for me, because it is clear that students have gained a great deal from the course.

The class schedule for the last weeks of the course is focused on students' progress in research, outlining, note-taking, and writing. Students submit each step of the final research project for review by their group and for my approval before they can proceed to the next step. We spend time on each element as needed, and since it is rare for all students to meet each

deadline, some sessions are spent reviewing different stages of different projects. Let me review the steps: after topic selection and thesis, students submit a bibliography and then in a week or so, an annotated bibliography that indicates how each source addresses their topic. Outlines for papers are evaluated in class and typically undergo two or three revisions before being approved. After the first few pages of a proposed paper are submitted for review, approved students can move to the first draft, which is due three weeks before the end of the semester. Several years ago, I began commenting on papers submitted electronically, a vast improvement over my often illegible and sometimes too brief hand written comments on the essays. In my comments, I suggest improvements and raise questions on all aspects of the essay—grammar, topic sentences, use of sources, organization of paragraphs, and arguments. Commenting, though, is a bit tricky because I do not want to be authoritative or overwhelming and thus undermine one of the messages of the course. I am careful not to rewrite the paper or overdo the comments and try to pose them as questions and thoughts to consider rather than as a template for revisions. I make it clear in a one-page summary of key concerns, and in individual meetings with each student, that my comments are for their consideration. Students respond to this well. They are surprised at how much time I invested in their work, and the revised essays show that the extended comments have prompted them to rethink some elements of their paper. The note cards are submitted with the final version so that I can see how students used their sources and organized their notes.

Over the years, this course has improved substantially as a result of paying attention to what does and does not work with my students. For many years, the library seminars failed to engage students and had little connection to the work of the class, but the revised design has improved students' knowledge and the ease they display in working with information resources. The final essays are stronger as a result of the practice essay and the mandatory review of the first few pages of their research papers drafts. Designating a single theme for the course has stimulated peer review and student collaboration, and has meant that fewer students get lost and more make it to the end of the course. Adjustments in pace and organization to accommodate a three-tiered investigation of each topic has made demanding and unfamiliar topics more accessible to students. Yet not all problems have been resolved. For instance, students may lack sufficient historical and historiographical context to guide them in topic selection. However, their work with secondary and tertiary resources might be more productive if they were equipped with more historical background. Time constraints prohibit lengthy readings, but one solution might be for students to read a brief narrative relating to the course theme before the library workshops. The historiographical issues are far more difficult to present in capsule

form and, frankly, may be inappropriate for students who are just beginning to grapple with historical inquiry. Another problem is that often students complain when I do not stick to the syllabus and when they perceive that there are too many activities going on at once. This is difficult to address because the schedule hinges on how students are responding to the issues under discussion, to the assignments, and to each other. They are informed at the outset that the syllabus is far from fixed and I am careful to preview the next class before we adjourn each day. Yet what I consider being responsive to students' needs, they sometimes see as disorganization.

### **Conclusion**

This course has proven to be the most demanding and labor-intensive of my teaching career, but also the most exciting and rewarding for both me and my students. It has strengthened my students' abilities to read, write, and think critically by helping them develop confidence in their own powers of investigation and analysis, habits of learning, and inquiry unfamiliar to most working-class students. During the semester, students proudly bring in completed assignments from other classes to show how this course strengthened their analytical skills, like reading for argument, constructing a thesis, or outlining. The course also brings students to a critical understanding of the nature of history, of perspective, and of the relationship between the historian and the history we write and teach. Year after year, the majority of students express wonder that their ideas about history, narrow at the beginning of the semester, changed so dramatically in such a short time. Many comment that understanding history as a work of inquiry and analysis dependent on their input made the subject even more exciting for them. In addition, students interested in a teaching degree often note that this new perspective has increased the appeal of teaching. They have come to see that teaching history is not just re-presenting the material of the text, and they can envision engaging their own students in a manner that is intellectually challenging. Though students are exhausted at the end and claim they have never worked so hard, they are also energized and sharpened by these new considerations and abilities.

This course works, I believe, because it provides students from the working-class with a different model of learning—one that does not dismiss or demean them. It tells working-class students that their knowledge and sensibilities are valued and essential to their own learning. It demystifies the classroom and consequently transforms these students' ideas about themselves and about learning. In practical terms, this means diminishing the role of traditional authorities in the classroom—the text and teacher—and designing an apprenticeship that brings empowerment and confidence, guiding students to interrogate and bring their own ideas to the material.

In the end, it may serve to replace students' sense of discomfort with a feeling more akin to familiarity and entitlement. All students entering college could benefit immeasurably from a format that includes active learning in a seminar environment that presents short readings that promote discussion rather than provide answers, one that helps students to construct a research paper that requires interpretation, perspective, and analytical skills. In the struggle between coverage and active learning or critical inquiry, it seems that coverage almost always wins out. But coverage without providing students the opportunity to become better learners has no value for students, certainly not for my working-class students.

## Notes

1. This essay benefited from the advice and counsel of many friends. First and foremost, my late colleague and friend George Kellner helped me to find my way when I first started teaching the methods course. He guided me and graciously shared the assignments and strategies he had developed over twenty years of teaching the course. About seven years ago, we began to work together to reconsider and to revise the course. A NECIT faculty seminar supported by Rhode Island College provided the time and opportunity to consider issues of pedagogy and class with colleagues Carol Shelton, Ellen Bigler, Mary Ball Howkins, and Willis Poole. Ronald Dufour, Carolyn Panofsky, Adeline Schuster, and Lisa Delmonico offered valuable advice on several versions of this essay.

2. Jeffrey Merrick, "July 14 and September 11: Historical Method and Pedagogical Method," in *The History Teacher* 39, n. 2 (February 2006): 197-214.

3. Tamara Draut, "The Growing College Gap," in *Inequality Matters: The Growing Economic Divide in America and its Poisonous Consequences*, ed. James Lardner and David A. Smith (New York: Demos, 2005), 95; United States Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2001, Table 170, accessed at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cclo/ccfacts.html>.

4. Sherry Lee Linkon, "Introduction: Teaching Working Class," in *Teaching Working Class*, ed. Sherry Lee Linkon (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 3.

5. Jean Anyon, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work," in *Journal of Education* 162, n. 1 (Winter 1980): 67-92. The social class of the schools was determined by income, occupation of parents, and other social characteristics.

6. Jack Metzger, "Politics and the American Class Vernacular," in *New Working-Class Studies*, ed. John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 189-208; Irvin Peckham, "Complicity in Class Codes: The Exclusionary Function of Education," in *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, ed. C.L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 272; Richard A. Greenwald and Elizabeth A. Grant, "Border Crossings: Working-Class Encounters in Higher Education," in *Teaching Working Class*, ed. Linkon, 28-38; Linda Adler-Kassner, "The Shape of the Form: Working-Class Students and the Academic Essay," in *Teaching Working Class*, ed. Linkon, 85-105; Barbara Jensen, "Across the Great Divide: Crossing Classes and Clashing Cultures," in *What's Class Got to do with*

*It?: American Society in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Zweig (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 168-184; Ira Shor, *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 5-10.

7. Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 145-149.

8. Patricia Valdata, "Class Matters," in *Diverse Online*, Nov. 3, 2005, accessed at [http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/printer\\_5028.shtml](http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/printer_5028.shtml) (26 January, 2006), 2.

9. Janet Calligani Casey, "Diversity, Discourse, and the Working-Class Student," *ACADEME*, July-August 2005, accessed at [http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/printer\\_5028.shtml](http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/printer_5028.shtml) (29 December, 2005), 3.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Merrick, "July 14 and September 11," 197.

12. Many departments have senior research seminars where much of this material is covered, but I suspect that without an introduction to the practices of historical inquiry, students may find a senior project daunting. At one midwestern university, the difficulty of the senior research course is reflected in "I Survived" t-shirts.

13. Brookfield and Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, 146.

14. There is a strong argument to be made for designing such a course for other student bodies and for disciplines other than history. It could introduce students to the issues and methods of their discipline which, as Mike Rose contends, is much needed: "dissonance between the academy's and the students' definitions of disciplines makes it hard for students to get their bearings with material: to know what's important, to see how the pieces fit together, to follow an argument, to have a sense of what can be passed over lightly." A seminar-style introductory course could model the practices and methods of critical thinking particular to each discipline while drawing on student perspectives and developing student voices. Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 192.

15. For a discussion of active learning, see Peter J. Frederick, "Motivating students by active learning in the history classroom," in *The Practice of University History Teaching*, ed. Alan Booth and Paul Hyland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 101-111.

16. Linkon, "Introduction: Teaching Working Class," in *Teaching Working Class*, 2-3.

17. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," in *American Historical Review*, vol. 37, n. 2 (Jan, 1932): 221-236; John Tosh, ed. *Historians on History* (Edinburgh: Pearson Limited, 2000); James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995); Eric Foner, "Changing History," in *The Nation*, September 23, 2002, accessed at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20020923/fooner>; Paper Tiger Television, *Class Dismissed*, 28 min, 2004. See also Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

18. Mark Kishlansky, "How to Read a Document," in *Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization*, ed. Kishlansky, vol. 1, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, (New York: Longman, 2003), xiii-xxii; "How to Read a Primary Source," <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/primaries.htm>. History Matters at <http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu/> has several brief essays where historians explain their interpretation of selected sources.

19. Casey, "Diversity, Discourse, and the Working-Class Student," 6-7.