

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING – CHERRY WHIPPLE

When I first contemplated teaching, my focus was on content. I spent hours developing lectures, creating handouts, and standing at the copy machine to produce “binders of history stuff” that I was sure would “teach” students the facts of history. I almost overlooked the teaching epiphany when it arrived, that students like to sit passively and absorb the words of a history lecture without making real meaning of the “story” of the past because then I am doing all the work. No wonder I went home exhausted each day! After reflection became a large part of my teaching practice these past few years I realized I must change from the “giver of history” to the “giver of skills.”

The process of learning history has slowly evolved to be more than a memorization of facts and terms as seen in bygone high school classes; today’s students must be able to read, analyze, contextualize, and synthesize large swaths of historical sources, both primary and secondary, in order to develop and communicate arguments around core historical themes and principles. Students then test their arguments against the claims of their peers and instructors, developing a new shared understanding of the past, present, and future. To address this new critical thinking required by history students, teachers must change their instructional strategies to be grounded in both the development of historical thinking skills and communication skills, all while still maintaining the interest of students who may have grown to expect the teacher to do the “heavy lifting” of analysis when the student role was as a passive receptacle of history knowledge. Ultimately, my goal is for students to understand how history occurred, the nuances that combined to cause history and the complex after effects of events, to make connections between historical events and to current events, to develop beliefs that reflect their historical knowledge, to advocate for their future and take action to build a future for our nation that both reflects our American heritage and learns from the lessons of the past.

My classroom is structured more as a seminar than a traditional classroom. Visitors enter my room and often can’t even find me, as I am typically sitting next to an individual group or student, asking questions to guide them in discovery. Inquiry-based learning has become my *modus operandi*. A lesson may begin with homework the night before, reading and annotating a few primary and secondary sources to answer a guiding question, such as “How progressive were the Progressive Era reformers?” The next day, students work through a series of scaffolded questions in small groups, creating, arguing, and defending their analysis by using historical evidence and by referencing the sources. Afterwards, students must synthesize their developing arguments through some type of individual writing, as short as a paragraph or possibly a magazine article. Other products, such as picking the top five items to include in a timeline, may be a small group process assignment. My role as a teacher becomes a facilitator. I often frustrate students when they ask a question and I respond with a question, but this type of interaction actually helps them develop the ability to question themselves. It is especially rewarding when I can tell them, “looks like you didn’t need me after all!” and they look at each other and realize they had the answer all along. The skill of metacognition, thinking about one’s own thinking, is often overlooked in high school classrooms but is such a vital skill in college learning and, really, life. My role is also to engage the disengaged, motivating students who are not typically interested in history, to assist students who may enter the class less well-prepared in history or with lower reading and writing skills, and to challenge students with advanced historical backgrounds and academic skills. Assessing the success of learning occurs naturally when students do make connections between historical events and current events, even if that connection is just asking a relevant question of a peer or the instructor. When my students question, problem-solve, and work collaboratively, I know that I have succeeded in my goal of developing historical thinkers.