

**Scott A. Gavorsky, Ph.D.**  
**Statement of Teaching Philosophy**  
**November 2016**

A collegiate education, in my opinion, is ultimately about learning to produce knowledge. Therefore, I best summarize my teaching approach as students “getting their hands dirty” in such production. Engagement with history means writing history, using primary and secondary sources to develop an argument about why an event or process happened. Students coming into my courses can expect to learn not only specific content, but also a skill set centered on critical analysis, engaging discussion, broad research, and argumentative writing—the combination of knowledge and practice that lie at the heart of an active, democratic society. Such activities first attracted me to history, and were those I most enjoyed as an undergraduate at Oglethorpe University, a small liberal arts college in Atlanta. Recreating those experiences for my students is one of my goals as an instructor.

The courses which I have offered have ranged from Western Civilization and American History surveys through upper-division French, Middle Eastern, and thematic topics. I have taught student bodies largely including first-generation college attendees, international students, detached- and active duty military personnel, non-traditional, and dual-enrollment students. Even in upper-division courses, many of these students have been non-liberal arts majors, seeking degrees in nursing, teacher education, business, or technical fields such as instrumentation or land-surveying. Guiding all these students through their own historical explorations allows me not only to impart the content of the discipline, but also the techniques of research, critical analysis, and writing that are the foundations of any intellectual or professional endeavor.

Working with primary sources, in my view, is essential to understanding history. Students bring into the classroom a series of preconceptions of history as nothing more than a chaotic succession of dates and events, or a requirement to be more “well-rounded,” or as a battleground for political debates. My goal is to present history as a dynamic process of past generations confronting the questions facing them, struggles students should learn to see within primary sources. In my survey courses, I introduce a series of texts ranging from Caesar, Luther, Gibbon, Marx, and Keynes to contemporary newspapers, worker’s songs, and biographical pieces. Digital technology allows me to supplement these with dynamic tours of Mesopotamian river valleys, the Sistine Chapel, or the techniques of advertising embedded in interwar political advertising. Classroom discussions focus on the dialogue between sources, a difficult task at first for students. In a survey class at Emory, students were having trouble understanding the appeal of Rousseau’s “general will.” I addressed this in the following class by a role-playing exercise that divided the class into groups presenting the complaints of different French towns drawn from the *cahiers de doléances*, and to propose solutions as part of a mock Estates General. As I wrote the responses from each group on the board, the students saw the parallels—and why the general will went from an abstract concept to a seemingly real phenomenon. By assisting students in working through similar questions, I help them understand how the reactions of one generation were structured by the experiences of the previous—which ultimately helps them reflect on the contemporary world and the issues facing it.

Extensive work with primary sources prepares students for the written projects at the core of my courses. Assignments are designed to help students develop a skill set from formulating a research strategy for an unfamiliar topic to constructing an historical argument based on critical engagement with sources. My Western Civilization classes start each semester with a Scavenger Hunt project to teach the fundamentals of

research. Students select a topic from a list, and compose a brief summary of the topic and a list of related primary and secondary sources. Sessions with the library reference staff helps students locate sources and introduces an often under-appreciated resource. Later projects ask students to prepare a causal argument for a historical event, based in part on sources provided by me. Knowing my students through classroom and office hour conversations allows me to tailor such assignments. In a class composed primarily of economics, business and public health-related majors, I asked students to write on the British Public Health Act of 1848, an admittedly obscure topic that allowed students to explore the development of the regulatory state, industrialization and class conflict in a context that resonated with their own interests. The Scavenger Hunt project gave students the confidence to find and work with relevant sources, while in-class and office hour discussions of writing strategies guided them towards a critique of both the sources and their own writing. This combined approach not only allowed me to help students develop an understanding of history, but also to critically analyze their own research and writing strategies—a skill applicable far beyond the university classroom.

Technology represents one of the greatest developments in contemporary education, which I believe enhances the liberal arts classroom—both live and through distance education. Students are increasingly relying on electronic databases and the Internet, and the ability to access research sources beyond the campus library needs to be encouraged. This creates an obligation, however, to help students identify and assess such sources—and to remind them that digital technology is a tool for applying their skills, not a replacement. One goal of my Scavenger Hunt projects is to promote proficiency with databases such as WorldCat and JSTOR as a fundamental component of a research agenda—with the reminder that sometimes the best way to find sources for an unknown topic is to go to the library shelves and pull books about it. In the classroom, I have used technology not only for class management and to introduce non-textual sources, but also to expand the teaching environment. A simple “Getting Started” guide or a short video on organizing a paper increases student confidence, while alerts of relevant events on campus create the opportunity for deeper involvement with the academic community. Work with colleagues at Emory, the University of Alaska Anchorage, and Great Basin College has led me to consider future digital presentations and pod- and video-casting. Although I have a deeper appreciation of the very real problems that arise when a project becomes more about the technology than the content, pressing students to move beyond the analytical essay can help enrich their understanding of history and provide them with another tool to interact with the world to which they belong.

Reflecting back over my teaching experience, I believe my approach of emphasizing primary sources and writing history has been successful. Yet my teaching style is continuing to evolve, in both approach and content. Teaching the full sequence of Western Civilization in conjunction with classes on the Middle East and Africa over the last few years has encouraged me to make students more aware of broader trends global trends. At Great Basin College, a number of students are former military or are entering careers with mining companies which often transfer personnel globally; the broader global perspectives I bring help such students make fuller sense of their world. Students articulating that one of the strengths of a course was “the level Gavorsky made us think on (much more deep in reasoning)” and naming a skill that improved as “enjoying history” indicate to me that I am merging both the discipline knowledge and the broader goal of educating students in the best liberal arts tradition. One of my non-traditional survey students summed up my goal in recent e-mail: “The class is really more of a two-for, history and writing. So far it’s the best money I’ve spent.”