

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, I spent two years developing a youth leadership curriculum. Here, my Moroccan colleagues and I created a project where young men and women explored their interests, collaborated with peers, and developed new skills. Leading this program underscored the importance of community-driven projects as a way to promote diverse learning styles and foster an inclusive educational space. I use this student-centered approach to teach history. In my classroom I combine reflective reading exercises, collaborative analysis, and informed debate to highlight the various processes involved in learning and writing history. Classroom time is divided between student-led discussion and ‘practicum,’ where students work collectively on an activity such as a debate. In these collaborative spaces, I cultivate a community-oriented environment where students practice thinking creatively about the relationship between history, societal transformations, and their own position as a researcher.

Building this awareness begins with my course syllabi, which highlight previously excluded voices such as women, slaves, and religious minorities. I foreground these perspectives in Middle Eastern survey courses as well as in upper level seminars like “Islamic Law and Society: Slaves, Captives, and Migrants.” As an activity in this course students examine eighteenth-century Moroccan slave registers in conjunction with Saidiya Hartman’s article “Venus in Two Acts.” In class we discuss how Hartman’s critical race theory lens urges us to think creatively and ethically about what historical information can be gleaned from these records and what historical stories can be told from silences in the archives. Students then either write a historical analysis of the slave register or a literary response in the style of Hartman. Through this activity students learn to evaluate and reflect on what information is prioritized as historical knowledge.

To foster engagement with a wide array of primary sources, discussion also plays a key role in my classroom. I have learned, however, that this cannot be done equitably without intentional structure. In response to a review from a student that stressed how our open-style discussion reinforced societal gender inequities, I began focusing on activities that better supported each student’s ability to participate. This past semester I used think-pair-share and jigsaw activities to extend our discussion across multiple individuals with different forms of expertise. These methods were successful. As noted by a student, “Professor Kitlas did an excellent job at encouraging class discussion, involving all members of the class, [and] communicating complex topics in digestible ways.” In all my classroom activities, I strive to constantly reassess and work towards pedagogical strategies that foster equitable and student-empowering learning spaces.

Likewise, I design major assignments around project-based learning objectives, giving students a variety of real-life options to practice communicating historical narratives. For example, I use Digital Humanities tools to teach a mapping project in “Islamic Global History.” Students each choose a historical figure, research them, and develop a collection of at least ten data points. Then, students work in groups to collaboratively produce an interactive StoryMap that incorporates all of their figures in a cohesive narrative. Working with visual and analytical components, students place their expert knowledge on an individual in conversation with research from their peers. In reflecting on this exercise, I ask students to think critically about how their expert knowledge related to and influenced their group’s collective narrative.

As a college educator, I am excited to continue working across languages, cultures, and geographies. I look forward to collaborating with students to help them explore their own interests and better appreciate how the skills they develop through historical research and analysis can benefit themselves and their communities outside the walls of the classroom.