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Making Thinking Real Enough to Make It Better: Using Posters to Develop Skills for Constructing Disciplinary Arguments

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Abstract: *How does one teach critical thinking, the procedures of an academic discipline, and the composition of plausible interpretations and arguments to students who are more facile with visual than with written modes of expression? How does one make real to students the construction of meaning in that unfamiliar epistemological space between brute fact and mere opinion? The "argument poster," a pedagogical strategy that helps students translate their skills for critical thinking from a visual frame to a written frame, results in better quality historical essays and research papers.*

A Perplexing Moment: Why Can't They Think Like Historians?

An illuminating test of teaching and learning arises when an instructor assigns students the task of taking basic concepts and methodologies of a discipline and applying them to a problem or question of their own choosing. Doing an exegesis of a sacred text, developing a sociological analysis of a religious organization, articulating a systematic theology, interpreting an event historically – the results of these activities and others like them reveal much about the dynamics of teaching and learning. The goal of such assignments is for students to employ the concepts and procedures of a discipline skillfully enough that their results are recognizable as part of the process of conversation that characterizes a field. Faculty give such assignments because they want students to move beyond learning about a discipline in the field of religion to thinking with its concepts and procedures. Constructing plausible interpretations of events, texts, and artifacts is what faculty often mean when they say, "I want students to think."

The importance of this goal makes reading a set of student papers that fail to, or feebly demonstrate such disciplinary thinking, disappointing and perplexing. Why is it, I have pondered more than once at the mid-point or end of a semester, that, most of the students write portions of or entire papers as if they had never been exposed to the concepts and procedures of historical interpretation? Why this outcome after I modeled historical analysis in lectures, assigned a range of textual materials that exemplify it, led students through carefully structured class activities in which they practiced it, and have both identified it as a central requirement and described it on a criteria sheet accompanying a writing assignment? What was missing in the course such that it did not succeed in its goal of helping students learn to take historical analysis, interpretation, and argument – the key disciplinary concepts and methods of my course – and employ them independently? Why was this dimension of the course, thinking as historians think, reasoning as historians reason, not more central in students' consciousness?

Successive modifications in course activities and assignments over several semesters modestly influenced the quality of this dimension of my students' papers, but not enough to close the gap between the course objectives related to demonstrating historical analysis and what students showed themselves able to do. Then, an assignment developed with a different primary goal led me to deeper understanding of the pedagogical issues involved in my perplexing moment. Working from that insight, I developed a strategy that has made students more able to engage independently in sustained historical thinking and writing. The strategy: using poster assignments to make disciplinary thinking real by making it visual and tangible.

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Insight into the Pedagogical Issue

Four years ago, during an "American Church History" course, taught to freshmen during an intensive January term, I developed an assignment to situate historically one of the major primary documents for the course, John Williams' *Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*, an early eighteenth-century Puritan captivity narrative. The purpose of the assignment was to situate the narrative in its historical context in order to help freshmen grasp how context shapes religion and to realize that the Catholicism and Puritanism of the document differed in significant ways from their own ideas about religion. In teams the students researched a topic that they had selected from a list that included politics, transportation, science and technology, family, geography, warfare, and the like. Their assignment – construct a poster about the topic that answers the following: "The most important thing to understand about topic 'X' and its relationship to French and English colonial North America in 1700 is _________ because _________." Each poster was to have a thesis statement, topical/thematic categories that provided supporting claims, and factual detail within the categories, all of which supported the thesis of the poster. The explicit format, a visually presented argument, was chosen to help move the freshmen beyond the report form that they knew well from high school.

On the day the posters were due I walked into a classroom of heightened energy. The students spoke animatedly with each other as they displayed their posters around the classroom. A quick scan of the posters showed them to be brightly colored with a wide range of illustrations, pictures, text, schematics, time lines, and more. Clearly, the assignment had captured the students' attention and energy. Glad for that, I wondered if this was a case where awakened energy had supported real learning.

Employing for the day a round-robin format with the class session divided into periods, each student spent some time answering questions about or amplifying on his or her poster, and some time going around the classroom viewing the other posters. The range of visual appearance and composition among the posters was striking. Some posters included glitter, miniature objects, and elaborately designed backgrounds, in addition to colored paper, colored ink, and multiple fonts on printed material. Most posters had thesis statements that moved beyond simple fact. Most included reasonable categories and appropriate factual detail. Most were visual representations of plausible arguments, interpretations of historical material, though many presented the interpretations embellished by colors, shapes, and designs, the significance of which was not immediately obvious to me. Beyond the quality of the posters themselves, I was impressed by the students' ability to explain their arguments cogently, using the data they had assembled on the poster.

Given the quality of the posters – which remained on display for reference during the next week as we worked through the Williams narrative – my expectations for the critical historical essay on the document were high. The assignment: "Write a critical historical essay about some dimension of Williams' narrative that helps a reader better understand something significant about the Puritan religious system." To my disappointment and intense perplexity, most of the essays submitted were poor. The ability to develop a thesis and marshal supporting claims and evidence that the students had exhibited on the posters seemingly had evaporated. Grades on the essays were significantly lower than on the posters. Why were my students able to make an argument on a poster and not in an essay? To me the assignments seemed virtually equivalent in terms of intellectual skills required, with only the form, poster and essay, differing. Yet the gap between the poster and essay grades suggested otherwise. Had the quality of the posters been an aberration? What created the misalignment between my students' understanding of the assignment and the intellectual skills required to carry it out, and my own? Without some grasp of that misalignment I could not extend effectively to the written assignments that were to be the major demonstration of skills learned in the course the learning that had occurred with the posters.

I returned the essays at the beginning of a class session, noted the difference in grades between the posters and the essays, and posed a question to the students: What was different in their experience of the two assignments? The responses were revelatory. First, they told me that they understood the poster assignment and felt they could do it, but did not understand the essay assignment and felt lost. When I proposed that the assignments were virtually the same and had them review the two assignment sheets, they told me that they did not see it that way. The poster assignment had boundaries and direction, the essay was too wide open. They knew what to do with the poster, not with the essay. As I probed further, more emerged: "With the poster we could see the parts and how they fit together or did not fit; we talked to each other; we moved the parts around; we made decisions about color and spacing. With the essay there are just words and blank pages."

The insight – with posters they could "see" the argument. The visual medium made their thinking real. Listening to the students, I realized that the frame of the assignment, something I had not considered significant, made all the difference. With the poster they could "see the argument" and with the essays they could not. "Seeing the argument" gave the students distance, the disciplined subjectivity to be aware of

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their thinking and to assess the quality of their claims using the criteria of the assignment and the disciplinary practices those criteria entailed. Precisely this was missing in their relationship to the essay assignment and hence, the poor result.

Two new questions emerged. First, how did the poster assignment work to enable the students to "see the argument"? Second, how to draw on what worked with the poster assignment to help students master historical analysis in critical essays and research papers?

Reflecting on that poster assignment and others since, it appears that the poster assignment worked in a number of ways to enable the students to "see the argument," effectively to make their thinking real and tangible to them in ways that writing on their own did not. The process of doing the poster assignment slowed down the meaning-making or interpretive process. Working in a team required students to speak with each other about the material. In conversation they clarified understandings with each other, refined their articulation of ideas, checked the accuracy of claims, made decisions about what material to include, how to include it, how to organize the material, judged the adequacy and coherence of the thesis and argument, and more. The sociality of the process and the assignment to represent visually the argument aided this slowing of the interpretive process.

The poster assignment externalized students' thinking. It objectified their ideas sufficiently for them to gain awareness of their thought processes. Seeing their thinking increased the students' awareness of it, decreased their fear of the thinking process, and made it possible for them to develop discrimination, the capacity to assess their own ideas, to critique, modify, and revise them using criteria provided for the assignment. More able to differentiate between their own thinking and the thinking – evidence and argument – in the sources they used, the students were better able to recognize the boundary between themselves and their sources. This, in turn, helped them to begin to identify assumptions behind and implications of particular historical interpretations of events or texts. Further, it helped them to see that thinking is an ongoing process.

The kinesthetic and aesthetic dimensions of the assignment assisted students to think better and to be aware of their thinking. Moving bits of material around physically led to inquiry about the material. Physical activity generated questions about ideas. Further, color and shape mattered to the students. Making decisions about the color, size, and shape of material for the poster helped the students to identify relationships among elements of their argument and to convey significance in the data and relationships among pieces of information. Hence, at an age when most freshmen students see the world in more absolute terms, the physical and aesthetic supported the students' ability to discriminate in increasingly complex ways (Parks 2000; Perry 1998).

As well, the physical, aesthetic, and social dimensions of the poster assignment provided a context within which affective connection to the material could be sustained simultaneously with intellectual distance. That combination often generates ideas and keeps the thinking process moving forward. A combination of affective connection and intellectual distance marks all good thinking and inquiry (Finkel 1999; Killen and de Beer 1994).

Recognizing the boundary between their own thought and the thought in their sources helped my students to grasp that critical thinking makes one a conversation partner in a larger community governed by procedures of disciplinary discourse. Developing this awareness helped my students grasp the significance of mastering historical thinking. That significance had eluded them because their operative epistemology – the world of thought is composed of brute fact and mere opinion – provided no analogue for the value of constructed meanings, plausible interpretations of data that would be adjudicated as more or less adequate. The posters helped my students to glimpse that historical meaning, while constructed, matters. Because they saw that historical meaning matters, they were more willing to attend to criteria for assessing historical interpretations.

Having glimpsed that their thinking mattered, the students' posters exhibited an awareness of their task, their audience, and themselves as thinkers. These three qualities are present as well in fine writing (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995).

Finally, there was a quality of play to the posters. Cutting and pasting were familiar activities. Engaging in these worked to quiet students' fears and anxieties about the assignment and about thinking. With fear quieted, the students could do the task, and did it better than they knew.

All of these dimensions of the poster assignment helped the students to do it well. But the second question remained: how to draw on what worked with the poster assignment to help students master historical analysis in critical essays and research papers?

Answering this question led me to further modification in course activities and assignments, this time with an explicit intention of helping students translate their practices of good historical thinking from the frame of the poster assignments to the frame of an individually composed, critical essay or research paper. My goal was to find ways to consistently make historical thinking visible and real to students throughout the course. More consistent awareness of their own thinking and the thinking in the assigned

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scholarly sources and primary documents would, I surmised, contribute to the quality of their critical historical papers.

Without the objectification of thinking experienced with the posters, I was concerned that the students would not move in their written expression from conceiving and practicing thinking as assertion of deeply felt positions to exercising the disciplinary procedures they evidenced in the posters. I wanted the students to comprehend in their research and writing that historical analysis is a set of procedures by which one disciplines one's subjectivity, discriminates between self and other, and constructs meaning as part of a community of discourse defined, in part, by its procedures of thinking.

Argument Poster Assignments

To meet this goal I designed a set of three poster assignments for my current version of "American Church History" for first-year students, assignments that I continue to use. The students work in pairs for the first two assignments and independently on the third.

The first assignment requires students, working in teams of two or three, to bring a poster to class that visually represents the argument of an assigned article or chapter. Each poster must: (1) identify the question, issue, or concern of the author; (2) clearly state the thesis or interpretive claim of the article or chapter; (3) present the elements of the argument (supporting claims, factual detail, descriptions); (4) visually exhibit the relationships among the elements of the argument; (5) visually exhibit the relative significance of all the elements of the argument.

This assignment is situated after several sessions where I have modeled such analysis, visually representing the elements and their relationships on the white board. During these sessions I preview the activity, do it, and then engage in meta-reflection with the class about the activity. Hence, when the first poster assignment is handed out, students associate it with the recent class sessions. I refer back to those sessions to reinforce for students that they can perform the task.

On the day the assignment is due, the twelve teams bring in their posters, many of them vividly colored and elaborately designed, and display them around the classroom. In a round-robin format, students spend time standing by the poster they created in order to clarify questions about it or to amplify on it. They also spend time viewing the other teams' posters and discussing them with the presenters. The presentation time is quite lively with conversation. As I walk around the room listening to students' interactions about the posters I see them doing with the posters what they often cannot do in writing, namely identifying and presenting an argument. Being required to present the argument of a chapter or article visually makes it possible for the first-year students to see someone else's thinking and to develop some awareness of their own.

After the presentation period for this poster I lead a plenary discussion in which we talk about the assignment, what is difficult about it and what seems to flow easily. We deal with incidents from their experience constructing the posters in which they disagreed about some point, for example, the relative importance of a point or how two points in the article were related, and elicit the steps they used to adjudicate their disputes. All of this increases their awareness of their own thinking processes, how they composed their arguments for the posters. It makes their own thinking processes real.

We also engage in exercises comparing the posters in several ways. I have students identify what gets highlighted and what gets obscured in the ways different posters present the material. We deal with clarity of presentation, adequacy and accuracy of presentation, structure of argument, relative significance, assumptions, and implications of the ideas on the poster and of the ways the ideas on the posters have been presented. These activities introduce students to structured critical assessment of historical arguments as a public process. These activities reinforce the students' ability to deal with arguments as interpretations with their own integrity, to be understood in their own terms. They also support students to practice criticizing arguments without dismissing them.

The second argument poster takes the student teams to another level. With this poster student teams pick a religious group that was present in the United States at 1890. The assignment: "Develop a poster about group 'X' in the U.S. at 1890 that answers, through a thesis statement and supporting historical argument, the question 'What one most needs to understand about group 'X' to understand it in the context of the U.S. in 1890 is 'Y', because __________.'" With this assignment the students move from identifying someone else's question, thesis statement, and argument, to developing their own. I frame this assignment as the class corporately composing a chapter for the textbook, a chapter that focuses on religious groups in the United States at 1890.

On the day these posters are presented the class repeats the round-robin format described previously. Once the presentations and viewing are completed, the students are assigned in new teams to develop thesis statements about religion in the United States at 1890 for which the posters serve as the evidence. These are to be thesis statements that organize the posters in different ways and show different dimensions of the

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religious experience and situation of the U.S. at 1890. With this exercise the students practice developing thesis statements and supporting them. Once the class has reviewed all the proffered thesis statements from this exercise, we assess them against the criteria for a good thesis statement that has been part of each poster assignment. Here the goal is to reinforce for students that a good thesis is an interpretation that rests somewhere between a generalization so broad that it is meaningless and a statement of obvious fact. A thesis statement presents an interpretive claim for which a plausible case can be made, a claim that, in the discipline of history, often is focused on causality.

For the third and final argument poster assignment, students are required to present the argument of their research paper. This assignment comes ten days before the papers are due. One half of the class presents their posters and the other half goes around asking questions and providing peer review on the quality of the thesis statements, supporting claims, organization, factual detail, and other dimensions of the argument. Then the other half presents with the first group of presenters providing the peer review. During the two segments I move around the classroom looking at each of the posters and interacting with the presenters as well. After this class period I collect the posters and write detailed responses to each student about the quality, strengths, and weaknesses of their argument as presented on the poster.

These three assignments are constructed deliberately to repeat some dimensions of historical thinking such as composing thesis statements, supporting claims, and marshalling evidence. The assignments extend the independence of students in practicing historical thinking as they require the students to move from my framing the task to the students' shaping their own question, framing their own project, and constructing an argument for themselves. Through the sequence of assignments, the students learn to identify historical arguments, to compose historical arguments, and to provide discriminating critique of historical arguments, their own and others.

The result over the past two years has been better essays in response to exam questions and increasingly higher quality research papers. Finally, the argument poster strategies make thinking real to my students and so make it possible for them to become better, more methodologically aware historical thinkers.

Why Bother?

The argument poster assignments take time that could be used in other ways in my course. I cover less material and spend time with these assignments helping students develop skills that, ideally, they would have attained to some degree before beginning college. However, as I pondered my perplexity about student papers, the perplexity that led me to the argument poster assignments, I was not willing to abandon the goal of having first-year students learn to think as historians. A colleague's comment, "Wait until they are sophomores and juniors, then they'll get it," did not satisfy me. I want my students from the beginning of their university studies to develop the ability to situate an event, text, person, movement, idea, or theory within its historical context. This practice deepens their understanding of themselves and their world by broadening their awareness of the myriad webs of relationships in existence, past and present. Situating something within its historical context is an essential element in critical thinking, in constructing meaning that moves beyond the magical (Freire 1993). I want my students to develop the ability to compose a plausibly defensible historical interpretation of an event. This discipline supports habits of mind and imaginative possibilities that contribute to human agency and to the creativity necessary for humane, sustainable communities in the twenty-first century. Committed to critical historical thinking as a liberating practice, I could not be content with a course that increased students' knowledge of religion in the United States, but did not help them learn to think about it in a critically historical manner. More students now leave the course thinking better historically, knowing what historical thinking is, and competent to employ it as they encounter religious people, ideas, and movements, on the campus, in the larger community, and in the world.

Argument Posters and a Pedagogical Challenge to Professors

My perplexing experience and the pedagogical strategy that resulted raise many questions about teaching that is both effective and responsible to a discipline or field. Increasing numbers of students are visual learners. They are more comfortable with visual modes of generating, organizing, and presenting thought. By itself, however, a social, kinesthetic, visual mode of marshalling evidence and presenting argument, such as the poster assignments provide, does not suffice for command of critical thought. All students, however they learn, need to develop their capacities for disciplinary, critical thought and for sophisticated written expression. Pedagogical strategies such as the argument posters are not sufficient, though they may be increasingly necessary, for building the bridge from where students are as composers of meaning to where, at the end of a serious university education, they should be.

Developing appropriate and effective assignments for students is a theoretically and experientially informed art, one that demands the combination of

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challenge and support that makes it possible for students to learn (Brookfield 1990; Kegan 1994). As more and more visual learners enter the classroom, the challenge to professors to find artful assignments to build the bridge from what visual learners know and can do, to mastery of effective critical written expression and argument increases. Practicing the imaginative tasks required to compose our courses as contexts of insight for all our students, including learners who are increasingly visually oriented, is integral to being for our students "the right companion for the right journey" (Kegan 1994, 335–355).

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