

HIST3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

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After teaching HIST3029, my favorite course here at HKU, for the third time, I am left amazed about how much of a difference a cohort can make. The composition of a class is always accidental, yet it has an enormous impact on class dynamics. When I taught the course for the first time in 2014, I had four students, all from the liberal arts; in 2016, I had a much more diverse group of twelve from a variety of disciplines and places. This time, there were nine students in the class, of whom two were exchange students from Britain and France, and of whom the only non-History major was studying Journalism and Public Policy and Administration—overall, this made for a much more homogeneous class, even though their second majors and minors ranged from Quantitative Finance to Fine Arts and Music. Not only were enough students continuously active and engaged in our discussions, and willing to come forward with their ideas about our texts and topics; they were also discussing among themselves, responding to class mates' comments and engaging with their peers' thoughts. This was a major change from 2016, where most discussions happened between one student and me, and then between another student and me. While I always actively encourage my students to respond to each other, I am not sure I will necessarily be able to reproduce this class dynamic in future HIST3029 classes; rather, I might simply have been lucky that the cohort was a little more homogeneous and engaged than the previous one. Did it help that I spent fifteen or twenty minutes doing ice-breaker questions in week 3 (once all enrollment is final)? It might have helped set the tone and I will do this in the future, but I do not think that it made much of a difference. Rather, students' engagement, confidence, and maturity will have played a more important role in better class interaction. Interestingly, two students (whose work is not here included) wrote in their second reflective essays that they were reluctant to speak up in class for fear of having misunderstood the readings, or because they preferred to listen to their classmates' ideas. Both realized, however, that they should have been contributing more to class discussions, and this realization should encourage them to speak up in their next seminar.

After teaching HIST3029 in 2016, I decided to include peer review in the book review assignment in order to make the assignment more life-like and to encourage students' reflection on their own work through evaluating their peers'. The prospect of having one's writing

published alters how one writes, but having to evaluate other students' work adds a layer in the cognitive process that is writing: it helps students to situate their own work in relation to their peers', an opportunity that they do not get often. In addition, by giving them specific questions and drawing their attention to specific qualities of an essay, my hope was to develop their ability to evaluate their own work critically and to better equip them to revise and improve their writing. Practically, this meant making a preliminary version of the book review due in week 9, assigning every student two reviews to read and critique, and then having students present their book reviews in class and having the two critiquers present their most important points in response. This took a little longer than expected, but it seemed appropriate to give students sufficient time to respond to critiques. Sometimes, this resulted in lively debate. As expected, the quality of feedback varied quite a bit, although the overall comments that students gave each other were thorough, earnest, and measured. Students addressed their comments directly to their peers in a courteous manner and offered (mostly) constructive criticism, both orally and in writing. While I did not necessarily agree with all the points of criticism, or with their importance for the book review, students appeared to take this step of the assignment serious and made efforts to give useful feedback that would indeed improve the final book review. In turn, all students used the feedback from the peer reviews (and mine) in revising their book reviews, and all assignments showed significant improvement from the preliminary versions (though in part, this might also be attributable to the fact that less effort goes into an assignment that does not receive a grade and that is *preliminary*). As a whole, the peer review seemed to work well and yielded the results I had hoped for, and I am happy to keep this element of the book review assignment.

My final thought for this essay goes in a completely different direction. In a conversation on social media, a student from the 2016 cohort mentioned casually that many students in his class had felt "bewildered" throughout that semester. In my old notes for the class, I found that I had written that this was a class about asking questions and not about providing answers, a class in which we reflect on topics rather than one in which an omniscient professor-sage presents the Great Truths of World History. It is indeed an unusual class on various levels: coming mainly from a rigid education system focused on structured learning and regurgitation, and having experienced many lecture-type classes, students have good reason to find this class strange, which has no fixed content that they need to acquire. In addition, everything that is discussed in class is also malleable—we spend considerable time discussing what world history even is, and there is no conclusion (intentionally so). We focus on different approaches and interpretations, and many of our texts emphasize complexity. The skills of critical analysis that I am seeking to develop in

my students through this will hopefully enable them to become historians with agency; however, I may need to state more specifically that this is my aim, and that some confusion is actually beneficial for this learning process.