

Shallat's teaching philosophy . . .

Air and Space

Once a student with a tape recorder set the pace for my history class. If I stepped away from the podium for a long explanation—click!—the machine went off. Click!—it went on again when I quoted facts and statistics. Click!—it went off when I digressed. Soon the entire note-taking class was following the tape recorder, writing and pausing and writing again like a room of sleeping children breathing along with a snoring adult.

“Hold on!” I remember saying in mid-digression, but students, trained to record, crave chunks of data for bluebooks. Few consider how facts are sorted and weighed into parcels called theories and concepts. History class becomes “answer anchored” rather than “problem centered,” writes Lee Shulman in a recent report from the Carnegie Foundation. Critical judgement suffers when facts torn from ideas resurface on final exams.

Sixteen years as an undergraduate teacher have long since eroded my faith in the note-and-test-taking process. Students need air and space: the airing of viewpoints unheard in bright Florissant classrooms, the space to inquire and think beyond the limits of academe. In my “Introduction to History,” for example, students walk trolley lines. Using census data and reading the urban streetscape, they study settlement patterns shaped by the automobile. Students discuss the history of slave and convict labor in the ruins of the prison quarry. They consider the history of cattle grazing in the shade of a desert homestead near ruts of the Oregon Trail. Upper division “public history” courses take the lesson to another level. One class received a Department of the Interior conservation award for planning an interpretive trail. Another won the mayor’s commendation for a book on historic housing. Seeing these students swell with pride when newspapers mention their work and studies are professionally published has validated, for me, the concept of engaged scholarship—specifically, the belief that past is

prologue and that history locally focused can help the wilderness state manage its staggering growth.

The outdoors, after all, is Idaho's golden asset. Our challenge as Idaho teachers is to bring that wonder indoors. I use a technique called minute writing. A term coined by Thomas Angelo of Boston College, minute writing is simply a brief in-class assignment that gives pause to work through ideas. I ask students to write freely as if talking to classmates. They respond with gems of feedback, criticism, catharsis, comments about the reading, and comments about personal experiences that relate to points raised in class." When you ask students to write without fear of immediate grading, you provide what author Toby Flulwiler has called "a personal sanctuary for private thought." You sanctify the value of personal reflection. You give undergraduates space.

Air and space: the fresh air of off-campus interaction, the space undergraduates need to critically reflect—these public history fundamentals guide all that I research and teach. Years from now when our students are struggling with the unforeseen in a world we can barely imagine, history majors, we hope, will draw from the storehouse of facts stockpiled in history classes, but the capacity to interact with focus and critical judgement will probably help them the most.