



Scaffold, Reinforce, Imagine: Society Building in the World History Classroom

I have been teaching World History I to community college students for seven years. During my fifth year, I grew tired of reading and grading essays and suspected that my students felt the same about writing them. When my students confirmed my suspicions that they also wanted to eliminate essays, I created a semester-long project to integrate the content and skills that allows students room to explore their creativity. Spoiler alert: it has been a huge success.

The Project

This is a semester-long, creative research project in which students play the character of an archaeologist who has just discovered a long-lost society and must present the findings to the world. Though the rediscovered society must be fictional, it must also be historically plausible. Students research academic sources, create an annotated bibliography, design a digital presentation, and present their projects at the end of the semester. They also have the opportunity for extra credit by creating a cultural artifact that they “found” during their dig.

Scaffold

I break the project into four drafts plus a final submission, each with its own grade and percentage points.

Draft 1

Students decide where they rediscovered their long-lost society and the period when the society was active. They have the entire globe at their disposal, but I limit the timeframe of activity to between 10,000 BCE and 1,500 CE.

Draft 2

Using library databases, students must create a bibliography of at least five academic sources. They must research their society’s selected area as well as real-life neighbors. For example, if a student places their society in the Mediterranean Sea (as an island) at 2,500 BCE, then they would research Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete, and so on.

Draft 3

Students are required to annotate the bibliography with a short summary of main ideas in each source and a specific identification of how each source will contribute

to developing their fictional society.

Draft 4

75 percent of the project must be complete before this portion of the project. I dedicate a week during the semester to meet individually with students and review their project’s progress.

Final Submission

- Students present their completed research in a visual digital format, such as PowerPoint, Google Slides, Prezi, or iMovie.
- Final submissions must include the following:
 - The society’s origin story (how it started and why)
 - A creation myth
 - A sacrificial ritual
 - How the society dealt with power, order, religion, and gender/sexuality
 - The society’s interaction with its neighbors
 - The society’s end
 - Archaeological artifacts connected to the above that tell the story
 - A bibliography
 - Extra credit: students can create a cultural artifact that was “found” during their dig

Reinforce

Overall, the society project is meant to reinforce the content and critical thinking skills we do throughout the semester, and the final projects help me to gauge how much and what students have learned.

Instructors are supposed to cover an enormous amount of time and place over the course of a semester in introductory and history survey courses, but rather than try to cover it all, I focus on comparative cultural analysis using four themes: power, order, religion, and gender/sexuality. This strategy creates a much-needed boundary for content, allows me to focus on predetermined topics from week to week, and gives students a sense of interconnectivity between cultures, time periods, and their own lives. To achieve student learning outcomes, I model analyzing a culture using the four themes and have students practice their own analyses through weekly journaling and in-class discussions throughout the semester. Additionally, we use the four themes to analyze creation myths and sacrificial rituals to understand past mindsets, worldviews, and behavior.

Since this project is based on the student archaeologists discovering a long-lost society, an early week in the semester is devoted to archaeology. We do some active learning exercises that model the work of an archaeologist using the dig site for Ur, Mesopotamia. I emphasize that what we know about Ur is connected to physical artifacts that have come from the ground, and that whatever cultural artifacts students “find” from their society must be connected to physical objects that are appropriate to time and place.

Imagine

There are many aspects of this project that I love, but the number one spot goes to the students’ imagination. I am amazed at their creativity and how it is connected to their lives. Who they are shows up in the imaginative spaces that this project allows. Musicians “discover” musical instruments, writers “discover” journals, gamers “discover” intricate weapons, LGBTQ+ students “discover” evidence of non-heteronormative sexualities, women “discover” matriarchies, veterans “discover” vigilantes fighting for justice, devout students “discover” the “real” interpretation of religious texts, and racial minorities “discover” outposts of escaped slaves. More often than not, I have tears in my eyes as I witness their presentations.

Throughout the years since I’ve implemented this project, students have created a range of extra credit artifacts. The library on campus displays each of them, complete with descriptions of the time period and type of society they come from, much like one would see in a museum. I’ve seen students drag their friends over to the display and exclaim with pride, “See. I made this!” Some of the more memorable artifacts are a full set of armor, a cake in the form of the “discovered” village, a working model of a beheading mechanism, and a tablet of laws in cuneiform.

Conclusion

Students who stick with this project feel a sense of pride in their perseverance and their ability to showcase their new knowledge and skills. Students have expressed that they learn more from this project than any test or essay they’ve been assigned in previous history courses. Once they feel comfortable with the open aspect of the assignment, they have fun and happily work long hours creating their own society.

I get a tremendous sense of satisfaction seeing students apply their skills and knowledge in creative ways during the project. I get to learn more about them and what’s important to them, and I get to see the satisfaction in their faces when presenting. A bonus is that I am not bored or dreading the end-of-the-semester grading slog. Instead, I’m excited about the society project and it shows.

I’ll leave you with a final anecdote from my experience teaching the long-lost society project:

One semester, a minority student who was struggling with housing insecurity persevered through his obstacles and perfectly created an amazing society.

After his in-class presentation, he asked me if I knew his grade yet. I told him I wasn’t sure yet, but it was definitely in the A range. He was thrilled. He walked out of the room, but twenty seconds later came back in and gave me a hug. That feeling of success—his and mine—is every teacher’s dream.

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