

On Making Good Use of Lectures & Discussion Sections

Early modern world history is an important, fascinating and worthwhile subject. It is also a subject full of practical lessons for people interested in living and working in California in the 21st century. You can learn a good bit about the subject in this course, if you will set aside eight hours a week outside of class and section-time during the next ten weeks for reading and writing world history, and then take that work seriously and really put your mind to it. Remember throughout that though your instructor will be doing his best to facilitate the process, the learning that is done here will be the result of your work and that of your fellow-students. Learning is an active process, and not a passive one. Some learning can be done while you are sitting by yourself doing the required and recommended reading for this course, or even cramming for an exam. Some, I hope, can be done by paying close attention to the stories told in lectures, and writing down the things you hear there that seem to you to be especially worth remembering.

But most of the actual learning you do this quarter will undoubtedly take place in formal or informal discussions with your fellow-students, because that is where you can put the knowledge and understanding you are acquiring elsewhere to work by raising questions and figuring out the answers to questions in the company of others. Discussions are also the place where you are most likely to make your own connections between the many parts of this complicated whole, as they unfold for you week by week. Here are some practical suggestions for making discussion sections into an especially effective occasion for learning:

1) First, do the recommended reading in one of the "whole-world histories" of which you'll be given a list in class. Do this very early in the quarter, to begin to get a familiarity with some aspects of this subject and in passing learn a few key events and "names and numbers players."

2) Then, make sure that you are wide awake and paying attention to lectures, teasing the key ideas out of them, and writing these down so as to be able to mull them over later and bring them up in discussions.

3) Read the required book for each week from cover to cover before going to your section meeting, no matter how little time you have available for this task. For suggestions about how to carry out this apparently impossible assignment, see my essay "On Reading History Books."

4) Keep the following set of questions in mind as you read; and make just a few notes as you go, to take with you to the section meeting. Forget about trying to summarize the book or formulate a judgement of what is wrong with it (that will come forth naturally enough in the course of any discussion!). Think instead about what the book is good for; and address each of the following questions to the extent that they seem appropriate:

- a. What are the main subjects addressed in this book? What is it really about?
- b. Where did the author get his or her information, and how reliable does that information appear to be?
- c. What are the author's arguments? That is, what are some of the main points s/he is trying to get across to you regarding the book's subject or subjects?
- d. What do you think of those arguments? Which are persuasive to you and which are not, and why?
- e. What are the principal astonishments for you in the book -- the specific images, ideas or pieces of information that seemed to you most worth remembering, for whatever reason? (These are the things you find memorable, which are often not the things the author was at most pains to get you to remember!).
- f. What important questions are left in your mind after reading the book, and how do you hope to find answers to those questions?
- g. How does this book speak to you about about your own experience with life? How can you relate the pieces of world history it recounts to your own personal history, or to that of your family, or to the history of our state and nation? If it is hard for you to make these connections, why is it hard?

3) Then, during the section meeting itself, take responsibility for getting your own thoughts into the discussion rather than taking a free ride and letting others do all the talking. The thoughts of shy people are as likely to be worth listening to as those of the bold; and the most successful discussion groups make full use of both. As a rule of thumb, you can count the people present, divide the available time among them, and then see if you can't make good use of your own share of the talking time to share your best thoughts with the rest.

4) When you're not talking yourself, pay attention and take down a few notes from what your fellow students are saying about what they have learned by reading the book. Add these to the notes you've made from your own reading, to get a fuller picture of what the book has to contribute to the process of your own learning.

5) Pay special attention throughout this process to making notes that will help you keep track of the connections you are making between things you are learning from your reading, and from the lectures & discussions in this class, and the things you are reading and experiencing and thinking about outside this class right now. Tease out the patterns and the key concepts in all of this, and make them as explicit to yourself as you can by writing them down and adding your own thoughts about them.

6) Get together over coffee or lunch with one or more other students from the class once a week or so, just to kick around a few of the ideas that are emerging from readings, lectures and section meetings in a way that helps them to stick with you.

7) Keep in mind while you are doing all of this work not only that such work is what learning is all about, but that it is real work after all -- and that this kind of work is an important thing for you to be doing right now -- even in the present hard and troubling times for California, for this country, and for the world. In fact, it is likely that the very future of this problem-ridden world depends in some very small but significant measure on how responsibly and whole-heartedly and well you do your learning, right now during this quarter, while you can still enjoy the privilege of being able to devote much of your time to it. That is why you probably ought to be doing this work in the best way you can.

8) Keep a journal or diary of your experiences as a reader, active listener and participant in discussions (that is, as an apprentice intellectual workers) during this quarter. This journal ought to include daily entries that incorporate the notes you have made about the very personal and unsupervised process of actual learning that you have undergone while participating with several dozen other people in this early modern world history course at UC Santa Cruz in the Winter of 2001. Write your journal with an eye to rereading it twenty or thirty years hence, or showing it to your life's partner or to your children when they start asking questions about what you were doing in college. That way you'll leave out the things that really don't matter to you at all; and the journal will help you to get a better grasp on the information and ideas that you think can be of use to you in the future, and that may be worth passing along to others.