

*"Learning by Doing: Teaching the History of U.S. Foreign Relations with
Original Documents"*

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My general aversion to surveys is perhaps best likened to Superman's reaction to Kryptonite--initial despair, heroic but ultimately vain escape efforts, followed by sensations of resignation, nausea, and ebbing life force. The 2005 SHAFR survey on teaching proved to be a pleasant exception to this rule. I completed the survey with great interest and looked forward to finding out what other diplomatic historians were doing in the classroom. The efforts of the SHAFR teaching committee augur well for a comprehensive dialogue among scholars of U.S. foreign relations on developing and exchanging ideas, both new and old, about how to best convey our ideas to our students and encourage them to think critically.

In considering how I might contribute to the emerging discussion, my thoughts turned to my efforts to integrate the study of original historical documents into my undergraduate classes. This essay will discuss the advantages of using document-based assignments, propose some general strategies toward implementing them, and describe some specific exercises to illustrate how the incorporation of active learning strategies through assignments of this kind can both engage student interest and facilitate deeper comprehension of the historical issues under study. By active learning, I refer to pedagogical processes that promote more active engagement with course materials than is possible by simply transmitting knowledge from teacher to student. Although active learning strategies are many and varied, using original documents in the classroom can foster a more precise understanding of what historical study involves, enhance

analytical skills, and prompt students to actively engage course readings. This in turn makes for more animated class discussions that invigorate both students and instructor alike.

Document-based assignments have contributed significantly to greater student enthusiasm, overall grasp of the course materials, and quality of class discussions in all of my courses. Obviously, our courses vary according to our particular specialties, emphases, and methodologies. Hence, the following arguments and remarks are not intended to provide definitive templates, but rather to suggest the broad potential of document-based assignments to prompt students to read critically, revisit core assumptions, and ask questions. I will explore some of the broader considerations, opportunities, and potential obstacles that have informed my own decisions in creating lessons and assignments based on original sources.

My pedagogical strategies, particularly for survey-level classes, rest upon the assumption that many incoming freshman enter introductory history surveys with absolutely no idea about what professional historians do. While I am well aware of and applaud the efforts of the many dedicated, talented, and demanding high school teachers whom I have come to know, all too often students come to class on the first day in morbid anticipation of a dull, fifteen-week reprise of their most recent encounter with history—a tedious exercise in memorizing and forgetting sundry lists of names, dates, and other minutiae. Since it would be an understatement to describe this way of thinking as an impediment to learning, I devote my initial class meetings to introducing students to a richer and more complex understanding of what historical study involves.

Students in my introductory U.S. history surveys begin reading and analyzing primary sources on the first day of class, right after the obligatory review of the syllabus and course expectations. They work on a brief document-based exercise that introduces them to original

historical documents and also serves as an icebreaker. Although I have used several different first-day projects over the past few years, I have recently had positive results using the National Security Archive's "Nixon Meets Elvis" compilation, which documents Elvis Presley's December 1970 visit to the White House.¹ While the historical import of the Nixon/Elvis meeting might pale in comparison to the Yalta conference, it nevertheless has great value as part of an introductory exercise on the study of primary sources. Since the assignment features two widely recognizable figures in Richard M. Nixon and Elvis Presley, the students' initial encounter with primary sources becomes an inviting experience rather than an intimidating one.

The lesson begins with a brief lecture that defines and clarifies the differences between primary and secondary sources. Students then receive a handout that reiterates these differences and highlights some important considerations when scrutinizing primary sources, such as identifying the type of document under review, as well as its source, date, and possible audience. The handout also urges students to consider what additional sources might complement their understanding of the document.

After explaining the variety of sources available to historians, I distribute copies of the documents related to the Nixon/Presley meeting—most notably Presley's initial letter to the White House and a memo from Presidential Appointments Secretary Dwight Chapin to White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman. Students are directed to read the documents, discuss them in small groups, and record their observations concerning how Elvis justified his appointment request and why the White House granted the request. The latter question leads students to the Chapin memorandum, which endorsed the idea of a Nixon-Presley meeting. After studying the letter, students begin raising innocuous but important questions about the identities of Chapin

¹ The "Nixon Meets Elvis" collection may be accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/%7Eensarchiv/nsa/elvis/elnix.html>.

and Haldeman. This information is of course crucial to establishing which of the two officials was empowered to decide whether Elvis would see the president.

Since the assignment asks the class to evaluate whether or not Haldeman agreed with Chapin's conclusions, students are eventually drawn to the handwritten comments on the margins of the Chapin memo, which state "you've got to be kidding."² In the class discussion that follows the exercise, the nature of these comments sparks questions and debate. Is it Haldeman's handwriting? Is he souring on the entire idea of an Elvis visit or only on Chapin's specific contention that Elvis Presley exemplified the "bright young people outside of the government" with whom Nixon should associate? These questions often shift discussion to Presley's initial letter to the White House, in which Elvis contends that he could relate to younger Americans in a way that Nixon, branded as a leading establishment figure, could not. After discussion has run its course, I summarize the activity by noting how the class has not only extracted information from a historical document, but also generated their own analysis and questions and presented divergent interpretations of the same evidence. In other words, they have begun to think like historians.

While Elvis's visit to the White House may not qualify as a foreign relations event per se, it nevertheless speaks to themes such as the role of popular culture in American life, the importance of symbolism, and efforts by the state to shape public opinion. This initial assignment thus serves as the genesis of a semester-long dialogue on these themes, during which I expand the number and type of documents under scrutiny and pose increasingly complex questions. Having dispensed with Elvis, the course moves on to explore a variety of topics related to the aforementioned themes, such as George Creel's World War I propaganda

² Dwight L. Chapin to H. R. Haldeman, December 21, 1970, accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/elvis/docs/doc3.pdf>.

campaigns on behalf of the U.S. government, Franklin Roosevelt's decision to create the Office of War Information in 1942, and John Kennedy's conclusion that the symbolism of beating the Soviets to the moon justified the enormous expenditures of the Apollo project.

Document-based assignments play a vital role in redefining history to an undergraduate audience that generally views the historian's main purpose in life as preparing tedious lectures on remote subjects and inflicting them on a captive audience. Lessons based on primary-source analysis can refute this notion by immersing students in the difficulties involved with gathering and interpreting historical evidence, thus facilitating a better grasp of how people create history. Moreover, document-based assignments can help overcome the revulsion and dread that many freshmen experience when they think about history.

Although critics sometimes allege that active learning strategies by definition consign content to the back burner, there is no need to regard source analysis and content as mutually exclusive terms. Since documents rarely, if ever, speak for themselves, it is essential to provide students with an appropriate degree of historical content and context before asking them to produce an incisive appraisal of a set of historical records. However, after providing my classes with a brief introduction to the topic and documents, I step back and allow students to contemplate the sources without outside direction. During the course of the exercise, I make myself available for questions about the documents and wander about the room to check on the progress of each group. This provides an opportunity to explain context and terms to students otherwise reluctant to speak up in class and ensure that the groups stay on task, while still encouraging students to take the lead in interpreting documents.

Of course, it is not enough simply to distribute copies of the *Tenth Federalist* at the beginning of class, step back, and wait for students to experience a collective epiphany. Sam

Wineburg, a psychologist who has devoted extensive study to historical cognition, has noted that all means of conveying scholarly knowledge, be they lectures, documentaries, or document-based assignments, require creating a representation of the subject matter at hand. Since creating any such representation involves “an act of pedagogical reasoning,” successfully incorporating original sources into courses will require devoting considerable thought to what specific issues, concepts, and historiographic debates are going to be explored, selecting documents appropriate to these tasks, and developing assignments that encourage students to interrogate documentary evidence.³

At risk of stating the obvious, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to integrating original documents into courses. A number of factors should be considered: class enrollments, duration of class periods, course levels, library resources, and student web access. My teaching responsibilities at Minnesota State University, Mankato, for example, include general education U.S. history surveys and upper-level courses in U.S. diplomatic history that have different enrollments, meeting frequencies, and period lengths. General education surveys range from 45 to 135 students, whereas upper level courses are generally capped at 25. I have taught classes that meet four times a week in fifty-minute periods, twice a week in 110-minute periods, and once a week in the evening for three and a half hours. The night class, which I have taught frequently, has provided me with significant incentives to devise hands-on assignments using original documents. In this age of declining attention spans, even the most flamboyant, determined, and insightful orator will likely lose an undergraduate audience after about an hour. Hence a lengthy class, particularly one held in the evening, simply cannot be taught as an extended version of a fifty-minute lecture.

³ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, 2001), 169-70.

Assignments rooted in original sources can be valuable assets in teaching both survey classes and advanced-level diplomatic history courses. Since most general education students will not study history after taking the survey sequence, I try to maximize my brief opportunity to expose them to some of the important themes and issues in our discipline. Therefore I have modified many of my upper-level assignments for use in the general survey. Many of my subsequent remarks will reference my experiences using original sources in that class.

When introducing students to primary source analysis, it is best to start with short documents (no more than two pages in length) that are relatively free of jargon and obscure references. As students become more accustomed to working with primary documents, they can progress to more challenging materials and more sophisticated questions. Remember that while scholars analyze primary sources as a matter of course, the average college freshman is in the habit of reading for the purpose of absorbing content and tends to read text uncritically.

Regardless of the course, topic, or assignment involved, original sources can serve as the springboard for examining any number of historical issues. I have two main criteria in selecting documents for class assignments: the source must contain enough information to allow students to construct a basic narrative; and it should, after rigorous scrutiny, allow students to draw some conclusions about the issues under study. One can add further complexity and interpretive problems to assignments by supplementing the initial document with other primary sources.

President William McKinley's 1898 "Benevolent Assimilation" address is one example of a primary source that has broad utility in the classroom, given the abundant references and issues discussed within the document. The document works well in both general U.S. surveys and foreign relations courses, since students need not possess extensive knowledge of the Spanish-American War to infer from McKinley's remarks that Spain capitulated shortly after the

American navy destroyed a Spanish fleet at Manila Bay and that U.S. officials later wrested control of the Philippines away from Spain.

McKinley's efforts to explain and justify the precise nature and goals of the subsequent American occupation provide several openings to discuss broader questions concerning the connections between domestic politics and foreign policy, the debate over imperial expansion, and the motives for overseas expansion. Teachers can direct students to examine the entire document to assess the possible motives for the occupation or draw their attention to a single term such as "Benevolent Assimilation" and request that they consider the underlying assumptions of the phrase. Since the speech alone does not speak to whether or not American forces achieved McKinley's goal of winning the "confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines," juxtaposing the document with records that introduce historical figures such as General Jacob Smith and Filipino nationalist Emilio Aguinaldo can provide a springboard for further discussions, lectures, or writing assignments on topics specific to the Philippines or global issues such as imperialism, guerilla insurgency, and nationalism. Regardless of the particular issue one chooses to illustrate with the document, "Benevolent Assimilation" can be used profitably because it draws students into the story of the Philippine occupation and encourages them to raise questions about a wide spectrum of issues pertinent to both the past and present.⁴

When incorporating a new document-based assignment into a course, it is initially difficult to estimate the amount of background students will need to engage the documents

⁴ See <http://www.boondocksnet.com> for a variety of interesting documents on the Filipino insurrection. The "Benevolent Assimilation" address can be accessed at <http://www.boondocksnet.com/centennial/sctexts/assimilation.html>. Documents concerning Smith include (but are not limited to) <http://www.boondocksnet.com/centennial/sctexts/atrocities020510a.html>. For contemporary views of Aguinaldo, see "Edwin Wildman, A Visit to Aguinaldo," at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898aguinaldo.html>.

without throwing their hands up in despair. However, my experience has been that less is usually better than more. For example, some otherwise excellent document readers are problematic because they provide extensive introductory lead-ins to the actual documents. Since undergraduates find this information authoritative, they tend to rely more on these introductory preambles than on the documents themselves. Better for students to ponder and occasionally struggle with source texts without interference. While I believe it to be my responsibility to provide missing contextual information or definitions of unfamiliar terms when asked, my initial response to questions about “what a document means” is to ask students to develop their own thesis, prepare to explain how they came to their conclusion, and test their idea on me.

In one such assignment, students in my upper-level Vietnam War course examine the Kennedy administration’s troubled relations with the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. The documents for this assignment, which are drawn primarily from volumes I and II of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series (1961-63), include assessments of the situation in Saigon from the CIA, the State Department, and the Michigan State University Vietnam Group, along with memoranda of conversations between U.S. officials (notably General Maxwell Taylor and Ambassador Frederick Nolting) and Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. These sources review and discuss issues such as the strategic hamlet program, Kennedy’s attempts to persuade Diem to institute political reforms, the Buddhist crisis of 1963, and appraisals of counter-insurgency efforts in South Vietnam. The sources, which reveal that U.S. officials were becoming disenchanted with the nation-building effort in South Vietnam, also reveal disagreements within the administration as to what policies were working and what the overall prospects for success were. Thus they do not lend themselves to easily deduced, monolithic conclusions about U.S. policy in Vietnam.

This particular project follows a week devoted to examining the Eisenhower administration's Indochina policies. Students are assigned and quizzed on the chapter four materials from the core text, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, which includes essays by David Anderson and Ronald Spector. The class thus begins work on the Kennedy exercise with a solid grasp of Eisenhower's policy objectives, the emergence and characteristics of the Diem government, and the tumultuous relationship between Saigon and its American patron during the 1950s—in other words, with a solid foundation from which to engage source materials from the Kennedy period.⁵

The Kennedy exercise begins with the class divided into small groups of three to four students. Each group is provided with its own unique document or documents. The students are instructed to review the document(s), produce a single written summary of salient points, and compile a list of policy options for the president that is informed by their overall knowledge of U.S.–South Vietnamese relations and their interpretation of their particular sources. The groups are given approximately fifty minutes to review and discuss their sources, after which photocopies of each document set are provided to the entire class. In prearranged order, the groups make brief presentations before the class that summarize the contents of their source(s) and advance their policy proposals. They then field questions from their peers. Subsequent presentations introduce new issues and perspectives to the dialogue. When one group inevitably questions the viability of the proposals of another, vigorous debates often ensue. The debates take unpredictable but invariably interesting turns reflective of a deep level of engagement among the participants.

⁵ See David L. Anderson, "The Tragedy of U.S. Intervention," in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert J. McMahon (Boston, 2003), 101-112; and Ronald H. Spector, "The Failure of Vietnamization," in *Major Problems*, 112-121.

Exposing students to the documentary record of Kennedy's Southeast Asia policies helps foster a greater appreciation of the complexity of diplomatic relations than I could have achieved by simply describing and recounting these complexities. Before bringing discussion to a close, it is important to remind the students that their observations, reservations, and disagreements about Vietnam policies reflect some of the dilemmas facing the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s. The in-class exercise then provides a jumping-off point for a brief lecture on JFK's Vietnam policies that places the assignment in a wider historical framework and provides any content material that the documents or subsequent discussion failed to illustrate or clarify.

Assessment of student comprehension of the overall lesson is achieved through evaluation of both the written summaries and the in-class presentations. The former are expected to be factually accurate. The policy proposals must make an argument informed by careful reading of the assigned documents and a broader understanding of recently assigned documents, essays, and lecture materials. These assignments collectively make up a modest percentage of the overall course grade. The more significant assessment tool is a five-page take-home essay. Unlike the in-class exercise, this is an individual assignment that requires students to advance a thesis on Kennedy's policies that is supported by evidence drawn from both the chapter five materials in *Major Problems* and the documents from the in-class exercise. Since the secondary essays in the chapter offer contrasting assessments of Kennedy's policies, students must demonstrate their grasp of historical content and scholarly arguments alike. They must also show the ability to defend a thesis with documentary evidence, both secondary and primary. These essays thus provide an excellent tool for assessing the depth of historical understanding achieved through the document-based assignment. They also make for far more interesting reading than is generally found with standard essay exams.

There are a few problems associated with the use of document-based assignments. Although they have greatly enhanced student learning in my courses, collaborative exercises can suffer if inadequate attention is paid to the difficulties inherent in managing group dynamics. While collaborative assignments are ideally suited for talented, ambitious, and diligent students who are at ease discussing and exchanging ideas, the real world presents us with students who possess a broad range of abilities, motivation, and confidence expressing themselves to their peers. The benefits of collaboration can therefore be lost if the members of the group are mismatched in regard to these attributes. Should one student end up doing a majority of the work, the idle are rewarded for the toils and travails of others. This in turn can dissuade more talented students from giving their best effort if they come to resent subsidizing good grades for their lazy counterparts. Group work can also suffer if time is not allotted carefully. Too little time leads to rushed and careless work, whereas excessive time allowances will inevitably degenerate into chat sessions.

While the aforementioned dangers certainly exist, they can be minimized with careful planning. Since any in-class assignment is doomed if students fail to read the assigned materials, reserving some class time for reading can eliminate the problem if significant points are linked to completion of the in-class assignment. For assignments that require students to read in advance, the mere threat of a reading quiz (with hefty points attached) usually deters wayward souls otherwise inclined to skip the readings.

Another difficult problem results from the disorientation some students experience when asked to participate in assignments requiring active engagement with the subject matter. Many individuals who do poorly on my initial document-based assignments, regardless of the course in question, are unaccustomed to learning by any means other than absorbing content. They are

reluctant to try to reach their own conclusions, since they are taken aback by the contention that their assessments might be valid and interesting. Given that learning how to interpret historical sources is not an easy task, other students may offer resistance because they find it easier to sit and listen to someone lecture. In the case of the former, even a small amount of reassurance can go a long way toward encouraging students to take some initiative in interpreting the past. In regard to the latter, a careful explication of class goals, underlying methodology, and expectations usually helps draw the recalcitrant back into the fold.

Finally, requiring each group to assume responsibility for explaining specific documents to their peers can effectively promote successful collaborative work. While this strategy is less applicable in larger classes, I have found it extremely fruitful and rewarding in smaller ones. The aforementioned exercise on U.S.–South Vietnamese relations is one case where students accepted the responsibility of reporting their findings to the wider group. Students essentially assumed the mantle of authority on their set of historical records and proved determined to demonstrate their mastery and fulfill their collective responsibilities. In presiding over the exercise and subsequent discussion, I discovered that I had to intervene only on rare occasions, usually to correct minor factual errors or clarify historical context.

Assignments that provide students with opportunities and responsibilities to contribute to broader class objectives do require teachers to relinquish control—albeit temporarily—over the direction and content of class discussion. Ceding control does not mean abandoning structure or direction, but teachers have to be willing to give students time to originate, reject, and develop arguments and theses about the documents or issues in question. This, frankly, is easier said than done. Teachers have to develop an instinct for when to jump in to redirect discussion and when to let conversation go. Since my general pedagogical instincts are geared toward lecturing, it is

sometimes difficult for me to resist the urge to take over the discussions that accompany these exercises. Yet although students might progress slowly and haltingly to a point that I might have explained quickly and concisely, it is well worth the wait to watch them develop ideas on their own.

Document-based assignments offer a dynamic, exciting way to encourage students to become actively involved in historical analysis. Primary source evidence, to be sure, often presents ambiguous answers rather than clear-cut, definitive ones, but this is more of an asset than a liability. It demonstrates the methodological problems that professional historians face and encourages the examination of historical issues from multiple perspectives, thereby making it easier to introduce students to the concept of historiography. Moreover, original documents can illustrate, in vivid and dramatic fashion, the complexity of the world in which our predecessors lived. Immersing students into this world and exposing them to the choices that historical actors faced, the constraints they operated under, and the cultural, intellectual, and personal baggage that informed their thinking can instill in our students a richer, more mature grasp of history. Unlike lectures, which can make the past seem incomprehensible and immune to judgment, primary sources add complexity to historical issues that can foster greater understanding, add depth to historical arguments, prompt sophisticated questions, and minimize apathy. Any success in contributing to and encouraging this process, it seems to me, marks a job well done.

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