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Jeremy Murray 2016 Summer Innovative Course Development Grant

Island Peoples, Island Struggles: Global History from the Margins

In this course, there was no way anyone could master every aspect of course content from islands in the Pacific to the Atlantic to the Mediterranean to the North Sea. The course was a shared and guided exploration of themes related to islands, isolation, marginalization, oppression, resistance, and a concept we kept returning to that we clumsily but usefully termed “islandness.” As a team, we inquired whether such an idea as islandness existed, and we had interesting, provocative, and productive results.

One of the key results of the course was the mastery that students discovered that they were capable of when invested with the confidence of their instructor. Each student chose an island in which they were required to become the leading experts in the class. Again, nobody, me included, was going to become an expert in all island histories of the world, and I made this clear from the start. Rather, each student gave the class a series of low-stakes and informal presentations that became increasingly formal and substantive as we progressed through the quarter. The presentations culminated in a final official research talk by each student. But this task, which seemed so daunting at the beginning of the course, was carried out with few sweaty palms or white knuckles, since it was simply a synthesis and fine-tuning of much of the information on the island history that the student had been working on and presenting informally for 10 weeks.

The gradual ramping up of low-stakes presentations was an activity that took considerable scaffolding on my part, but was a delight to behold. For some students, I even encouraged them to rehash the exact same material that they had presented in a previous class, but just to give it a slightly different angle, or to add a small amount of detail, or bring in visual aids in the form of an effective and “hard-working” Powerpoint presentation. Some students needed special attention since even such a scaffolded exercise presented daunting and seemingly insurmountable challenges. For these students, I encouraged them to practice first speaking informally and causally from their desks. I explained that they did not need to stand in front of the class. This was helpful, and it made the prospect of presenting research much less onerous. Still, I did insist that students eventually present in front of the class, and this would eventually entail triumphant revelations as students learned that mastering the three-word presentation mantra would make any venue possible and even a welcome challenge: “Know your subject!”

The papers that resulted were also outstanding, and I expect that some will be featured in next year’s edition of the History Department’s award-winning student-run journal, *History in the Making*. This course was extremely gratifying, and I thank TRC for the chance to develop it!