

Encouraging Active Reading in Large Classes

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Introduction

UCL, like many other higher education institutions, employs large-group teaching across much of its undergraduate curriculum. In History, where I teach, these modules generally adopt a lecture/seminar format, in which assigned preparatory reading feeds into classroom discussions. However, such a large class environment often results in reduced student engagement with learning, less lecturer feedback, and a difficulty in developing students' active reading skills. These underlying issues were magnified by the pandemic, which necessitated remote learning for the 2020-21 academic year, further divorcing students from teachers. This case study discusses efforts to engage students in active reading in a large lecture class of 250-300 students.

Background

Approaching History is a core undergraduate module that offers an introduction to historical theory and method. The module is compulsory for all first-year undergraduates on BA History and related programmes which comprise a cohort of 250-300 students. I have run the module for the last three years, through the pandemic, in three different formats. In 2019-20, it was delivered as a traditional two-hour lecture (until the module was brought to an early close by the beginning of the pandemic). In 2020-21, it was delivered via a one-hour asynchronous lecture and a one-hour live online lecture each week. In 2021-22, it was delivered as a weekly two-hour hybrid lecture, with students attending either in the lecture theatre or via a livestream. Notwithstanding these format changes, students were always expected to read, prior to the lecture, at least two texts of 30-40 pages each that were available on the online learning environment.

Such online reading (that is reading that takes place in an online space while the reader is connected to the internet) is increasingly the norm for students. However, particularly within a large course, such reading is too often approached passively. Large courses are often focused on providing comprehensive 'coverage' of a topic, with readings selected by specialists in the field to ensure that students are exposed to advanced knowledge of the content. A major problem with this approach is that students are positioned primarily as *passive recipients* of knowledge rather than *active learners* engaged in developing new ideas, explaining their understandings to each other, and applying their knowledge in different contexts.

This has certainly been my experience in teaching *Approaching History*: in a traditional lecture it is challenging to engage a large class of students in an active discussion of the reading, and virtually impossible to provide tailored responses to individual students. This is exacerbated still further by the separation of student and teacher imposed by online and hybrid teaching. Discussions can be conducted with the whole class, but this frequently becomes a conversation between the lecturer and a small number of more confident students, which in turn disincentivises the majority from contributing, and fosters disengagement with the reading.

Approach

Over the last two years, I have attempted to revise the module to actively engage students with their reading and to encourage discussion. In 2020-21 I introduced guided reading questions to try to encourage students to connect the preparatory reading with the lecture. The weekly readings are accompanied by specific guiding questions that are designed to encourage students to acquire knowledge, analyse connections, and evaluate significance. Each week's topic is geared around a broad inquiry question.

Required Reading for Week 6

Required Reading

Eric Williams, "The Origin of Negro Slavery," in *Capitalism and Slavery* rev. edition (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2021). 🔄 ⬆️

David Geggus, "The Haitian Revolution," in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, 2002), 5-29.

Aisha Khan, "Race and Racial Thinking: A View From the Atlantic World," in David Rainbow (ed.) *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal, 2019), 78-99. 🔄 ⬆️

As you read consider the following questions:

- Why and when did European colonizers enslave Africans?
- How does Eric Williams connect slavery with racism?
- What were the main contributions of the Haitian Revolution?
- What factors does David Geggus present for the remarkable success of the Haitian Revolution?
- Aisha Khan makes a case for Atlantic experiences as central to how we understand racial thinking. How does she establish her argument on the value of comparative discussions on race?
- Khan explores in detail the 1885 writings of Haitian philosopher, Anténor Firmin. What were Firmin's main ideas about race and how did he prove them? In what ways did the Haitian experience influence his position?

Figure 1. An example of guided reading questions in *Approaching History*. These questions are provided to students, along with the reading, prior to the lecture.

I now gear our weekly live lectures around discussion of these questions using a variety of different methods such as 'think, pair, share,' collaborative annotation, and online forums or pinboards. Technologies that enable students to contribute anonymously, such as Padlet, Mentimeter, and Talis Elevate, are by far the most conducive to discussion. The guidance questions encourage active reading and ensure students are prepared when they are asked to contribute. Their posts allow me to tailor a wider discussion of the reading to their interests as well as enabling me to correct any common misunderstandings.

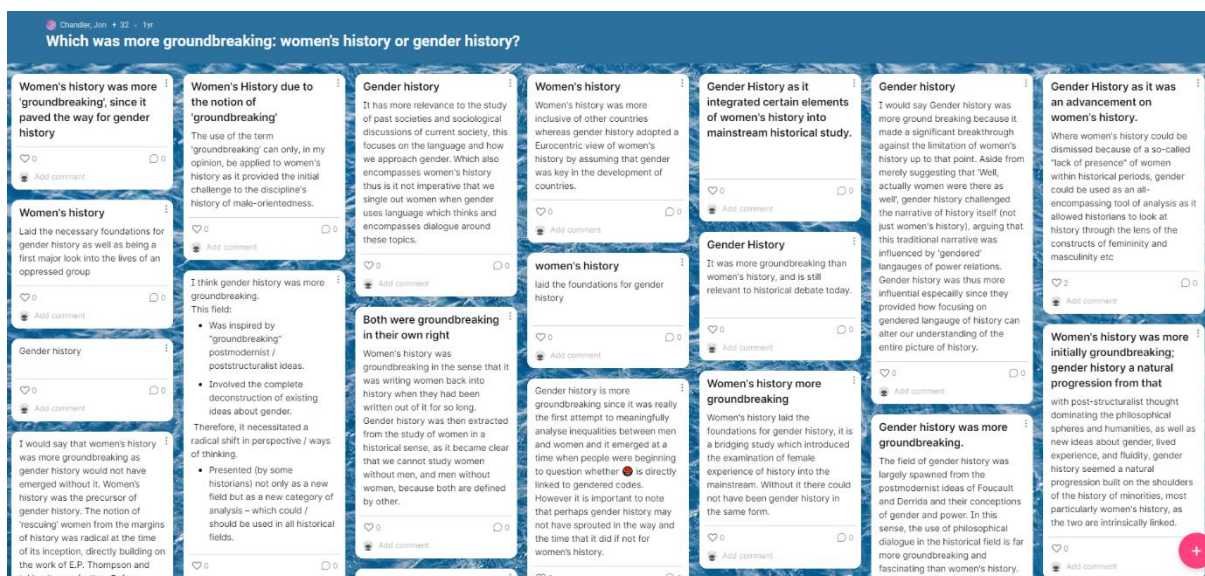


Figure 2. An example of an asynchronous discussion that took place on Padlet. Students posted their responses to the reading question prior to lecture which were then discussed during the live session.

Throughout the course I encourage students to engage with the broad inquiry question through analysis of example essays and exam scripts. This is an activity that students are very familiar with from their secondary education, and it really engages them: first years, in particular, are much more willing to criticise an essay from an unknown peer than something written by a “proper” historian. It is important that the examples are carefully curated: I usually edit and sometimes make creative additions to ensure that the example is relevant to the inquiry question. I use collaborative annotation software such as Talis Elevate and ask students, live in the class, to read and comment on the example’s strengths and weaknesses.

Extract 2. Is the concept of ‘empire’ a useful category of analysis? (Conclusion)

Currently, empire is a useful category of analysis. A century ago, empire was associated with a hagiographic approach of imperial history adopted by nationalist historians. This failed to explore vast and important facets of the states being examined. However, post-colonial theory has revitalised the concept of empire, leading to a far wider scope of analysis and encouraging academics to explore the relationships between core and client states and the societies of the subjugated. Orientalism (1978) is a great example of the fresh arguments and perspectives that have developed as a result of this. The concept also remains relevant today as some impacts and influences of pre-modern empires persist. However, I have highlighted two dangers associated with using empire: when exploring contemporary societies, it can be tempting to wrongly view major powers’ foreign policies as evidence of empire; secondly, given how elusive the definition of empire is, forced comparisons between states can develop. I suggest that the concept as a category of analysis could become more useful still if academics saw it as having sub-categories, making it easier and more valid to compare different empires.



Figure 3. An example of a discussion in a hybrid lecture centred on an inquiry question. Students used Talis Elevate to anonymously critique an example response to the inquiry question which was being discussed by the lecturers.

Feedback

These exercises have had a positive effect on student engagement with and contribution to the course. The guidance questions certainly seem popular (I’m quickly inundated with reminders if I ever forget to post them!) while the use of technologies in discussion undoubtedly garners more contributions from a broader range of students than before. The collaborative annotation of example scripts engages students with the weekly inquiry question and a clear majority of respondents to our end-of-course survey found it beneficial. Students thought the activity was ‘useful at gaining new skills for analysing academic papers’ and appreciated the ability to ‘bounce ideas off each other’ virtually.

An inherent issue with large classes, made even more acute by the pandemic, is the limited time that is available for creating and fostering personal interactions either among students themselves or between students and teachers. Research from the *Active Online Reading* project suggests that collaborative reading pedagogies support students overcome these barriers by fostering a supportive learning environment. The strategies outlined in this case study create more time and space for student-student and teacher-student interactions in an online environment as well as in the hybrid classroom.

Top Tips

1. Embed guidance and inquiry questions into your curriculum from the beginning. Plan the questions carefully so students are moving from knowledge acquisition, to analysing connections, to evaluating significance.
2. Plan synchronous or asynchronous activities that encourage students to engage with these questions and that allow you to identify misunderstandings and provide tailored feedback. Use a variety of technologies to keep students engaged over the duration of the module.
3. Structure large classes around broad inquiry questions. Encourage students to consider potential answers before the lecture. Engage students with these questions by asking them to dissect example essays, exam scripts, and past papers during or after the lecture.
4. Encourage asynchronous interaction between students by using collaborative learning technologies such as Padlet and Talis Elevate. Lead by example: comment on students' comments or posts and draw connections between them. Build a bridge into the physical lecture space by discussing their comments or by continuing the activity synchronously.