

## PEDAGOGICAL INQUIRY REPORT, SPRING 2020

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Pedagogical Enhancement Project on “*Theory as History: Accessibility and the Links between Life and Ideas*”

### **The Project:**

Junior History major and Writing Center tutor Connor Rauch and I worked together through a series of shared and separate readings both in history and in pedagogy with the aim of improving my introductory history course Hist 150: “Comrades Come Rally: European Socialisms.”

The immediate problem I wanted to solve was the issue of weak discussions which led to weak understandings of how theory worked in relationship to history. This led students to not fully grasp the import of socialist theory as an agent of historical change and to see the working class not as agents of change but only as victims of the system. My goal is to help them understand the ways in which it is much, much more complicated than that.

### **The Process:**

- Connor and I met almost every Friday in Fall semester for 2 hours. We continued to discuss ideas over a couple of skype phone calls over Spring Break before he left to study abroad in Ghana. (Who knew we were being so ahead of the on-line curve?)

- We also communicated ideas and brainstormed practices and syllabi ideas using a set of google docs.

- Connor wanted to concentrate on theory and how to bring it to the students. He read a variety of works and created a reading/list summary for me. Together we used that to find short theoretical articles that could be paired with specific events in history to show the way that theory springs from events and vice versa.

- I asked Connor to interview some of the former students to get a sense of what they liked and thought worked and what didn't. Although he was able to interview only a couple, and those were mainly favorably disposed, their commentary was still very helpful.

- In Connor's discussions and my return to the course evaluations it became clearer that one reading assignment had failed quite miserably and that in general I had not prepared well enough to help them think through the economics at hand, partly because my knowledge is weak in this area.

The result is that I am now looking for a clearer primer on mid-twentieth-century capitalist economic interconnections. I will also prepare a careful, step by step lecture with powerpoints to help them understand the international financial system. Some of my time was spent in researching for that.

- At the suggestion of the Teaching and Learning Committee, we used *Creating Wicked Students* to think about assignments and how to create a much more “active” classroom. The attitudes and ideas in this text were key to helping us sort out a set of ideas and assignments we'd like to experiment with.

## **The Result**

- Together Connor and I developed a series of “roundtables” at the end of each of 4 units as a way to structure the class. Each roundtable will take a different form, shaped by the historical context of the moment. The roundtables will alternate between strictly historical work to understand developments and more innovative theoretical work where they apply their own theoretical learning toward the problems at hand.

### **Feeling the pain, looking forward.** Worker autobiography roundtable

All students read two secondary theoretical articles that explore the question of class formation.

Then sets of students read historical autobiographies from France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom as a means to understand industrialization and its impact on (and creation of) a working class.

### **Build a Party platform.** Revolution vs. Reform at the turn of the century.

This activity requires students engage with the social and political development of their chosen State in order to develop a socialist platform for the early Twentieth Century. Again, students will work together in groups according to their State and then come together to report out to and work toward an international program to be decided by the *Second International Workingman’s Association* (founded 1884).

### **Faltering Economies.** State of the state reports on oil crisis, welfare tensions, etc.

This unit will have introductory level secondary readings on postwar economies, especially the development of technocracy and agencies like the World Bank and the European Union. After exploring the “economic miracle” and the rebuilding of European nations following World War II, we will delve more deeply into the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. I still need to do reading this summer to shape how this roundtable will work. I may change the class into Communism and Capitalist Europe for this section.

**Building Utopias?** How alternatives like Maoism and alt/eco movements shape and challenge socialism.

After a unit including more recent “alternative” developments, students will consider what a new movement might look like that built on the earlier work of socialism. The goal of this culminating assignment will be for them to consider how these historical developments have (or have not) set Europeans up for developing alternatives to traditional capitalism.

The Roundtable format sprang from my successful attempt in the most recent class to meld theory and history by bringing in these autobiographies. They were by far the most successful portion of the class and helped students to see a need for theory.

The point of the Roundtables is to give a much clearer purpose to all their reading and discussion, to help them see that they need to understand past events *and* their contemporary theoretical ideas to make sense of historical development. This should culminate in understanding the ways that historical knowledge can inform current decision making.

**Enhancing my overall teaching:**

I cannot yet say with certainty what the impact on student learning will be. But I can say that although the project and this specific outcome apply onto to this course, I have developed a process that will be transferable to other courses, especially those non-majors. Three key tenets I take away about shaping future courses old and new:

1) Increasingly, students who are not history majors need active means to help them engage with what can seem like arcane details. Even the early twentieth century is a distant planet to them. This is something I've noticed over the past couple of years and that I think will only become more prevalent. Some form of the roundtable process will be extremely helpful in other courses, such as Hist 263: From Farm to Fork, which I am teaching this Fall. I plan to structure that course in a manner similar to the structure outlined above.

2) Connor's findings in discussions with former students convinced me that it is important to be more self-consciously global in my approaches. Although I can center my inquiries on Europe, I need to go where the action is — thus the introduction of Maoism and Che Guevara in Socialisms; and the introduction of Green Revolutions and Alter-Ecology into both classes.

3) STORY is key. Students need to be able to tell their own story about the events they are learning. The ability to tell a complex but manageable story is the ability to master and use the materials they've learned in a variety of contexts.

**Sharing results of the Project:**

I will be using these procedures in both Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. Connor Rauch will be a senior next year and would like to be my Writing Fellow/TA for Comrades Come Rally. I would be happy, after that experience, to be part of a teaching/learning center roundtable on shifting from passive to active. Connor currently is considering working at Whitman after graduation; if he does, I'd like to include him in any presentation or discussion group. He was an equal partner and helped spur my enthusiasm for change and curiosity about new ideas.