

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Aaron Benanav

Critical reasoning emerges out of a balanced sense of the power and the frailty of serious thought. This perspective motivates the way I organize my courses: around awe-inspiring theories as well as the historical trends that both support and complicate them. I might begin a lecture by summarizing Malthus's theory of the clash between the geometric growth of the population and the arithmetic growth of the food supply, but I always follow this summary with statistical evidence showing that humanity has definitively broken through the Malthusian ceiling. I want students to marvel at a world in which the majority of the population lives in cities and depends on others to grow their food. What made this world possible, historically?

Organizing courses around such questions helps students understand the stakes of historical arguments. For example, in 2016 I taught a course on world history since 1760 at UCLA, which was organized around the question: why are some countries rich and other countries poor? Students came into the classroom with many preconceived notions, which were challenged when confronted with accounts of the Opium Wars, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and other historical events. At the conclusion of the course, I asked students to demonstrate their evolving understandings of modern world history by writing papers comparing the developmental trajectories of Turkey, India, Russia, and China—the former seats of the great Eurasian empires. I provided students with historical data on income levels, inequality, literacy, and life expectancies, in addition to course texts and lectures. Reading students' papers made it clear that they had gained an appreciation of the difficulties of achieving human development under adverse conditions, arising not only from external pressures but also internal conflicts.

In this context, it was especially interesting to discuss the material I was teaching with students whose family histories intersected with the histories of the various countries we were studying. One of my primary goals as a teacher is to create space for students to connect course materials to their diverse experiences, since, when students are willing to share their family histories in the classroom, it brings course content to life. In 2015, I participated in a committee at UCSC's College Nine, which increased the inclusivity of the readings in our core course. In 2017, I won the Feminist Forum Award at the University of Chicago based on the inclusivity of my syllabi.

I discovered the importance of inclusivity in the classroom when I was lecturing at College Nine at UCSC, in 2011-2015. College Nine is uniquely diverse on UCSC's campus: half of the entering class identifies as ethnically Asian and a quarter as Latino. Teaching there, I was constantly reminded of how important it is to teach history with a global scope, so more students feel connected to course materials. The results can be rewarding. In my own classroom, discussing the history of migration from Southeast Asia to the Middle East was made more real and relevant when a young Pilipino woman talked about her aunt who had made that journey as a maid. The connections students draw to their lives can also raise difficult questions. In discussing the drug war in Mexico, a student was once moved to describe her family's experience with death due to cartel-related violence. My teaching process broke down in this moment, when real suffering was revealed in the classroom. I am still learning how to bear witness to these sorts of experiences. After all, violence, as much as the escape from it, is the very stuff of history.