

# Marrying Content and Practice: Raising Undergraduate Awareness of “Job Skill” Acquisition in a History Survey Course

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HISTORIANS TEACHING undergraduates have grown accustomed to hearing a refrain in media outlets and increasingly from parents: history and other humanities majors fail to prepare students adequately for professional success after graduation. Although certainly not new, this perception has gained traction over the past decade as parents push their children to major in fields outside the humanities.<sup>1</sup> As a result, history departments at U.S. universities have seen a steady decline in the number of majors.<sup>2</sup> Thus comes the question, what can an individual instructor do to counteract the perception of history’s weakness in offering preparation for professional success?

I detail below the trial-and-error process that led me to develop a strategy that marries content and practice to raise student awareness of “job skills” obtained in a history course. I intentionally implemented this strategy in a course on Japanese history, a subject that may easily be labeled as esoteric and superfluous according to another current perception: undergraduate courses should be directly relevant to a student’s future career.<sup>3</sup> I will also detail my related

initiative of including an alumnus, an outside voice of professional success, in the course throughout the semester to enhance this pedagogical approach.

### **Introducing Job Skill Awareness: Versions 1.0 and 2.0**

For more than a decade, I have regularly taught a lecture survey, “Japan Since 1600,” which offers an introductory overview of major political, social, economic, artistic, and cultural trends spanning from the start of Japan’s last feudal age (the Edo period, 1603-1868) to the present day. I structure course assignments to foster skills in critical thinking, as well as oral and written communication, as students learn about the Japanese past. I have long employed group work, in the form of in-class exercises and two- to three-person presentations, as a means for students to enhance such skills. I previously presented such skill acquisition as an inherent yet amorphous plus, a learning outcome realized only in the future when students reflect on their college experiences.

In 2012, I decided to search for ways for students to gain a greater awareness of skill acquisition in my courses. I worked with Amy Willard, a staff member from my university’s Office of Personal and Career Development (OPCD), to map out strategies to demonstrate that a class on Japanese history, while offering ways to build critical thinking skills, could also provide opportunities to advance the “job skills” of collaboration/teamwork as well as oral and written presentation. At the beginning of the semester, Willard presented an overview of surveys, conducted by her office, which underscore that employers consistently look for the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively. She also gave examples of employers asking about such skills during interviews. At midterm, we convened a required evening session to reinforce the value of these skills in future careers (including graduate school). During a ninety-minute discussion, an alumna who majored in history and now works at a major bank, and an Army veteran and undergraduate history major enrolled in a MBA program, offered insights on the value of collaboration skills within their respective careers and took student questions.

The results of these measures were decidedly mixed. In written evaluations, some students expressed satisfaction, but most found negligible value in the evening session and the in-class presentation

of employer surveys, with many asserting that even our limited discussions were “out of place” in a history course.

In 2014, I used this student input and further suggestions from Willard to develop a new approach. I decided to intentionally provide students with opportunities to hone collaboration skills, exercises tailored to not only enhance their understanding of course content, but also offer more tangible experiences to relate to potential employers during an interview. In addition, I chose to include leadership and communication within collaboration as course sub-themes. To gauge progress, I created assignments where students engaged throughout the semester with a “teamwork/collaboration value rubric” that offered definitions of levels of effective collaboration/teamwork from the lower end “benchmark,” to mid-range “milestones,” to the highest end “capstone.” In the first week, students completed a short response sheet in which they located their individual levels concerning collaboration/teamwork. (I assured them that being at a benchmark level was perfectly acceptable.) Students also completed a one-page response in which they defined collaboration as well as communication and leadership in general ways and as related to Japan. (Here too, I affirmed that only a superficial knowledge of Japan was understandable, given they had just begun the course.) With these assignments, I sought to create a means for students to articulate an entry-level understanding to help them track their learning during the semester. Students reflected on their progress vis-à-vis the rubric through short, written assignments at midterm and as part of a take-home final.

In addition, I divided the twenty-four students into six groups of four, with each group making two preparatory presentations, spread out over the semester, on assigned readings of a given day. Instead of emphasizing the value of collaboration, leadership, and communication to the post-graduate job search, Willard took a more indirect approach. During a class visit, she explained the resources available through her office, such as a short video she created giving an overview of effective preparation strategies for individual and group presentations. At the beginning of the semester, each group also completed an in-class team-building exercise in which students created maps that allowed each team to identify points of agreement and areas of further discussion concerning the core themes of the course. All groups also met with me before their first presentation to explore various approaches to working together. In addition, I gave

written feedback to each student following the completion of each group's first and second presentations, highlighting effective and ineffective areas of collaboration, leadership, and communication.

As the final piece of these course revisions, at the beginning of the term, I outlined overarching narratives of modern Japanese history, emphasizing what many historians see as the dominant role of a Japanese group ideology and the limited influence of individual leaders. Related to those themes, I assigned primary sources exploring the leadership decisions of Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku<sup>4</sup> during the pivotal months leading up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.<sup>5</sup> Students also read secondary works portraying Yamamoto as hobbled by a Japanese group ideology, which prevented him from articulating his opposition to the Pearl Harbor attack and hindered Japanese naval forces in the pivotal Battle of Midway in 1942.<sup>6</sup> The class also read and analyzed Endō Shūsaku's novel, *The Sea and Poison*, as a negative example of collaboration: a group of doctors and nurses who performed vivisections on U.S. prisoners of war at a university hospital during World War II.<sup>7</sup> In the final weeks of the semester, I assigned texts examining teamwork within Japan's rapid economic growth in the late twentieth century. One text explored the "Toyota Way" of emphasizing the involvement of all employees in the production process to assure quality. Students also read sections of a guidebook outlining how U.S. businesses could advance teamwork and, by implication, the company's overall performance by applying aspects of the just-in-time production system developed by Japanese companies.<sup>8</sup>

As a capstone for these semester-long assignments, each group gave a ten-minute final presentation that explored a broad narrative of modern Japanese history related to one of the following areas chosen at random: politics, society, culture, foreign relations, everyday life, and the economy. Students also completed take-home finals in which they explored narratives of collaboration, leadership, and communication within post-1945 Japan, and assessed their personal level of development in the three skill areas since the beginning of the semester. I hoped these exercises would be forums for students to articulate learning outcomes in their knowledge of Japanese history, as well as in "job skill" acquisition.

In the course evaluations, a number of students expressed satisfaction with these strategies, relating that working in a group throughout the semester enhanced their learning of key trends

in Japanese history, such as the rise of militarism in the 1920s and 1930s, and post-1945 rapid economic growth. Others stated that course assignments better equipped them to understand and articulate larger narratives of the Japanese past. Several also concluded that assignments helped them to discern improvement in their communication, leadership, and teamwork skills, while others stressed the semester-long group exercise allowed them to realize how effective teamwork involved identifying and utilizing the particular strengths of each member of their respective groups.

Although buoyed by these positive assessments, I confronted the fact that a significant portion of students also found my initiatives ineffective in enhancing their learning of Japanese history. Many concluded that time spent on class presentations and self-assessment took away from lecture, which they stressed was a more valuable venue to learn about the Japanese past. Others expressed dissatisfaction with the focus on group work, asserting that it ended up creating a dynamic whereby one student completed most of the assignment, while his or her peers “loafed around.” Finally, only a minority of students relayed the notion that class assignments had allowed them to discern personal advancement in the skills of communication, leadership, and teamwork. I therefore concluded that, overall, the group exercises and multiple presentations proved overwhelming, and thus inadvertently pushed students to focus on building teamwork and other skills at the expense of exploring aspects of Japanese history. I also realized that my assignments, intended to assist students in tracing the progress of their learning over the semester, had instead led them and me to focus on evaluation at the expense of discussion of topics in Japanese history.

### **Version 3.0: Marrying Content and Practice**

When I taught the course again in 2016, I retooled my efforts to more effectively marry the learning of the content of Japanese history with the practice of honing skills applicable for future professional endeavors. I realized that my previous initiatives had limited student-directed learning, especially my use of a rubric that rigidly defined collaboration/teamwork goals and student progress toward them. To address this issue, I first shuffled the thematic emphasis, casting leadership as the primary organizing theme, with collaboration as a sub-theme. In addition to readings about Admiral

Yamamoto, I assigned secondary and primary sources providing what amounted to case studies of prominent political, diplomatic, economic, and women's rights leaders. Students considered first a failed political leader, Ōshio Heihachirō, a low-ranking samurai who in the 1830s attempted to incite a peasant rebellion against the Tokugawa shogunate, the central authority of Japan's feudal state. To provide international context, I also assigned sources related to John Brown and his similar, quixotic attempt to initiate a slave rebellion in the United States in the 1850s.<sup>9</sup>

I again employed group work, dividing the class into six three-person teams, but with each making only one presentation. For their presentations, each group developed discussion questions about a key leader or an example of collaboration in the Japanese past. (I retained the readings about the Toyota Way and just-in-time methods.) Groups examined the leadership choices of Japanese officials and U.S. diplomats during Commodore Matthew Perry's visit to Japan in 1853-1854, and considered the perspectives of the winners and losers in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan's modern revolution.<sup>10</sup> Other groups examined the life and work of Ishimoto Shidzué, a prominent activist in the 1920s birth control movement, and Takahashi Korekiyo, a finance minister often credited with introducing Keynesian economic policies in the 1930s before similar policies advocated by John Maynard Keynes were implemented in Western nations.<sup>11</sup> Finally, I gave more focus to a topic explored in a limited way in the class two years before: the difficult decisions confronting the Japanese prime minister in the chaotic days following March 11, 2011, when northern Japan was struck by an earthquake, tsunami, and the threat of a meltdown at a nuclear plant.<sup>12</sup>

To offer models and first-hand experiences of leadership and collaboration, I was fortunate to work with David Friedersdorf, an alumnus currently employed in the health care industry, who graduated with a history degree from my university in the late 1980s. After graduation, Friedersdorf completed graduate study in Australia on a Rotary Scholarship, followed by a stint at IBM before beginning a career as an entrepreneur. Friedersdorf attended a class session during the first week of the semester and spoke to students about his experiences as a history major and his subsequent career. During his time on campus, he also made time to talk individually with several students, many of them history majors with specific questions and concerns about graduate school and the job search after graduation.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Friedersdorf met with the six groups at various points throughout the semester. The meetings took place via an online conference platform during class time on the Tuesday before the group's Thursday presentation. During a fifteen- to twenty-minute discussion, he explored with students the examples of leadership offered within the various case studies. Friedersdorf would highlight how the decisions that confronted those Japanese leaders presented similarities to those faced by a manager in a business. He also stressed that the examples of collaboration in Japanese history that students were studying, as well as their experiences working in a group, paralleled life in the professional world. Friedersdorf brought an infectious interest in the study of history to the conversations, which allowed him to ask provocative questions that pushed students to analyze the assigned readings in valuable ways.

After their respective sessions with Friedersdorf, each group met again outside of class time to identify two to three key themes in the assigned readings for that week, and prepare seven to ten discussion questions, which the group e-mailed to the class and me the evening before our Thursday discussion. Friedersdorf also attended, in person, a class session late in the semester to participate in the discussion of *The Sea and Poison*.<sup>14</sup> In advance, he contributed questions exploring aspects of leadership and collaboration in the novel, as well as the Japanese experience during World War II. I e-mailed his questions, along with some developed by me, to the students the day before our discussion session.

To further facilitate student-directed learning, I employed two related assignments that allowed students to track their own learning during the semester. Different from my initiatives in 2014, I made these assignments ungraded questionnaires that students filled out during class. Students completed an incoming questionnaire in which they described two to three points about Japanese history that they already knew, and outlined several points about what defines effective leadership and collaboration. At roughly the middle of the semester, they completed another questionnaire with more focused questions, given that students had gained knowledge of Japanese history. Students identified and described integral themes in Japanese history, what defined effective leadership in the Japanese context, and what they saw as effective collaboration or group work. In addition, the second questionnaire asked students to give specific examples from their own experiences working with their group.

At semester's end, students completed a take-home final that allowed them to explore larger narratives of twentieth-century Japanese history through the lenses of leadership and collaboration. They were asked to consider what leadership model and/or collaborative approach had proved most effective in twentieth-century Japan, especially during points of political, economic, and environmental crisis. They also engaged with their answers in the two previous questionnaires, their group activities, and their sessions with Friedersdorf in order to articulate advancement of skills and consider connections to key narratives of modern Japanese history.

I was heartened that in their take-home finals and end of the year course evaluations, students clearly articulated learning outcomes about not only modern Japanese history, but also about the practices of leadership and collaboration. A first-year student explained that at mid-semester, he had concluded that Japanese leaders were motivated primarily by national security goals. After studying several leaders and examples of collaborative practices, he concluded instead that leaders focused more on maintaining public order in their decisions. Another student noted that her conceptions of effective leadership and collaboration had remained fairly consistent across the semester, a conclusion she supported effectively with references to primary sources examined at different points in the course.

Most of all, I was pleased that students identified ways they had considered connections between the content and practice of leadership and collaboration. One student noted learning how breakdowns in group communication within the Japanese naval leadership contributed to the Japanese defeat at the Battle of Midway in 1942. With that historical example in mind, he and his partners strove to establish "good communication through meeting and collaborating over a Google Doc. In our first meeting, we successfully gathered information and established what we wanted to do, while in our second meeting we filled in the outlines and prepared effectively for the presentation." Another student lamented learning about the Toyota Way and its proven teamwork practices only late in the semester after he and his partners had completed a less than effective group presentation.

In addition, student responses indicated the success of the group exercises. One student described his group's interactions as "surprisingly very helpful" in enhancing class discussions by "really forc[ing] students to go in depth in understanding the reading."

Students also offered positive assessments of their interactions with Friedersdorf, with one noting the benefit of engaging with him at different points throughout the semester. Another commented that his “insight as a businessman and entrepreneur helped to give my group in particular a unique way of looking at the topics in the reading.” In turn, one student emphasized that Friedersdorf offered “very unique” perspectives on the assigned readings, as he presented “a multitude of stories and anecdotes which he has gathered [in his career] through which we could conceptualize our class material.” The student also valued the “stories of him [Friedersdorf] utilizing his historical skills [gained from his university classes] to achieve success.” Another student stated that Friedersdorf “brought a different perspective to our readings and helped relate [the readings] to current examples in health care and other current businesses.”

Overall, in stark contrast to my previous two efforts, I found that students offered almost uniformly positive assessments, voicing only mild critiques, such as frustrations with technical difficulties that sometimes limited the interaction with Friedersdorf over the Internet meeting platform (issues that were resolved by mid-semester). I conclude that one reason for this success was my focus on self-directed student learning in place of assessments tied to rigidly defined rubrics of collaboration and leadership. This change provided students the freedom to articulate more clearly, in a narrative form at the end of the semester, key outcomes about their learning of the practice of leadership and collaboration. I believe that student engagement with Friedersdorf throughout the semester was also vital. By interacting with him on multiple occasions, students could learn from an experienced outside voice, affirming the value of their study of Japanese history in both content and practice.

### **Conclusions**

My experiences and the combined feedback from students during the three iterations of my initiatives revealed the drawbacks in trying to make implicit connections between skills advanced in an undergraduate history class and the job search after graduation. My efforts, especially in 2014, proved less effective because I overly emphasized the skill acquisition process and its future potential payoffs at the expense of exploring aspects of the Japanese past in greater detail and depth.

In recent years, many have convincingly demonstrated the limitations of lecture in relaying course content.<sup>15</sup> Based upon my experiences, I believe this is also the case in informing students about the value of “job skill” acquisition in undergraduate history courses. I found illustrations of this in the pushback against my required seminar with alumni and in the consistently poor attendance at my department’s annual “Career Day,” in which alumni give short, engaging lectures to students about options for graduate study and employment after graduation. I have concluded that such lecture sessions, while providing valuable content, miss the mark, as students feel “talked at” instead of guided about ways to see their study of history as preparation for future careers.

By working with an alumnus throughout the semester, I developed an indirect yet more effective means to help students gain awareness of their job skill acquisition, while also fulfilling the main goal of the course: exploring the content of Japanese past. I benefited in working with an alumnus generous with his time, and was also fortunate to utilize department and university funds to allow him to visit my class on two occasions. I am confident that my experiences can offer a potential model for others, even those with less financial support on which to draw. Over the course of the semester, Friedersdorf spent a total of two and a half hours with us in class time, and roughly ninety minutes of combined time (six fifteen-minute sessions) working with student groups via the conferencing platform. An instructor could thus readily duplicate my initiatives by utilizing Skype or one of the other free platforms for online meetings and video conferences.

History majors succeed in a diverse array of professions—11% in legal jobs and 10% in office/administrative support and sales, respectively. Another 15% find jobs in management in business, science, and the arts, with only 4.5% choosing to teach history at post-secondary institutions.<sup>16</sup> I have consistently found that alumni who majored in history, whatever their chosen profession, maintain the keen interest in the “content” of history—the historical figures, events, and narratives—which led them to become history majors. They are eager to share with current students the ways in which their study as undergraduates, and their continued explorations of history after graduation, have shaped their personal and professional lives. In sum, those of us teaching at undergraduate institutions have in alumni a fabulous resource on which to draw: men and women who continue to be passionate students of history.

## Notes

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1. Steven Pearlstein, “Meet the Parents Who Won’t Let Their Children Study Literature,” PostEverything, *The Washington Post*, 2 September 2016, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/09/02/meet-the-parents-who-wont-let-their-children-study-literature/>>.

2. Julia Brookins, “New Data Show Large Drop in History Bachelor’s Degrees,” *Perspectives on History*, 1 March 2016, <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2016/new-data-show-large-drop-in-history-bachelors-degrees>>.

3. Mark Hendrickson, “Mythbusting 101: Uncomfortable Truths Your College Won’t Tell You,” *Forbes*, 16 August 2012, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhendrickson/2012/08/16/mythbusting-101-uncomfortable-truths-your-college-wont-tell-you/>>.

4. In the text of this article, all Japanese names are given according to Japanese convention, with the surname first.

5. For example, U.S. and Japanese diplomatic and internal military documents from James W. Morley, ed., *The Final Confrontation: Japan’s Negotiations with the United States, 1941*, trans. David A. Titus (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

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7. Shūsaku Endō, *The Sea and Poison*, trans. Michael Gallagher (New York: New Directions, 1992). Endō based the novel on doctors and nurses who performed vivisections on U.S. airmen at Kyushu University Hospital in the closing days of World War II. These incidents are mentioned in John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 54, 446.

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9. Tetsuo Najita, “Ōshio Heihachirō (1793-1837),” in *Personality in Japanese History*, ed. Albert M. Craig and Donald H. Shively (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 155-179; “Ōshio Heihachirō’s Manifesto, 1837,” in *Sources of Japanese History, Volume Two*, ed. David John Lu (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), 7-8. Students also read John Brown’s final address of October 16, 1859, freely accessible on a number of websites including The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History at <<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/john-brown’s-final-speech-1859>>.

10. Documents from both the U.S. and Japanese sides surrounding Perry's visit can be found in W. G. Beasley, ed. and trans., *Select Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy, 1853-1868* (London, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1955). Secondary sources assigned included Michio Kitahara, "Commodore Perry and the Japanese: A Study in the Dramaturgy of Power," *Symbolic Interaction* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 53-65; and essays by John W. Dower in the "Black Ships & Samurai: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan (1853-1854)" curriculum units by Lynn Parisi in *Visualizing Cultures*, <[https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/black\\_ships\\_and\\_samurai/cur\\_student/bss\\_cur\\_toc.html](https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/black_ships_and_samurai/cur_student/bss_cur_toc.html)>. The Visualizing Cultures website also offers primary visual and textual sources. Related to the Meiji Restoration, I assigned one source from the perspective of the losing side, Shiba Gorō, *Remembering Aizu: The Testament of Shiba Gorō*, ed. Mahito Ishimitsu, trans. Teruko Craig (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), and various primary sources from William Theodore de Bary et al., eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume Two...Abridged*, second ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

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13. I thank Molly Lineberger and the Wake Forest Office of Personal and Career Development for providing funding to support this visit, which was part of the university's Executive in Residence program.

14. The Wake Forest History Department supported this visit through a fund established by contributions from alumni who majored in history.

15. Emily Hanford, "Don't Lecture Me," The Tomorrow's College Series, American RadioWorks, Fall 2011, <<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/tomorrows-college/lectures/>>.

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