

# ALEXANDER BENJAMIN CRAGHEAD

## Towards a Teaching Philosophy

On one wall of my apartment is a single sheet of paper, written in passion. Overwhelmed by numerous and sometimes unproductive graduate seminars, one night several years ago, I set down what I believed good historical scholarship was:

A SCHOLAR HAS AN ETHICAL OBLIGATION TO STUDY THAT WHICH IS OF VALUE TO THE WIDER WORLD

ACADEMIC WORK HAS AN ETHICAL OBLIGATION TO BE INTELLIGIBLE TO THE PUBLIC WITHOUT SACRIFICING INTEGRITY

HISTORY MUST PROVIDE CONTEXT TO HUMAN EXISTENCE BY REVEALING TO THE PRESENT AND FUTURE A CHRONOLOGICAL NARRATIVE OF PAST ACTIONS

If this single sheet could be called a scholarly philosophy, it also is the jumping-off point for my pedagogy.

First and foremost, I believe methods of knowing matter more than specific knowledge. A student in a dozen years may not remember a single thing about, say, 1880s architecture, 1920s real estate development patterns, or 1960s urban renewal politics. They just might remember how to read academic books efficiently, make a field survey, or research old government papers in an archive. I hope, more than anything, they will encounter every future debate with curiosity rather than reverence.

Because methods matter, my teaching starts there. When I assign a reading, give a lecture, or lead a discussion, I try to pause along the way to own my methods, "going meta" to make explicit how I use sources and lines of reason to assemble my arguments. I want my students to think with me, not think the same thing as me.

Further, I believe that the best learning involves doing as well as reading. To look at a painting is one form of learning, but to pick up a brush and try to paint is a far richer experience. Just so, to read scholarship is a start, but to try and make scholarship brings deeper understanding. I am always seeking ways to get students direct exposure to primary archival sources, or to physical places and spaces.

Finally, just as in my scholarly philosophy, I continue to struggle with the role of jargon in academic work. Good scholarship is, to borrow from Geertz, a "web of significance" that exists within a community of scholars, and specialized terms support efficiency and are important for students to know. They can also, however, act as a barrier, especially for newer students. If I can find a way to demystify jargon without acting as a simple translator, I will be a happy teacher.

And for me, teaching and scholarship are the same thing. Underlying everything I do is my ability to see, and just as I express what I see in my writing or my scholarship, I hope to guide students to understand how I see, and in the process, learn with intention how to see with their own perspectives, their own minds, and their own eyes.

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