

“Did ever a man,” asks Socrates to Miletus, “believe in the existence of human things, and not of human beings?”

Often the primary motive of students in taking any world civilizations course, whether in college or high school, is to fulfill a requirement. However, with the right approach, the experience can become more than merely perfunctory for the student. I teach a course that surveys the social, political and cultural developments of a variety of world civilizations to AD 1500. I focus on those aspects of civilization that represent the most spectacular examples of social formation: the relationship between individual and deity as a religious expression; the relationship between society and nature as a philosophical dilemma; and the relationship between individual and society as a cultural and political manifestation. Within each civilization, students explore how persons organized themselves politically, economically, and socially as a response to their particular geographical and environmental condition.

Ultimately, the course intends to expose students to the different and similar ways that various civilizations have resolved issues. In this respect, the course transcends the particularisms of a temporal or spatial context as well as the convenience of placing change over time within the construct of a deterministic paradigm. Rather, sources are intentionally juxtaposed to one another: Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Kālidāsa’s *Śakuntalā* or Tacitus’ *Germania* and Ibn Battuta’s *Black Africa*, as examples. The same is done with material culture: what is the function of depicting a ruler or the symbol of a ruler? what use does religious and secular architecture receive within a society?

An immediate pedagogic concern is therefore that students learn how to analyze primary sources, how to construct historical arguments, and how to work cooperatively in a group setting. I seek to inculcate in students the means and expertise to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, to instill an unrelenting defiance in the belief of some great idea. My approach is to use a lecture-discussion format in which I set aside scheduled days for writing and discussion. As primary evidence, students draw upon various assigned literary texts and examples of material culture. On discussion/writing days, small groups of students are assigned thematic questions emphasized in the course. They are instructed to select and cite primary sources that they determine best addresses their question, to offer an explanation of their choice, and to give a summation of the problem and their approach. In doing so, students learn to formulate ideas in the form of a thesis question, an analysis with citations, followed by a conclusion. As the semester progresses and as the students become accustomed to the format, they naturally become able to process more questions in a class period.