HIST 107 Facilitator Guide

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## Introduction

### The Role of a Facilitator

Reflect for a moment on the best teachers you have encountered in your educational career. Like most great teachers, they were probably fired up by some seldom-expressed idealism, a conviction that teaching is the ultimate form of subversion, capable of touching the lives of the young and permanently undermining complacency. The most effective teaching often appears effortless, but it is in fact the product of a lifetime’s commitment to helping others and years of practice and preparation. It is also probable that one of these great teachers inspired you to want to teach, and you may hope to emulate your mentor’s example. As a Facilitator, your role will differ slightly from an instructor, as you guide students through Trinity’s online courses. However, the passion you bring to the Learning Lab, as well as your training and experience in facilitation, will help you succeed in a FAR Centre. This survival guide seeks to (1) diminish stress, (2) save you time, and (3) increase your self-confidence as a facilitator. Taken together, these three goals should make your job a lot easier. The following guide makes clear that the opportunity to guide TWU students may also promote the development and clarification of your career.

### Getting to Know the Textbook

While the textbook chosen for HIST 107 is written with a unified voice, it is the product of the labor of a scholar, or scholars, with a particular area of expertise who has experience teaching large survey courses, and he/she has endeavored to apply that experience in this textbook. What you read in the textbook emerges from his/her classroom: an appreciation for what worked and what did not. All of the authors have directly confronted many widely held misapprehensions about world history that have hampered their ability to teach effectively. The very nature of history is generally misunderstood, with most people believing it is little more than the memorization of a few (or too many) key facts. This text attempts to sweep away much of that debris, to provide students not simply with a compelling version of history but also to lend insight into the working of history itself.

Naturally, specific chapters of the textbook relate to the authors’ own research. But the book is also an effort to recapture the broad sweep of world history. In turn, delineating the general currents of this history has aided the authors in placing their scholarship within the larger context of history as a whole.

## 1. Working with a Professor

### Defining Your Roles

Make no mistake, being a facilitator is not easy. Most likely, you neither designed this class nor selected the readings, and you will not deliver the lectures. Sometimes, you are entirely free to conduct your section as you see fit, though most Learning Lab sessions will be structured by the professor. The professor selects the readings and topics, and has provided specific learning activities for the facilitator to guide students through. In discussion, the initiative is entirely yours; aiding students with their writing and grading their work will probably be your responsibility, too. But you should not forget that the first and the final word always belongs to the professor, who sets the syllabus and assigns the grades. It is therefore wise to follow the tone he or she sets.

## 2. Working with Students

### Learning Lab Atmosphere

Facilitators naturally want to work with their students in the friendliest possible fashion. Students, in turn, generally respect facilitators and respond well to a relaxed atmosphere. Nonetheless, students also know that the facilitator is not a professor, and some will occasionally try to exploit the situation. Over the years, instructors have heard every imaginable excuse and plea for special consideration, as well as some that defy the imagination. Your best defense can be a stern offense, clarifying both your accessibility and your professionalism. There are no hard-and-fast rules on how to achieve this balance in the classroom, and every class has its own dynamic. What follows are a number of suggestions on how to establish a professional distance while retaining a sense of camaraderie.

### Avoiding Pitfalls

Some aspects of facilitating can only be learned the hard way. It may seem unlikely, but some students feel betrayed if they think of you as a close friend and get less than an excellent grade. (Note that the professor assigns grades, but facilitators may give feedback on participation). Other students may turn to you as a personal confessor and share their most private confidences, leading to embarrassment and the lessening of your professional standing with both the other students and your professor. Most dangerous of all, a student may misunderstand your friendliness as an invitation to intimacy. An accusation of sexual harassment can have dire consequences for your professional and personal life.

How you respond to, say, an “excess of friendliness” depends on your personality. Here are some rules to guide your interaction with students:

* No sarcasm (students hate it!).
* No private meetings with students behind closed doors.

Always leave your door open when a student is in your office. Some facilitators choose to meet students in the middle of the quad; others hold their office hours in groups. If a student begins to divulge personal information, it is perfectly acceptable for you to say, “I’m sorry, that is none of my business.” In addition, you may turn the conversation back to the textbook. But sometimes there is no way of avoiding the student who tearfully tells you of some desperate family trauma and begs for your understanding. Always keep at hand the phone number of the counseling center, and make sure you know where the center is located.

From experience, most professors discover the need to maintain a friendly but critical distance. When a student tells you of a personal crisis, it is best to take it seriously and offer sympathy; it is also best to let those better qualified than you deal with the problem.

Finally, there is a tendency among many professors and graduate student instructors or facilitators to treat their students with disdain, to make fun of their ignorance, and to belittle their writing skills. While it certainly can relieve tension to get together with other facilitators to compare classroom confusions, making fun of your students will quickly take the joy out of teaching and make you question your commitment. Also, undergraduates usually notice a negative attitude, which in turn will likely lessen any enthusiasm they may have had for the course.

3. Leading Discussions

For most facilitators, the majority of class time is spent conducting discussions based on the online course (video lectures, readings, learning activities, etc.). In terms of effective facilitation, discussions are preferable to lectures (Note it is not the role of the facilitator to teach/lecture). It is easier to keep students’ attention when they are part of the discussion. Their involvement helps to ensure that they are absorbing information and alerts the facilitator to what is working and sinking in and what is not. As John Stuart Mill noted, “The interests of truth require a diversity of opinions.” And a highly interactive class is just more fun.

The key to a great discussion is preparation—not the sort of intricate organization that force-marches the students through the material, but an understanding of the topic and a conception of the key issues that need to be addressed. Advance preparation will make it all look easy to the students while allowing you the confidence to respond with flexibility to the flow of the discussion.

Note that facilitators are not the subject matter experts, so refer to the online course and facilitator’s guide for any points of confusion. When you are unable to answer a question, ask students to go back to the course materials and work together to find the answers. If there remains confusion about any course content or assignments, contact the professor.

### The First Day of Class

Your first task is to ease your students’ tension and anxieties. They are generally nervous about taking a history class that requires them to synthesize both lectures and readings at the college level. Often they do not know anyone else in the section and are scared to voice opinions in front of peers. Even though this is an introductory course, you may be surprised to learn how many of your students disliked high school history and learned little of what we understand history to be. Many students think of history as the memorization of dates. You therefore need to reassure your students that there is a lot more to history than dates and that it will be worth their time to give it a second chance. As discussed below, you can turn directly to the opening pages of the textbook for a quick introduction to the workings of history. However, if you are comfortable doing so, you may want to introduce both yourself and the subject by talking a bit about the origins of your own interest in history and what sustains that interest. Nothing—absolutely nothing—makes an introductory course more successful than the enthusiasm of the instructor for the material. Again, realizing the facilitator may not have a background in history, motivating students is a key goal of facilitating an online course.

### Icebreakers

Before addressing the subject matter, turn to your students. If you can establish even the loosest sense of community on the first day, you will find the days ahead far more pleasant, as your students will be a little less hesitant to share their judgments and far more receptive to your leadership. So get acquainted quickly, indicating that they are among friends and that what they have to say will be heard and respected. It is usually not sufficient to go around the room and ask the students to give their names. You must instead try to get a sense of their identities. One way is to ask each student to relay the standard information—name, academic year, major, where he or she is from—and then add something unique, such as a favorite song or the last book he or she read for pleasure. You may even want to write this information down on index cards as a way of helping you learn each student’s name over the first few weeks. Alternatively, try some version of the “name game”: place students in pairs and ask them not simply to tell one another their names but to say something about the history of that name; what it means, where it came from, if it originally belonged to someone else, like a grandparent. After a few minutes of letting the students talk and relax, go around the room and ask each student to tell the class about his or her neighbor. By the end of this exercise, you can be fairly confident that your students will not refer to one another as “that guy” and that they will get a sense of the personal power of history.

After spending some time getting to know one another, you may want to share with your students your goals for the semester. Even here, though, you should keep the tone light. When students first hear about an essay assignment, they often start worrying almost immediately about what they are going to write. Frame the discussion of the paper assignment within the context of questions or doubts they may have about world history. For instance, ask your students what one fact from history bugs them the most. Write those events on the board—and they will probably run a wide gamut from slavery to the invention of the shopping mall. Then ask them which single fact makes them most interested in history. The events you write on the board form a range of possible research and discussion topics.

Before the students leave the classroom, make certain that they know how to reach you, and vice versa, and also how they can reach the professor. Circulate a list and ask them to record their e-mail addresses. If you have the time, enter the list into a spreadsheet so you can send reminders to your students of upcoming assignments. They will certainly appreciate the extra effort on your part. Send out a message the day after the first class, reminding students of your office hours and the first assignment. Whatever you do on the first day, it is appropriate and advisable to keep it light and informal; a friendly atmosphere pays long-term dividends in the classroom. You may want to allow students to use your first name for this reason. They know you’re the instructor. Likewise, calling an instructor by his or her first name does not necessarily diminish respect. But if you want to be called “Mr.” or “Ms.”, it is best to make that clear up front by introducing yourself that way.

### Preparing to Facilitate a Learning Lab

This model for facilitating TWU online courses is very new and will evolve. It stems from the idea of the tradition teaching assistants who lead sections in introductory survey courses. Even though you may have studied history in your previous undergrad courses, that does not necessarily mean that you feel prepared to facilitate this course. To repeat some sound advice from another venue: Don’t Panic. Just think of the textbook and online course as your guide. You will quickly find that there are a number of ways to get yourself ready for the Learning Lab.

The most common initial response is despair over the seeming ignorance of the majority of the undergraduates. Facilitators often enter their first classes with high expectations of the stimulating conversations before them, only to discover that, as every study in the last twenty years has found, college students have retained very little of their high school history coursework. While it is therefore safe—and helpful—to assume that you know a great deal more about the subject matter than most of your students, it is a grievous error to treat those students with contempt. You can have confidence that your greater knowledge allows you to avoid the hurdles of overpreparation for a fifty-minute discussion. Remember also that it is a mistake to denigrate students for their lack of preparation; it will only make your job harder. Effective teachers, like all great craftspeople, work with the materials at hand. Your task is to guide your students, not some idealized version of what a student should be. And, you can feel rather comfortable that you will not be boring your students with well-known material; it is most likely new to them.

There is no rule on how much time to devote to preparing for your class. If you are discussing a theme with which you are personally very familiar, you may find yourself simply walking in to lead the discussion or activity. On the other hand, if you have never studied the topic at hand, you may find yourself spending more time reviewing the material. Note again that this is an online course, so there is no teaching during the lab, simply guiding students through the scripted learning activities listed in this Facilitator’s Guide.. That being said, you may want to read the text and any supplemental works assigned.

But you may not feel prepared for a class just because you have read and outlined the chapter and stuck some bookmarks into the textbook. Class discussions rarely follow logical schematics of discourse, and your job is not just to summarize what the students read. Before class it would be helpful to imagine the types of questions you are likely to receive and consider how you will demonstrate the larger issues under consideration. It is very helpful in this context to get together with at least one other facilitator and compare notes. You will probably notice that you have outlined the material in very different ways. Of course, this divergence is the very nature of history. Historians do not select the same facts or events for their interpretations of the past, nor do they structure their arguments similarly. But just as we learn from reading scholars with whom we disagree, so you can enhance your voice in the classroom by getting a sense of how other educated people address the same subject. In that regard, your premier source for intellectual comparison should the assigned reading, but you can also contact the instructor if you have some significant questions about the course materials or subject matter..

### Getting Started

At first thought, nothing is more difficult than starting a lively conversation with twenty or thirty students—many of whom may not want to talk—about a historic topic of little apparent relevance to modern life. But teachers have developed a number of very effective techniques over the years that you are free to borrow from—a few of which follow. Observe good teachers and note their techniques, appropriating whatever works for you.

An effective discussion should not only clarify the meaning of the lectures and texts but also provide a network of ideas which, by connecting the material, will allow students to see the big picture. The key is to get your students’ attention early on and maintain it. An energetic beginning will make a strong impression on your students, allowing you to keep their interest and providing the framework for the entire discussion.

You will quickly notice that many of your students have not yet learned the necessary analytical skills to make connections between the lecture and the assigned reading or to formulate independent interpretations. It would be wise for you to get in the habit of discussing the texts from the start and explaining to students the importance of substantiating their comments with evidence from the textbook or lectures. At the very first meeting, turn to the first page of the textbook. Even if you have reason to believe that no one has done the reading, or rather precisely because you think no one has done the reading, draw everyone’s attention to the opening passages of the book.

The students should be drawing on information gleaned from the lectures and textbook to construct their own understanding of historical development; your role will be more that of a moderator than an instigator.

### Effective Methods

There are, of course, a number of different methods for getting off to a quick and successful start. Try diving into the middle of the chapter to lift out a single fact that allows the students to explore the specifics of an argument.

Similarly, stories and quotations that outrage students’ modern sensibilities are very useful. By marking up your own copy of the textbook, you can guide the students through a thoughtful consideration of what might otherwise be too easily dismissed as a tragedy—an easy categorization that precludes an appreciation for the historical forces at work.

### Explaining Historiography

One of the most difficult yet exciting lessons of history for undergraduates is the discovery that the discipline of history changes constantly. The facts of a given event can be altered to suit some later purpose, only to be “discovered” decades later.

For example, you could read a selection from an older text, one that is forty years old or more, and turn to a passage that will be clearly outdated to today’s readers. You can then point out the authors were the most prominent scholars of their day, so their take on history fairly represents what was considered “objective reality” in those years.

There are many reasons for beginning with such a text, not the least of which is to get the students’ attention immediately. But a major part of what you should hope to accomplish in your Learning Labsis to show the students how historians work and how much we have learned in just the past few decades. The students gain a noticeable confidence in formulating their own historical perspectives through an appreciation of history as a work in progress.

### Sustaining Focus

The easiest way to sustain a focused discussion is to require the students to do most of the work. There are a number of short assignments that can help you attain this end. For example, have students select a single passage in the reading that most captures their attention, have them bring a single question to class, or have them write a hypothesis on a theme covered in the lecture with one piece of supportive evidence drawn from the text. These assignments will lay the basis for deeper discussion and the innovative exercises described below.

### Role-Playing Exercises

One of the most successful routes to a lively conversation is that of having the students take sides in a debate and/or role play historical circumstance. Examples of role-playing exercises are included in the Learning Lab materials.

### Making Connections

Students will undoubtedly find some issues more difficult than others and will need help making sense of what seems to them a very complicated connection. It is vital to remain aware of gaps in your students’ understanding. If your class does not grasp the foundation of a specific historical sequence, students will not be able to follow its development. For example, without an understanding of what drove Europeans to the Americas, a discussion of the impact of that conquest on Europe and the Americas will become completely muddled. This is not to say that you should move at a stately pace, page by page, through the text. Rather, touch on the key passages to ensure that vital concepts are grasped and that your students are constructing the historical causality. It is obviously not possible to discuss everything, but you can rely on the students to come up with some of the more interesting details of the landscape that lay between the peaks.

### Attention-Getting Devices

Occasionally, you will get the sense that the students’ collective attention is lagging. There are varieties of effective attention-getting devices available—voicing an outrageous assertion or quotation, calling on students by name, or even the old classic, “This will be on the final.” (The latter can induce a bit of anxiety, which some say reduces attention, so it may best be used as an obvious joke.) One can also be less dramatic and play on the desire of students to generalize about history by culling examples, metaphors, and analogies from the textbook and then asking students to expand on their representative value. If none of these approaches works, you may just want to try a complete change of pace, telling the students that you will return to these questions later (be sure to do so), and attack the issue from a completely different direction. If you resort to the latter tactic, it is useful to flip back a page or two, and get a running start. Try asking about something that you are sure the students must know as a way of building momentum and getting opinions out in the open. Often the students themselves will then return to your earlier question with a loud “I get it!” (For further ideas, see “Dealing with Problems” in this guide.) The purpose of using these exercises in discussion building is to link the knowledge available in the textbook and lectures with the individual students’ reasoning powers.

## 3. Testing

### Standards

Generally, facilitators work with the materials the professor prepares. The professor will outline what material she or he considers essential to be covered in an exam, and will also communicate what he or she expects of you in assisting the students to prepare for the exam.

### Preparing Students

Given the enormous stress that most students feel over finals, they will appreciate any help you can offer them. But keep in mind that you will also be making your job easier in preparing the students for the exam, if only because it will prevent complaints later. You can meet with individual students or groups of students during your office hours, though you will quickly find yourself repeating the same advice. The most efficient way to help is to moderate a study session. Note the choice of the word “moderate.” You are doing your students an enormous favor in holding a study session, but you should not get carried away and essentially do their work for them.

The best approach is to hand out sample identifications or essay topics provided by the professor at your last discussion meeting before the exam. At this point, divide up the list among those interested in attending a study session, and make each student responsible for outlining—and only outlining—a useful answer or identification. If you have prepared well, you have already reserved a classroom and a time for the review session. At that meeting, you may want to begin with a few general rules to follow during the exam—essentially a summary of the expectations of the professor. For instance, you may tell students to avoid rhetorical flourishes and padding. It is not the length of the answer that matters but the precision. Add that they must write neatly; if you cannot read what is written, you will assume that it is incorrect. (One of the oldest tricks of test taking, dating back to classical Greece, is to deliberately obscure one’s writing in the hope that the grader will assume the answer is correct.)

Now comes the heart of the review session. Ask the student or students who tackled the first problem to write their outline(s) on the board and to explain the logic of their structure. Your task at this point is simply to question the comparative worth of details. By this time in the semester, the students should be talking fairly freely with one another, and you can count on the other students to point out errors or failures of logic.

Once you have moved through all the problems in turn and covered the boards with sample outlines, you may want to repeat the basic expectations for the exam. Specifically, you can remind students what is considered an excellent answer and what constitutes a barely acceptable one. If students are convinced that they understand the nature of the exam, they will be much more comfortable taking it, and they will produce better work. It is vital that you remember how important it is for students to do well on the final. With a review session, you not only allow students to provide one another with sample outlines but also encourage them to think about the problems before them.

## 4. Essay Assignments

### Helping Students Generate Topics

Most professors supply paper assignments. As you already know, these assignments take many forms. Some draw entirely on the assigned reading, which reduces your responsibilities substantially. Others require the students to go to the library. At this point, many students will need your help. You might find the resource “[Developing a Research Question](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UtZJbLmZErluhAXdvfJlehEmzP3xbb_iyRB5BAaw7qs/edit#heading=h.11cqdv9timv)” helpful at this stage. Your first task is often to clarify the difference between primary and secondary sources. (See the resource: “[Finding and Using Historical Sources](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kQjrQcl09iE-fIBPaxVIynmW-Q9rzqhOSTvQNdZJeKY/edit#heading=h.myqkeslwcikp)”). Explain that primary sources are the building blocks of history and that each historian is capable of reading these sources differently, often in dramatically distinctive ways. This would be a good time to direct students to the resources: “[Essay Proposal Instructions](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bKN1_FRT6KtO1aUal0mHK1DH-1mjepN1AvH0ilcuLK8/edit#heading=h.374cb41hgkuv)” and “[Research Essay Instructions](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tMT1OoGBBX6FfJAj4iI7ibT2R7fOmskTWjiXCePrr24/edit#heading=h.9519xdia80g4)” and hand out the “[Guidelines for Writing a Good History Essay](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vk97KyAKBDUxD6d-tSfTymEo3FEokfQ0phK5NRMwSqY/edit)” and “[The Use of Sources in Writing Research Papers](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jd93WPifRAb7OgJmRlMc37r8k7mP761uc2IAs6ChMkw/edit).” Unless your library has an especially good tour of its resources, it is well worth the time to go through the library website as a class, and show them how they can locate and use the resources.. You may also want to contact the TWU librarian to conduct a synchronous Zoom session, or to ask about other library resources. See the [Student Resources](https://far.twu.ca/guides/facilitating-a-far-centre-course/student-resources) section in the FAR Centre Facilitation guide for more information on the TWU Library and other student support.

You will probably note that many professors operate on the assumption that, at least in introductory courses, there is a difference between first and later assignments. With the first essay—often the student’s first college paper—it is best to offer topics with precise alternatives, such as: “Was the United States justified in declaring war on Germany in 1917?” or “Did Europeans’ demand for natural resources and their military superiority give them the right to expand their empires in Asia and Africa after 1880?” You can draw attention to very specific parts of the textbook as starting points for discussion. While such categorical assignments posed as questions (rather than the deadly “explain” or “describe”) do not determine the individual student’s essay, they do provide a clear sense of alternatives on which the student can build his or her analysis. And, students will proceed more logically in their research if they perceive the need to answer a historical question and take a definite position on a scholarly question. By the time they receive the final paper assignment, students should be able to construct an independent thesis without needing such blatant directional markers.

### The Writing Process

Much of your work as a facilitator will be devoted to guiding essay assignments. It is advisable to offer extra office hours during the week before a paper is due. In these consultations, many students will essentially ask you for their thesis. Avoid the impulse to provide one. You will need to ask many leading questions (e.g., “Do you think that world security was threatened by Germany in 1917?” or “How did Europeans’ exploitation of colonial peoples and resources affect Asian and African societies after 1880?”), and you may think the student’s thesis lacks depth, but you do not want to be accountable for the paper when it comes time to grade it. And remember, many students try to distance themselves from responsibility for the final product. Do not let them say “your paper”; it is “my paper.”

The single most common gripe about history classes is this comment: “It was not an English class, and yet I was graded on my grammar.” You therefore need to explain, in the strongest possible terms, that writing clearly is an absolute necessity. A history course requires the same level of writing as any composition class. History papers are not the regurgitation of facts but the expression of a mode of analysis. It does not matter how good an idea is if no one can understand it. If a student seems to be struggling with writing, make sure to let her or him know what resources are available on your campus or online, such as writing centers and tutor services. See [Student Resources](https://far.twu.ca/guides/facilitating-a-far-centre-course/student-resources) for more information on the TWU Writing Centre and how students can book appointments for online sessions.

Make clear the expectations for student writing assignments. You may want to establish certain recommendations for the preparation of a superior essay. Generally, it is wise to keep such guidelines brief so that students will actually read them. (Use the handout “Guidelines for Writing a Good History Essay” as an example.).

The very last point in the writing guidelines handout on plagiarism (see: “[Proper Source Citation and Plagiarism Examples](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gCPBKdIK683fqr1CI0Y40e2V0m7j1jzIJ6TUe1AGQB0/edit#heading=h.gjdgxs)”) may require further guidance. When defending themselves against accusations of plagiarism, some students may say: (1) “The teacher did not explain plagiarism,” (2) “My culture/former school/other professors permitted copying directly from the book,” and (3) “I printed the wrong file from my computer.” None of these is a good excuse, but it does not prevent students’ repeated attempts to use them. Therefore, it is imperative that you hand out precise explanations of plagiarism in a hopeful effort to prevent problems.

Plagiarism is usually fairly easy to discern, as you will note the complete absence of grammatical errors or the use of obscure archival sources. Proving plagiarism is a very difficult and time-consuming task, unless the miscreant plagiarizes from the textbook (a great deal more common than you might think). If you suspect plagiarism, inform your professor immediately. Note that as the professor marks all assignments, he will check for plagiarism.

## 5. Dealing with Problems

Facilitating a course at a TWU FAR Centre carries with it problems large and small. Keep the distinction clear and avoid making problems that are easily solved into complicated situations that drain you of time and energy. An overly aggressive student whose conduct borders on sexual harassment is a large problem. A student who comes to you with tales of woe may become a large problem. Do not—repeat, DO NOT—attempt to deal with these large problems yourself. Every college employs people who are trained to handle these kinds of problems. At the very least, it is your professor who should address any complicated issues or threatening situations. Report any such matters to the professor immediately, and let others with more authority or professional preparation cope with them. Careers have been cut short by a facilitator’s conviction that a major confrontation or talk of suicide was a joke. Disengage yourself as quickly as possible from an undergraduate’s personal problems, and allow people with more experience and resources to take over.

What is mainly of concern to you are the little problems that arise as you learn any new skill. No one is a born teacher any more than anyone is a born bicycle rider. Every teacher makes mistakes and confronts roadblocks; recognize them as part of your training, identify the problem, and work on it. Talk with your fellow facilitators (if possible) or the professor about a specific difficulty, and learn how they dealt with it. While students are most creative in inventing new crises for teachers, there are a few common difficulties you may encounter that you should consider.

You may not suffer from this trauma, but many students have a deep fear of speaking in public. You may observe a student who is a blabbermouth in the cafeteria yet clams up in your classroom. Usually, these students are just afraid of making fools of themselves. There are several ways of getting a shy student, or most of a quiet class, to participate. The first step is to avoid phrasing questions in a manner that implies only one answer (factual questions aside). Having the class write their responses to a specific question and read them out loud in class is very effective; even shy people feel safe reading aloud something they have already written. Breaking the class into smaller groups responsible for developing reactions to a historical problem also draws quieter students into the conversation, though you need to be particularly alert to the dynamic of each group.

On the other extreme are those who participate too much. A private conversation during your office hours is the best way to let a student know that, while you appreciate his or her contributions to the class discussion, you would like his or her help in drawing out some of the quieter students. All but the dimmest students will get the hint.

Often in the course of the day, you will find your class getting bogged down. Petty debate over minor details or a frustrating inability to understand the larger issues can prevent you from making steady progress. Worse still, you may discover that none of the students has done the assigned reading. It is important on these occasions not to lose your temper. Try, literally, to focus students’ attention on something different. Illustrations in the textbook are especially effective for changing direction in a conversation or bringing home a point. Ask questions about the illustrations that require students to reflect on specific issues raised in the text or lectures.

Illustrations have a way of waking up students and inspiring those who are most disengaged. Even a picture lacking obvious drama can bring forth deep passions and insights. The textbook allows you to bring history to life and ensures that your class discussions reflect that drama.

There may be occasions when none of these methods works or when the problem persists class after class. Outstaring students is generally not a good approach. Students, like most people, hate extended silences. Make the silence itself a point worthy of discussion: “OK, my friends, why doesn’t anyone want to talk today?” Such a question may evoke laughter and cause students to admit that they just don’t get it or that none of them has done the reading. For those who don’t get it, go back to the book, open it up, and start parsing a passage. To deal with students who simply fail to do the work, it may just be appropriate to remind a student or the entire class that “F” is an option.

Better still, though, you can avoid such confrontations by careful preparation. It is important to remember that students want to resolve the intellectual problem under consideration. Begin by reaching an agreement on the nature of the topic under discussion, and keep clarifying that issue and where you are in the process—for instance, defining, suggesting hypotheses and evidence, evaluating alternatives—involving the students as much as possible. If you get a sense that many students are overwhelmed by the reading, provide them with questions beforehand to guide them through the material. It is vitally important to make sure students have done the reading, even if you are not confident of their level of understanding. Thus, recall the importance of never denigrating an initial interpretation; rather, build on it, find something positive to say about every comment, rephrase silly comments (and yes, there are dumb questions), write key phrases spoken by students on the board to encourage a sense of responsibility and pride in one’s words, and link the comments of one student with those of another to get them to talk to each other and not just to you. Such extra energy early on will convince students that they can master the material and offer something of value. Nourish that confidence, as it is the very foundation of education.

## 6. Effective Facilitation: Polishing Your Skills

The point of teaching is to be effective, to impart a body of information and a mode of analysis. As you start facilitating this course, the clearer your own perception of the workings of history may become, an insight that cannot but improve your teaching. There are several ways of improving your teaching and facilitation skills. Ask your students for written evaluations, and read them carefully. With time, you may find these evaluations valuable components of a job application. Be honest with yourself in identifying weaknesses, and work to correct flaws. Some methods of self-examination are more attractive than others; videotaping your class is painful but valuable. Just as you encourage your students to show their rough drafts to friends, invite your professors into your classroom, so that they can suggest improvements and later attest to your teaching abilities in letters of recommendation.

Much of what is offered in this brief guide is given to you in the spirit of exploration. A great deal can be learned from talking with and observing experienced teachers, but that does not mean you should try to become some ideal type of a college professor. You will quickly discover your own voice and style as a facilitator, and you should have no trouble retaining your sense of humor in the process. Do not hesitate to experiment—and abandon an idea if it flops. Some approaches work for some facilitators and not for others. Do not be afraid to try something new. It is your Learning Lab, your career—and facilitating should be fun. With music, as Duke Ellington said, “If it sounds good, it is good.” With teaching, if it works for you, it is good teaching.