

I have three main goals for this presentation. First, I'd like to introduce you to Crash Course, the videos serving as the primary source and subject of this talk, and tell you a little about how I use the videos and why I find them pedagogically valuable. If nothing else, I hope you'll walk away from this chat with a potential resource for your own classrooms. Second, I want to delve into some of what makes the videos a useful resource for students. What makes the videos work for students? Here, I'll use a few comments from former students in my classes to tease out the elements that make the videos attractive to and effective for them. Finally, based on those conclusions, I'd like to suggest a few ways the Crash Course videos might impact how and what we teach in history classrooms. These are very preliminary suggestions, but I hope they will provide food for thought and further discussion.

For those of you unfamiliar with the YouTube channel, "Crash Course," is the brainchild of Hank Green and John Green (yes, that [John Green](#)). Hank produces series about the sciences and social sciences; John fronts the humanities series (history and literature, primarily). Their goals are fairly modest. Here's how they express their aims in the intro video on the Crash Course channel:



My interest in the Crash Course videos is an invested one. I used the Crash Course: World History series to prep my lectures when I taught World Civilizations last fall; having never taken the World Civilizations course I was assigned to teach, the videos served as a useful stepping stone resource that provided key names, events, and ideas to expand on during class. In the interests of transparency, I also shared the source with my students - who promptly abandoned their textbooks in favor of the videos for review material. I found out just how often they were using the videos when, after a particularly scattered lecture

on my part (on East Asia, which is completely out of my field), a student approached me after class to ask, “Hey prof, is there a Crash Course for that?”

The comment was, in part, an indication that the student was struggling to understand the day’s material, but it also spoke to the sheer usefulness of the videos for students. It doesn’t take a ton of digging to find out why students find the videos so effective and attractive. When asked, “What did you like best about the Crash Course videos?,” students responded:

- Informative in a funny way! (Anonymous)
- The videos were short and pretty straight forward, making it easy to understand the main points brought across just within a goos [sic] 10 minutes. (Bernice)
- The material is easy to understand because it's presented in an engaging/ relatable manner. It's also a good introduction to understand our assigned primary sources. (Veronica)
- I'm a visual and audio learner, therefore, John Green's videos were somewhat useful in helping me understand the course material a little better before doing the course readings (because the videos provided both subtitles and also graphics). (Livia)
- They simplify the lecture content for better understanding as the information provided were [sic] in bite size. The visuals used made the content more interesting as well. (Itriah)
- Entertaining and informative. (Anonymous)
- I think the videos were a great way to warm up to the topics. It works well especially for us internet-addicts! (Astrid)

Note the keywords here (and these are common to the rest of the responses I received):

“informative”; “funny”; “short”; “straightforward”; “easy to understand”; “entertaining.” Their conclusions are similar to my own. The humor and visuals are effective at keeping students engaged. The brevity of the clips caters to shorter attention spans while the videos’ presence on YouTube makes Crash Course seem as familiar as, say, funny cat videos to self-proclaimed ‘internet addicts.’ The information, centered on a single, clear thesis (see clip below for demonstration), is easy to digest and devoid of complicated terminology. But the videos aren’t simplistic either; they challenge viewers to connect past and present in ways that are often deeply personal.

The staff at Crash Course are, then, producing videos that teach content well. Viewers, including my students, are gaining introductory-level knowledge that is presented clearly, enthusiastically, and usually accurately (i.e., the dates/names/order of events are pretty much correct). In many ways, the videos are doing a significant part of my job for me. And yet students who offered additional comments to the informal survey I distributed seemed to view the videos as supplements rather than replacements for content delivered by an instructor. Jun May, a participant in my Spring 2015 class, responded:

“I think it can be difficult studying world history because these are civilizations we may have never heard of in our lives or know very very little about. Thus, it is usually mindblowing to try figure out when they existed and what happened. That is when watching Crash Course before the lesson actually gives me abit [sic] more information and preparation for what is going to be taught in class - sets the stage! No doubt, I may not understand immediately after watching the video. However, with the video and then attending class, I have reached enlightenment ;).”

I need to add that Jun May’s response is likely influenced by the way my syllabus is constructed; this spring I used the Crash Courses in place of a textbook to provide background material for my students before class. I’m not sure if students would view the videos similarly if they discovered them on their own. At best I can say that the prevailing view among my Fall 2014 students, when there was a textbook assigned, was that the videos were “useful for revision [review]” [Hern Yee]. In any case, it seems that for at least this small sampling of students, the Crash Course videos and class instruction were equally valuable and mutually-reinforcing.

With that in mind, it’s worth turning to the potential impact of the Crash Courses on the history classroom. Students already identify the videos as introducing and reinforcing basic definitions, people, and events. I would argue that instructors might also use them to introduce and reinforce skills crucial to the history classroom and to the digital age more broadly. There are two skills I’d like to highlight in the last few minutes of the presentation. First, I think the

videos invite us to help students think about the role of bias in historical narratives and, second, the videos foster a love of creative, illuminating connections among past events and between past and present. By way of illustration, allow me to share a brief clip (about two and a half minutes). The following is from one of Green's more controversial videos, "Alexander the Great and the Situation...the Great?".



The clip is a little mean-spirited and self-consciously out of date, but it is a fair example of the show's presentation style and intellectual concerns. It is also rich with opportunity to invite students to identify and query the ways bias is present in popular sources and intellectual narratives. The writers of the video model the skill of identifying bias. They draw attention to the ways in which social and personal values determine who gets attention and credit in the teaching of history. My students readily absorbed that idea and came to class ready to consider Alexander's legacy. When I asked them, as a warm-up question, "What makes a person great?",

most of the responses echoed the Crash Course video: “It all depends on what you value.

Maybe this...maybe that...”

Paradoxically (to me at least), my students apparently more readily accept the subjectivity of historians and their narratives than they recognize the biases of a popular source. To me, an American and historian, the “Alexander” video is transparently the product of the left-leaning, pro-inclusivity, relativist histories of the 1990s culture wars. Commenters, in fact, routinely criticize Green for this particular bias. Various writers (trolls, if you’d like to be less charitable and more accurate) have accused him of slandering truly great men, pandering to feminists, and promoting political correctness. One of my favorite critiques, from about a month ago, reads: “So this is what’s [sic] being taught at schools? It has so much ‘John Green bias’ it’s almost fiction at this point!” (“Jason Cook”).

All of this is news to my students, which begs the question of how to reinforce the skill they did pick up from the video (noticing historians’ biases) in a different contexts (noticing biases more generally). Maybe it would be simple enough to start by asking students to browse the comments and compare/contrast viewers’ perspectives with Green’s perspective. I’m not sure I would wish that tedium on my students, but it would be a simple exercise to begin with. Or maybe we could watch the video together, again, stopping to note loaded language or subjective arguments. The goal, as always, is clearer than the process; ultimately, I’d like to help my students develop their skills in order to identify bias not only in history sources, but also in sources that more directly affect their disciplines and personal lives. That seems, to me, a necessary skill in a world of proliferating news sources, Wikipedia articles with multiple authors, and blockbuster films with both subtle and overt messaging regarding what sort of wo/men they ought to become.

The second skill introduced by the Crash Courses is, far and away, the easier, more exciting, and more readily reinforcing skill. The consistent use of pop culture references (Kim Kardashian and the Situation) as parallels to historical figures (Alexander the Great) and events invites connection between past and present. This in turn provides educators the chance to encourage students to create similar webs of knowledge and understanding in the classroom and beyond. My experience has been that students are eager to make those sorts of connections. I ran a class blog and FB group in my World Civ I class this spring and through both mediums, students (of their own accord) tied historical events and ideas to present-day news and trends. One blogging group bravely attempted a comparison between their own democracy in Singapore to Athenian democracy; another student shared a link to articles about the destruction of Assyrian artifacts by the so-called Islamic State after our Mesopotamia classes. Other students tackled comparisons within societies we discussed in class; one group wondered what mummification looked like outside of Egypt and then went and tracked down instances of that burial practice in Japan.

Again, it remains unclear to me how to encourage students to take that creativity and connectedness out of the history classroom and into their other courses, their careers, and their knowledge consumption. Perhaps the Crash Courses, as a product of social media, might also serve as an entry into making connections within other social media spheres - among history hashtags on Twitter, between amateur history blogs, among Wikipedia articles (the links within articles seem fertile territory for mapping out connections...) That might just be one step closer to encouraging students to transfer the skill to arenas beyond a single class.

In an age of declining numbers of history majors, cuts to humanities departments, and social/political preference for the STEM fields, I'm very pleased to have a resource in the Crash Course videos that is both attractive and effective to students and invites me to encourage

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practical skills. If you'd like to investigate this resource further, I'd encourage you to get lost in the Crash Courses and the comments. If you'd like to know more about the ideas that have influenced my presentation today, please do check out Carter and Arroyo as well as Siemens' articles. And if you'd like to chat more, argue with me, or share best practices, please do chat with me here at the conference or check out my website at your leisure.