

THE PURPOSE OF TEACHING

“Think about what you really want your students to get out of their classes. It’s rarely something as banal as “a correct understanding of the events and causes of the French Revolution” or “an increased capacity to write about literature,” the kinds of things you’re obliged to claim on your course assessment paperwork. I’m trying to teach my students, in no matter what class I teach, how to understand a problem, a process, or an event — a document, a social form, an inflection point — and to use that understanding to increase their more general capacity to reason humanistically. I hope that doing this kind of thinking increases their capacity to relate to, appreciate, understand, and engage themselves in their own lives and in the lives of others.

The time horizon for that teaching is not the single semester or the course. It’s the student’s lifetime. And so I don’t care too much whether students remember anything specific about most of the books they read with me, or about what they can do by the end of the semester. I care that, in 20 or 30 years, those students will have had a richer and more responsible life than they would have had otherwise. And I hope that the kind of thinking about the world that I helped them learn will have empowered them to do so.”

Eric Hayot, “The Humanities Have a Marketing Problem,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 22, 2021.