

Consider the impact of your subjects when you're teaching

I teach mainly

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The research topics are mostly about slavery.

What's striking is that students tend to come in to lectures with strong assumptions about the history of colonialism and slavery. Which is not surprising, given that it's a subject which attracts a great deal of public attention and about which opinion has become extremely polarised. It's important that students understand that activists have played a key role in putting this subject on the agenda. I therefore always explicitly state this context, because it immediately raises the question of your own stance on this as an historian.

Some students are extremely driven by how society perceives the colonial history of the Netherlands and, as a result, focus mainly on the relevance of the history of slavery to society today. I like to inspire students to look at this past in a different way, which is why I always start by depoliticising the subject: I don't go straight to its contemporary relevance but go back instead to the historical sources. What they tell us about how slavery actually worked. Some students really enjoy that and are open to it whilst others stick to their own views. Which is fine too. But, as a professional historian, I would of course prefer students to try and understand subjects from multiple perspectives.

I've haven't consciously worked on inclusive education, but I do always try to consider the potential impact of my subjects on students. I'm not afraid to allow people to voice dissonant views, I think that's inevitable with subjects like mine. Sometimes that makes people angry but, on the other hand, it's good to see that students then argue the case for their resistance and begin to reflect rather than simply staying angry.

Personally, I tend not to take a stance because it's my job to introduce students to different perspectives and arguments. My own views on those things are less important.

When we learn about Dutch colonial history we rely on historical sources in which the compilers of those sources used colonial language. That language often makes it difficult to determine the value of the contents of the source, because students may come to identify with the compilers of those sources. However, colonial language is dehumanising. Words like 'nigger' and 'slave woman' were intended to express people's subjection, inferiority and sexual availability. The use of those words is not only uncivilised and inappropriate, it also means that the reader has difficulty understanding the position and choices of these people and their way of thinking. This is why I always choose my words with great care. The way I talk about things as a lecturer influences the way students think about those things. So by exercising great care myself, I hope to teach students the importance of language in these subjects.

I don't know if this is always the right way to approach students, because in some cases students are simply looking for clarity. However, I hope that students leave my lectures questioning their previous assumptions, because I have made them aware of the context and made them look beyond society's perceptions.