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AMY DUNAGIN, PH.D.
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY



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The Art of Teaching History



Amy Dunagin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of History, pictured here in the British Library where she conducts archival research.

Some people imagine studying history as a dry, lifeless process of committing names, dates, and places to memory often without a shred of cultural context. That may be true in some cases, but not if you are a student in Assistant Professor of History Amy Dunagin's classes. Assistant Professor Dunagin, Ph.D., is a life-long lover of music and history and has found creative ways to incorporate both passions into her work. Framing history education in a cultural context that folds in the arts comes naturally for Dunagin. "I will play music and have students compare how religious music changed between a Catholic and early Protestant context, for example, if we are talking about the Protestant Reformation," said Dunagin. The music transports students to the time period and offers a sensory experience beyond a textbook or lecture. The music connects the people of that time and place to the students in the room, closing the temporal distance between the two.

Dunagin uses other cultural materials such as political cartoons, poetry, and period-specific musical instruments as teaching tools. But her own experience as a musician who has performed for audiences is her most effective teaching tool. Her passion for the subject transforms her teaching into an engaging performance and her students into active participants.



Amy Dunagin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of History

Students have said on her evaluations that, "Her enthusiasm for the material is infectious," and "She was very passionate about the subject, which helps me get invested in the class!" Dunagin may not necessarily think of teaching as performing per se, saying: "I don't think of my teaching as a performance necessarily, but it often ends up feeling to me a lot like performing music, a lot like being on a stage, and I think on some level I try to make it a good show and the feedback that I probably get most often from students is that I seem very passionate. But I think it's also just a style [I have] in the classroom of trying to keep the students engaged, almost like a performance thing to keep the..."

audience engaged. I think that I did so much performing as a younger person that it's just sort of a mode that I fall into when I'm in front of a group of people," Dunagin added.

Encouraging her students to get physical also keeps them engaged. While teaching British history, she has divided her class just like the House of Commons of Parliament so, throughout the semester her students physically manifest history by moving desks to create a divide down the middle, Tories on one side and Whigs on the other. Much like staging a theatrical scene, her class debates the Reform Act of 1832 arguing their points back and forth. Says Dunagin,
"Everyone was laughing by the end of it, and you know, hopefully it gives the students a chance to do a little performing of their own."

When asked what she wants students to leave her classroom with she said,
"I would like them to have a sense of curiosity about how the past resonates in the present. ...they may not remember the specific examples I try to offer, but I hope that at the end of the class, the students are curious about those questions on their own as they move forward in their lives."

That seems to be working for Dunagin, at least for one of her students who said,
"Her interest and excitement about information being taught pushed me to want to learn more and kept me interested as well."

