

# Developing the ‘life of the mind’: Steve Aylward

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I sat in the first desk in my row with only five minutes left in Mr. Steve Aylward’s first Global II class of the year. My notebook already had at least one full page of notes, if not more. Some students had given up in the midst of the deluge of historical analysis Mr. Aylward gave us in that first day, deciding that it couldn’t all be necessary, but I persevered.

But with only a few minutes left in class, Mr. Aylward explained that what I had just heard, the Marxist interpretation, was only one of many different interpretations that one can gather from the sea of stagnant facts that is history. I felt cheated, confused, disgruntled, and, frankly, incredibly stupid.

Over the course of my two years in Aylward Space, I felt that way several times. However, after realizing my ignorance, I always came back with a greater passion, a greater desire to learn and to make up the vast gaps in my historical knowledge. And Mr. Aylward always showed us a way out of our ignorance, giving us insights on how history happened at all levels, both from the viewpoints of the elites and those of the average citizens. By the end of my Aylward experience I still felt stupid. But it was a good, healthy stupid, one that made me realize that my stupidity was under my control, that I could do something about it. And after every class, I definitely had a desire to do something about it.

Ever since Atilla, Mr. Aylward’s famed feline friend, crash-landed on the planet we mere human beings call Earth, he has been inspired to teach high schoolers, introducing them to all that Aylwardism is.

Aylward came to SLUH in the fall of 1978, primarily teaching Ancient History and World Cultures first before moving on to Western Civilization, and later Global History I and II and Modern European History. Aylward also worked, along with former history teacher Art Zinselmeyer, to change the social studies requirement of freshmen and sophomores from Ancient History and World Cultures to Global I and II. Additionally, Aylward coached track for one season and cross country for four seasons, and founded the SLUH chapter of Amnesty International, moderating the club for most of the ’80s. More recently, Aylward moderated *The Forum*, SLUH’s political newsletter. Aylward’s extracurricular contributions to SLUH are certainly diverse and numerous, but his teaching ability highlighted his tenure.

On his teaching philosophy, Aylward said, “I don’t like pounding facts into people’s heads. You have to learn a certain number of facts, but I guess my aim is to give students historical perspective, that’s probably No. 1. That’s so lacking in an American culture.” Aylward continued, “The image of pounding facts into people’s

heads—if you teach history that way I think it’s boring. So, with the sophomores, you know, it’s a very elementary level of doing this, but I try to show them that there are a lot of interpretations, that history isn’t all the same. Facts are facts ... but interpretations make history sort of a puzzle, make it more interesting.”

Aylward’s Global II class and especially his Modern European History class follow textbooks—but just barely. Aylward adds bits of information from wherever he can to give his students a fuller perspective of the time period, using excerpts to demonstrate the mindset of the average poor Parisian just before the French Revolution, to show Marx’s point of view and intentions, to demonstrate the Battle of Verdun as a case study of World War I as a whole. The



History teacher Steve Aylward stands with senior Michael Jonagan after Jonagan gave Aylward’s farewell speech.

supplementation all comes together to give not a series of facts, but a perspective on the history of the time period that cannot be transferred through a mere textbook or Internet site. That’s what makes his class so memorable to his students.

Perhaps senior Kyle Kloster put it best: “It’s not that he follows a textbook. He teaches what he wants and (the material) happens to intersect with the textbook somewhat.”

Along with the theme of making students apply history, Aylward tries to make them think critically about countries’ different points of view, in part by assigning each student in his sophomore class a nation to represent in a model UN that convenes every Friday, culminating in a research paper about that student’s country.

Aylward said, “I guess a lot of people misunderstood this, but my approach ... is not the sort of standardized reading through a text, but getting people involved in the U.N. That goes back to when I was practice teaching at Parkway Central Junior. They were using that approach and I adopted it. ... I thought, have guys, appoint guys, assign them a country to represent. Most guys don’t really do anything with it, I guess, but some do. Rather than just memorizing facts, ... have them act it out, think about it, the cultures and countries’ point of view. To me that’s much more worthwhile than doing the fact routine.”

Junior Jake Kessler said, “I think he was really good because he did a lot of stuff in class as opposed to following strictly along the book. He’s really good at illustrating, especially in foreign politics, how all these countries related to each other and what exactly was going on.”

Given Aylward’s background, one could expect no other approach to a history class: “I believe in a multidisciplinary approach. I started off as a Classics major, a BA, MA, ABD (all but dissertation) in the classics. Then I shifted over towards anthropology and history. So I guess I always had this broad level, this broad multidisciplinary approach. Literature, history, archaeology, anthropology, all of these things, first in the ancient world, and then more of a general

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anthropological approach, which I developed.”

But the ideals of Aylwardism were not merely expressed and lived out in the classroom. Indeed, over the course of his career, Aylward’s intellectualism, zeal for learning, love of teaching, and warmth affected many of his colleagues, within the social studies office and without.

Former APUS History teacher Danno Monahan came to SLUH in 1980, two years after Aylward, and the two sat near each other in the Social Studies office through four changes in office location. Monahan said, “I realized terribly soon that we agreed on a lot of things, what makes a good history course—writing, interpreting primary sources—skills that we both thought important both in college and in life.”

Monahan continued, “Also, in his AP course, like mine, we wanted not just a course where people could (do well on AP), but also to give them a good college-level course. And he did that.”

Psychology teacher Brock Kesterson said, “I know we taught different subjects, but he’s very active in keeping his mind sharp and reading up on modern events and those type of things. So I really have tried to adopt that type of attitude towards psychology and trying to stay up on things that are going on and trying to relate those things to my class. And I really have done that.

“He brings me stuff and says ‘Did you see this? Did you hear this? Did you think about this? Did you read this?’ And those types of things, I can attribute that to him. He’s made me more aware about how to become more well read, and doing that helps me relate that stuff that the students aren’t getting in textbooks.”

Monahan stated that Aylward and he also shared knowledge and reading material: “Usually I was reading something in my field and he in his, which I think was a mark of a good teacher, to stay on top. ... He gave his most to the curriculum.”

Rather than any particular moment or moments over the course of his career, Aylward looks at those times when he really felt that his students are ‘getting it’ as the most rewarding part of teaching, “You realize that in each class or each week at the particular time you feel that people are clicking into something. I’ve taught this stuff a number of years, but it still doesn’t seem stale to me, trying to get people to think, trying to make the material interesting. At least some guys think that history is relevant, and for some guys even enjoyable.”

Aylward also enjoys seeing the change of heart in some students from sophomore to senior year, “Sometimes you find guys that maybe didn’t even do all that well in terms of a grade (in my sophomore class) coming in (to my Modern Euro class, that’s rewarding). ... The way you teach and the way the class works together, they realize it’s not just boring memorization.”

History teacher Tom McCarthy related a story about Aylward from his time as a student, “I was a junior when Aylward came to SLUH, but I never had him as a teacher. He substituted one time for the Modern European History class and he ended up juggling the whole class. One of the guys was sleeping, and when Mr. Aylward noticed it he jugged him. And then somebody protested that he jugged him. When somebody said ‘Are you going to jug all of us?’

he said ‘Yes,’ and proceeded to jug all of us.”

However, contrasting that initial harsh picture of Aylward, McCarthy has come to truly know the man as a colleague and friend. “He is an exceptional teacher. He’s one of the top five faculty members here at SLU High. We have grown so close together over the years just with conversations on teaching, history, politics, especially modern politics. He is a remarkable teacher for getting students to think and not memorize. I think that’s probably his best legacy here.”

McCarthy continued, “Aylward’s a professional, he’s highly competent, he cares incredibly about the students, and he also contributes greatly to a lot of behind the scenes things here. School policy formation, faculty meetings where things have to get done. He raises very good questions, maybe the social conscience of the faculty in some respect.”

Overall, many came to see Aylward not just as a great teacher, but as someone who truly cares about his students and co-workers, someone who puts so much time and effort into all he does because he loves it so much.

Latin teacher Mary Lee McConaghy said, “He gave me an amazing amount of help and support first semester when my voice was so bad. He came in for weeks to one of my junior classes to help me. I didn’t ask. He just appeared and did all of that.

McConaghy and Aylward became especially close during their time here, especially because of Aylward’s background in the classics. McConaghy said, “I started the year after he did, so we were both starting at about the same time. ... He was basically a Latin teacher wannabe, as many people are, so he has a big interest in that.”

Kesterson concluded, “Losing Doc and losing Mr. Aylward to me, the first thing that comes to my mind is intellectuals. Not to say that other people in our department aren’t intellectuals, but that’s the first thing that comes to mind. They have so much wisdom, so much experience whether it be through teaching or traveling or reading.”

“The collegiality of this department I think really hinged on him and Dr. Monahan. So losing those two guys is going to be something that’s really hard—to fill those guys’ shoes,” said Kesterson.

Before I knew it, I was trapped in Aylward Space that first year, and I couldn’t get enough, returning for a second dose this year. Through numerous historical books, backwards-turned ties, and short-sleeve Oxford-cloth shirts, I grew immensely in my knowledge of history, writing ability, critical thinking skills, and love of history and politics. The historical perspective and critical mind I possess I largely owe to that man of history, through *Hard Times* and easy, as the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. (in spite of my desire to be the Turkish Ambassador), with *Newsweek*, *The Economist*, and the famed German map that hangs on his wall. I am very thankful for all that Aylwardism and Aylward Space were, are, and will be.

This summer, Mr. Aylward has already planned yet another trip to Scandinavia, and next year he will continue to work with the collegeboard and AP programs, and may also find work with the Citizens of Modern Transit. No matter, what, he will certainly be continuing to spread Aylwardism wherever he goes.