

TRENDS AND TRENDINESS IN TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE HISTORY

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Judging them by their performance at the Constitutional Convention, the Founding Fathers represented a good cross-section of America. Or at least I have been so convinced by a little analysis by Clinton Rossiter read in the light of my experiences in an open admissions college. Rossiter has categorized the fifty-five men at the convention on the basis of their contribution to the convention's purpose, much as I categorize the students in my classes in accordance with their participation in class activities.

In his first category Rossiter places the PRINCIPALS, four of them: James Madison, James Wilson, George Washington, and Gouverneur Morris, in case you are curious. Eleven--Ben Franklin and ten others--are called INFLUENTIALS. The seven VERY USEFULS include one Luther Martin, described by Rossiter as "garrulous, sour, and pigheaded, yet an influential pricker of egos and consciences." We have that sort in our classes, I think you will agree. Typical of the eight USEFULS is Richard Dobbs Spaight, who, despite the distinction he achieved in other roles, goes down in Rossiter's history for his "several small triumphs as a plugger of holes." Ten are labeled merely VISIBLES. Among the seven CIPHERS is Thomas Mifflin, whose only recorded action was to second a motion. There are, finally, six DROPOUTS and two INEXPLICABLE DISAPPOINTMENTS.

I once thought an effective teacher was one who succeeded in making everyone in his class a PRINCIPAL. I have changed my mind. I have concluded that if we draw our categories parallel to Rossiter's we are likely to find them to be populated in roughly similar proportions. We are entitled to some claim to success, I believe, if we can move our students up a notch and, at the highest level, find new outlets for the PRINCIPALS. That is a modest goal, I admit, but a realistic one. I mention that at the outset so that you will recognize that I try to think in realistic terms when I contemplate the prospects of effecting change in the teaching of history.¹

I

For the past several years I have tried to keep a discerning eye on the various efforts within the historical profession to find ways of reaching students more effectively, of dealing more satisfactorily with historical knowledge so that our students can in turn feel more congenial toward it and study it to greater purpose. To be able to discuss trends in these efforts we need quantifiable data of a sort that is simply not available. The data we have consist of random reports by individual faculty members or departments, articles in journals and newsletters, papers and other presentations at historians' conferences, and impressions we gather from observation and conversation.

This mixed bag of data is quite naturally contradictory, and how we interpret it depends on how we define the term "trend." If a trend is a general tendency, we could probably ignore the reports, articles, papers, and studies, and, going on our observations, say that the trend in history classrooms around the country is to do what has been done, to teach as we have been taught, and then, in turn, to teach as we have taught: ragged notes, maybe with multicolor interlinear revisions, films on a fixed schedule, two book reviews or a term paper required, two exams and a final.

If a trend is a bend, as another of its definitions would have it, we can see at least a hint of a trend. Some within the profession are bending in a

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new direction to respond to apparent crises of history in the classroom--crises that I believe cannot be ignored. There is first of all the enrollment crisis. Participating in an American Historical Association survey, approximately 250 departments representing a cross section of different types of institutions in all parts of the country showed history course enrollments falling from 626,587 in 1970-71 to 550,387 in 1973-74, a 12% decline.² There is behind the enrollment decline, one would at least suspect, a decline in interest in history as it is taught, although the decline can quite plausibly be ascribed to other circumstances having nothing to do with teaching practices. We have to face the irony that declining enrollments have coincided with the emergence of what some call the history teaching movement. If the teaching movement is inspired only by the enrollment crisis it is likely to be misdirected and misused.

More important, in my judgment, than the enrollment crisis is what I would call the need crisis. Writing fifteen years ago about the anxiety of the American people before the future--and look at what has happened since then to intensify anxiety!--Robert Heilbroner observed that

at bottom our troubled state of mind reflects an inability to see the future in an historic context. If current events strike us as all surprise and shock it is because we cannot see events in a meaningful framework. If the future seems to us a kind of limbo, a repository of endless surprises, it is because we no longer see it as the expected culmination of the past, as the growing edge of the present. More than anything else, our disorientation before the future reveals a loss of our historic identity, an incapacity to grasp our historic situation.³

I am not arguing that knowledge and understanding of history automatically lead us into a better, quieter world, for we know that self-interest and prejudice influence conduct more powerfully than knowledge and understanding. But we can never be free to be guided by anything but fear and prejudice unless we have knowledge and understanding, and so we do not give up in pursuing them. That is why we study and teach history.

Where there is awareness of the crisis faced by history in the classroom, some things are happening. At nine of its past ten meetings the Organization of American Historians has offered sessions on teaching; in 1972, 1974, 1975, and 1976, teaching concerns received considerable attention. Since 1971, and probably before then, the AHA conventions have had sessions on teaching, and in 1974 in addition to the sessions there were two rooms devoted to continuous demonstrations and displays. Never mind that they were in an out of way place and unpublicized; those who came found them to be helpful and encouraging signs of desirable ferment. 1975, however, saw a relapse; the demonstrations were all scheduled for the same inconvenient time. In both organizations the rather benign concern for history in the schools that once prevailed has given way to a more intense interest in its fate in colleges and universities. Additional impetus to the spreading concern for teaching was provided by Gilbert C. Fite, who devoted his 1974 Southern Historical Association presidential address to a discussion of the historian as a teacher.⁴

The History Teacher, a journal that publishes some excellent articles on teaching, took on a new and enlarged format four years ago, and some new ventures are being undertaken by its publisher, the Society for History Education. The AHA Newsletter has reported on teaching practices for the past several years, and will continue to do so. The Community College Social Science Quarterly carries occasional articles on history in the classroom, and the Committee on History in the Classroom, recently granted AHA-affiliate status, sends once-in-awhile newsletters to its members. The founding of the journal in which this article appears is another sign of interest and concern. Beyond these publications, history departments here and there are sponsoring symposia and colloquia and other such affairs. All of this activity is indicative of

the ferment on behalf of teaching in the historical profession. If a trend is a bend in new directions, we can probably claim that we are witnessing a bend and that we are helping to produce it.

But I must admit to some uneasiness in all this activity, especially over the self-denunciations on which the movement sometimes seems to thrive, over the methodical analysis of our imperfection. In commenting on the self-denunciations in Puritan society, Perry Miller noted that they did not really reveal a despairing frame of mind. Rather there was something of a ritualistic incantation about them. In purging the soul they in fact encouraged persistence in heinous conduct: the admonition to change which never occurred served as a token payment on the obligation. There is a message of caution for us in Miller's observation.

I might also mention that if the proof of a bend lies in resistance to it, such resistance now exists. We can expect it to grow, for there is probably a chorus of historians waiting to join in with a letter writer who bemoans the "pandering to the marketplace, lowering of standards, curricular gimmickry, and the absence of self- and disciplinary respect" he sees in current practices.⁵

II

If we are trending in new directions, where are we headed? Where is the history teaching movement, if there is such a thing, taking us? In an early stage of preparation of this essay I thought it might be possible to find some answers to those questions by categorizing and tabulating the articles and the reports on new developments in history teaching. I analyzed for their major thrust 79 articles that have appeared in The History Teacher since it began publication at Notre Dame in 1967. You will understand if you have read these articles that it is impossible to draw the kinds of distinctions that are necessary for accurate categorization, for most of them cross category lines. That explains why I eventually abandoned my attempt. But I did not do so until I had discovered that the categories that emerged told me something about what was happening and that keeping the categories in mind may serve a useful purpose, as I hope to show later. Eleven of the articles dealt principally with organization or structure in history teaching. Structure, as I use the term, refers to ways of selecting and arranging the content that is the subject of study or of organizing classroom experiences to achieve one's purposes. Twenty-three articles focused chiefly on methods; that is, they were concerned with ways of presenting or manipulating the content that has been selected and arranged and with strategies designed to help one achieve objectives. Articles in this category considered such things as media-based, individualized, programmed, computer-assisted and audio-tutorial instruction; lectures; seminars; lecture-discussion arrangements; gaming and simulation; role playing; inquiry; and team teaching.

Twenty-two articles discussed teaching approaches, that is, they looked at specific avenues that might be used for facilitating the implementation of one method or another. Usually they suggested ways of getting at purposes that might have some unusual appeal to students. Instructors here and there are using art, music, historical novels, strands of popular culture, biography, genealogy, mythology, quantitative data, local history, family history, oral history, comparative history, pseudohistory, psychohistory, film and tape production, journals, cartoons, and a number of other approaches.

My fourth main category, materials, listed articles that treated the form in which the content under consideration is received by students. Five articles dealt with primary and secondary print and non-print materials. Eight dealt with a fifth category, purposes in studying history, eight looked at specific areas of study, and four commented on teacher education possibilities.⁶

But these articles and reports dealt only with what people with the initiative to write chose to write about and with what editors with the power of selection chose to publish. They only suggest the nature of the ferment that exists; they are not an accurate picture of what is happening, certainly not of the proportions of teaching trends.

Looking at the articles and reports as I have prompts me to ask an important question: How do we protect ourselves against the kind of trendiness that is characterized by nothing more than a call for bold, persistent improvisation, a call that would say, "It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something." How do we avoid being guilty of the kind of convictions Horace Greeley seemed to have, at least as they have been characterized by Michael Les Benedict? Greeley really believed in his radical convictions, Benedict says, at least as long as he held them. But his mind was elastic enough to adjust to new necessities and new circumstances. I do not by any means disapprove of improvisation, nor do I see any virtue in persisting with a structure or method or approach that fails. If that means I am changing my convictions that doesn't bother me too much. To have an elastic mind isn't all bad. But I don't like the kind of change that merely blows with the wind.

III

There is a need now for a new trend in the history teaching movement, one that I would like to contribute to, and that is a trend to respond to the crisis in the classroom through responsible, creative, disciplined change. To effect that kind of change we need to have some standards for evaluating the merit of individual efforts to improve teaching and to judge the likely effectiveness of the recommendations for change that are being advanced. To that end, I propose four questions that should be asked by individuals or departments as they evaluate their programs, courses, strategies, or plans for change.

First, are we clear on our purposes? I wonder how many departments have worked out careful statements on purpose, how many instructors have outlined their purposes in detail, and how many students know what they are expected to know or to be able to do when they complete a course, a unit, an activity, or a single classroom experience. To be able to state one's purposes in clear and concise terms requires some disciplined thinking about the nature of history and about learning processes. I spend a rather considerable amount of time at the beginning of each semester discussing with my students the general objectives for the course at hand. The objectives call for such things as learning to think in a historical context, gaining mastery of content, developing abilities of expression, and acquiring the ability to use at least some of the tools of historians.

Objectives can also be expressed in terms of processes. With credits to Benjamin Bloom, I have set these as my process objectives: knowing, understanding, analyzing, synthesizing, integrating, feeling, and expressing. What is encompassed in each of them is too extensive to discuss here, but in my classes we stop and talk about them from time to time and evaluate how we are doing at achieving them. Some days a specific objective is singled out for special emphasis if that is appropriate. More often there is no specific reference to them except possibly in a passing way.

Second, are we clear on our instructional design? We run the risk as departments and as individuals of trying to do too many things at once. Even though our strategies are conceived and planned with care, our pace and level of thinking is likely to be faster and above that of our students. Our heads ought to be brimming with ideas; the trick is to be able to make these ideas accessible to students. One of my unwritten goals as a teacher is to have

every class meeting include activities the students do not expect when they enter the classroom. The risk in this is that students are kept off balance. Without special help they cannot handle confusion that might seem to them to come from directionlessness.

Perhaps the term "instructional design" can best be defined by a reference to the design I attempt to use. I call it a contextual design. That means that an effort is made to understand the historical content--the episode or event or idea being studied--in terms of its vertical and horizontal dimensions; to show its connectedness to what was happening at the same time and to what preceded and what followed; to develop a sense of continuity; and to come to grips with consequences. Chronology is not ignored but neither does it dominate. The contextual design rests on the premise that, as in drawing from and reconstructing the human memory, the full chronological sequence need not be established. That is to say that one can recall something like one's tenth birthday, what preceded it, what was happening at the same time, and what followed, without filling in all the birthdays before and since. Besides minimizing the confusion often caused by far-ranging classroom experiences, this design provides a framework for responding to two related questions in the minds of most students: "Who cares?" and "So What?"

Third, in seeking change are we clear on which of the change options will receive the greatest attention? In other words, are we focusing on structure? Are we working on methods? On approach? On materials? How can our resources be used to best advantage within the limits imposed upon us by circumstances we cannot control?

Finally, have we given thought to teaching styles? Different teachers are excellent in different ways. To do one's best in the classroom one ought to be free to do what one does best. I believe that consideration of teaching styles should be self-conscious and intentional. A good starting point for considering teaching styles is Joseph Axelrod's model, developed out of some extensive research and observation. He has concluded that there are two basic styles, the didactic and evocative. One of my premises in teaching history is that we don't need to create interest in history; it is our task to encourage it to emerge. We don't take history to the students; we bring it out of them. In my judgment, therefore, the didactic style, with its emphasis on telling, is ordinarily inappropriate in history classrooms.

Axelrod poses four prototypes of evocative styles. In the subject-matter centered prototype the teacher says, "I teach what I know." Facts-and-principles teachers of this variety regard knowledge as product. It is something to be presented--the trick is in finding the way to do it most effectively. The instructor-centered teacher says, more likely unconsciously than consciously, "I teach what I am." That is not to say, "Be what I am," but rather, "Be what you can be as fully as you can--and maybe your encounter with me will help you in achieving it." It is not self-centered, but "intellectual-process-by-example centered." Knowledge is process; subject matter is a medium for developing a world view, a philosophy of life. What the teacher thinks and reads, how he works intellectually, how he apprehends knowledge, where he is moving, are critical to the classroom experiences of his students. A third prototype, called student-centered, says, "I train minds." Knowledge is process; cognitive skills must be developed for apprehending it. These skills must capitalize on the student's interests, abilities, and inclinations; they need not and probably should not reflect the instructor's patterns and preferences. The emphasis is on analysis and problem-solving and on the development of appropriate skills for accomplishing them. A fourth prototype, also called student-centered, says, "I work with the whole student." Both affective and cognitive development are important to persons of this prototype, but perhaps the affective concerns are dominant.⁸

I hesitate to summarize and apply Axelrod's conclusions in this brief presentation. They are based on sophisticated and extensive research, and to treat them in a superficial way is risky. I hope you do not read more into them than is warranted. But I would like at least to point to the deficiencies in each model and allow you to infer the strengths. The facts-and-principles prototype assumes that there is a definable body of facts and principles that can be moved purposefully through any number of heads gathered together in one classroom at the same time. The instructor-centered prototype requires much substance and depth in the teacher. Enthusiasm, sincerity, and cleverness do not excuse the sharing of emptiness. Student-centered teaching, whether aimed primarily at heads or at the whole person, assumes that we know enough about students to be able to differentiate between their needs and that we are resourceful enough to find a way to meet those needs.

These four questions, then, provide a basis for developing creative, responsible, and disciplined responses to the crises in history classrooms: Are we clear on purposes? Are we clear on instructional design? Are we clear on the change options we choose? And have we considered teaching styles? They are posed here not because they are the final four questions that must be asked but because they are the first four, and I hope they will be understood in that light.

IV

I dare not conclude without a warning that a call for systematic planning and for disciplined evaluation of teaching purposes, methods, structures, materials, and approaches should not be taken to mean that rigidity should replace spontaneity. I believe that for a teacher to be effective he must be free to be an artist in the classroom. But I also know that an artist follows sketches and designs and that he plans his lines and colors and shadings and overall layout. I subscribe to the idea that effective teaching is an act of celebration. Even though his statement seems cumbersome, I agree with what one teacher said about his teaching:

The only justification for a class is that a transaction of extraordinary and to some degree unforeseeable and unpredictable character can occur, in which teacher and students together constitute a gathered community lifted to a heightened level of understanding by common active engagement with symbolic materials of substantial human significance. I judge my work as a teacher by the degree to which some such transaction has been realized.⁹

What are the prospects for marked change in the quality of history teaching? How large is the trend that seems to be developing likely to be? Once upon a time I thought that our goal should be to make every teacher a great one, one who could judge himself favorably in the light of that standard. Well, teachers, too--like the founding fathers and like our students--represent a cross section of America. We have some DISAPPOINTMENTS, some CIPHERS, some USEFULS, some in every category. It would be a significant accomplishment, it seems to me, to see teachers move up, one by one, to the next notch. Maybe from that one we can move to another and another. That may be wishful thinking. Let's just hope that some people, many perhaps, make the effort to move one notch now. If that happens, we can say--borrowing from Benjamin Franklin at the Constitutional Convention--that it is a rising sun and not a setting sun over the historical profession.

NOTES

¹Clinton Rossiter, 1787: The Grand Convention (New York, 1966), 212-219.

²AHA Newsletter, 12 (September, 1974), 1. For more on the status of history, see Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools;" originally presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, April 19, 1975; published in Journal of American History, LXII (September, 1975), 557-570.

³Robert Heilbroner, The Future as History (New York, 1960), 15.

⁴Gilbert C. Fite, "The Historian as Teacher: Professional Challenge and Opportunity," Journal of Southern History, XLI (February, 1975), 3-18.

⁵Paul J. Hauben, Chronicle of Higher Education, X (July 21, 1975), in response to an article describing innovative endeavors at SUNY-Stony Brook in the July 7, 1975, Chronicle.

⁶I applied the same categories to 31 reports that appeared in the column on teaching in the AHA Newsletter from September 1974 to June 1975. The largest number, 14, dealt with structure, 9 with methods, 3 with approaches, 2 with materials, 2 with teacher education, and one with purposes. Douglas Alder, of Utah State University, has maintained a file on articles and on individual reports he has been able to accumulate. His categories show this tally: Simulation, 10; How to Teach History, 5; Deployment of Students and Time, 15; Seminars, 6; Computer Assisted and Programmed Learning, 8; Case Method, 1; Film, 20; New and Unusual Subjects (Psychohistory, Technology, Family, etc.), 23; Media, Slides, Multimedia, 18; Competency-Based, 7; Change the Survey Course--Inquiry, Documents, 23; History Labs and Oral History, 18; Television, 8. Professor Alder's list has been privately distributed in tentative form.

⁷Restructuring of a history program can be done quite creatively. See Charles F. Sidman, "The Kansas Plan: The Department of History at the University of Kansas," unpublished report, 1975. A summary of this report was printed in the AHA Newsletter, 13 (October, 1975), 5-7.

⁸Joseph Axelrod, The University Teacher as Artist (San Francisco, 1973).

⁹Philip H. Phenix, "Teaching as Celebration," in Excellence in University Teaching: New Essays, eds. Thomas H. Buxton and Keith W. Pritchard (Columbia, S.C., 1975), 23.