

TEACHING COLLEGE HISTORY
A CRITIQUE AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

James C. Maroney
William J. McNeill
Lee College

History courses, and most especially introductory survey courses, are in a bad way. Declining popularity of college history, as reflected by enrollment figures over the past several years, confronts all segments of higher education from the two-year community college through the major university.¹ This decline derives from many factors. The most prominent include changing degree requirements in many institutions, some of which allow the substitution of various social science courses in place of the standard history requirement, while others have dropped the history requirement altogether; student preference for more "relevant" courses, often utilizing the most modern "multimedia" techniques, which seem to make the traditional lecture method "old-fashioned;" the recognition that teachers, especially those at the community college level, no longer deal with the traditional student but with a new breed of culturally deprived, minority group members possessing neither use for nor interest in history; economic factors expressed in the demands of students, legislators, and the public demands for accountability and for cost-cutting through the deletion of non-essential requirements; complacency on the part of some college and university teachers of history who refuse to recognize or even consider the need for change; and uncertainty on the part of others who themselves, in the face of these attacks, doubt the value of survey history courses.

Some historians are coming to recognize that those who teach the survey courses must accept primary responsibility; in the words of one observer, "we often convert what ought to be an introduction to history into an introduction to graduate school." Such a tendency might well come naturally to scholars whose training emphasized specialization and the importance of research and writing. Whether actually true or not, community college administrators widely hold such views of job applicants who possess the Ph.D. degree. Many two-year college administrators openly contend that research and teaching are incompatible and prefer job applicants to present any work beyond the master's degree in methods courses or other credits from Education departments. While the nature of "good teaching" continues to defy consensus, it can be demonstrated that scholars actively engaged in research and publication often win "excellence in teaching awards" and, conversely, that most recipients of such awards in institutions encouraging scholarship do publish. Such phenomena might well lead one to relegate the "incompatibility" of teaching and research to the status of myth.²

Historians recognize the plight of the discipline, and virtually every issue of such journals as The History Teacher and Community College Social Science Quarterly contains articles analyzing the ills of the profession and offers various methods, approaches, and goals as potential solutions. The following examples sample the multifarious nature of the suggested remedies.

The belief that a course must be organized around behavioral objectives stated in performance terms, a concept popularized by Benjamin S. Bloom and Robert F. Mager,³ pervades the thinking of many educators, especially in two-year community colleges. Patrons of this concept believe that the student has an inherent right to be informed at the beginning of a course what measurable and demonstrable skills, actions, or knowledge he will acquire as a result of completing the course. Furthermore, the concept holds that the student should be informed of the specific act or actions he must perform in order to achieve the objectives. Frequent articles in professional journals attempt to justify and offer helpful suggestions for implementation of behavioral objectives.⁴

One group of teachers attempts to deal with the plight of the survey course in terms of the way the course is presented to the students. Examples include the audio-tutorial approach and individualized, self-paced instruction. Designers of such courses believe that, in addition to the utilization of behavioral objectives, courses should be structured so as to accommodate the different rates at which students learn. In the audio-tutorial method described by Leslie E. Shumway, the instructor tapes his lecture to enable the student to listen to the tape at his convenience as many times as necessary or to allow the student to duplicate the tape on his own blank cassette. This procedure frees class time for the use of films or film strips, recordings, class discussion, and the answering of questions.⁵ James A. Carter's "systems approach" to the teaching of an individualized course in American history is a method in which the subject matter is compartmentalized into self-contained and independent "packages." Such "packages" presented to the student feature precisely stated objectives, a pre-test, the presentation of a body of subject-matter by such means as tapes, recordings, films or film strips, slides, printed lectures or other reading assignments, and a post-test to ascertain if the student mastered the material. Based upon the stated objectives, the post-assessment "is similar or identical to the pre-assessment." In case of failure, the student restudies the package and retakes the post-assessment, a process which "is repeated as often as is necessary." After mastering a package, the student moves on to the next package. Fast learners may complete such a course in a few weeks, while their slower-learning colleagues can often master material if given enough time, but would fail in a faster-paced traditionally-structured course.⁶ Performance contracts, in which the student is guaranteed the specific grade he "contracts" for, providing he fulfills his end of the bargain, have been experimented with in such courses, although this approach, involving the concept of teacher accountability, is not limited to individualized or self-paced instruction.⁷

Carter and Shumway justify their methods, in part, by pointing out that the "open door" concept prevalent in most two-year community colleges necessitates a new approach. In the method utilized by Carter and Shumway, the teacher serves "as a discussion leader, guide, and counselor rather than as a lecturer during the class periods." Shumway admonishes those who "prefer the stimulation of lecturing" (the Bob Hope Syndrome) to think first of the students and remember that instructors are teachers rather than performers or entertainers. Both writers admit certain disadvantages inherent in the methods they advocate; Carter bemoans "the lengthy time involved in preparing learning packages," while Shumway admits that his course "seems ideal" for the better student but presents problems for the weaker student who possesses "an almost irresistible urge to procrastinate."⁸

Lester D. Stephens of the University of Georgia, in his guide for the history teacher, agrees that history instructors rely too heavily on the lecture method and proposes instead an "inquiry" approach in which

The emphasis has been placed upon greater involvement of students and less narration from the teacher. This is intended not to diminish the role of the teacher but to modify his function from that principally of the teller or narrator to that of precipitator of intellectual inquiry, director of thought-provoking activities, and motivator of interest in the study of the past. The argument, then, is that instruction in history should focus upon the student as inquirer rather than as passive recipient of knowledge.⁹

But it should be noted that the ills of the history profession scarcely can be cured merely by the abandonment of the lecture method; furthermore, the

lecture, while under attack, hardly is finished, and a strong case can be made for its retention.¹⁰

Another group of teachers does not see the answer to the problem in terms of how the material is presented; instead, they advocate the abandonment of much of the traditional subject matter covered in traditional survey courses and the substitution of new material or courses which will be "interesting" and "relevant" to the student. In the opinion of James W. Hurst, "the traditional history course (Western Civilization and the United States two-semester survey) with its emphasis on a textbook, supplementary readings, lectures, discussions, and written testing over broadly covered but poorly understood 'topics,' 'events,' or 'periods' does not meet the needs or stimulate the interest of an ever increasing number of junior college students." Hurst proposes two alternatives to the usual survey courses: a course in local history involving the student "in gathering raw historical material," and a course in the history of technology, appropriate to the industrial locale of the region in which he lives. Plans for the latter course include direct involvement of students by means of tours and interviews of "men and women who, as resource persons, can provide first-hand insights into the evolution and development of technical processes." In the classroom, student interest will be held by maximum use of audio-visual devices, while the lecture method "will be kept to an absolute minimum."¹¹

An instructor in Honolulu Community College, Barbara Bennett Peterson, believes that "WASPish American history" is unsuited for Hawaii's "typical junior college or university student [who] may not be keenly interested in the traditional 'mainland' type of American history course." Peterson's course incorporates large amounts of material on Asia and Asian-American relations as well as Hawaiian history in order to motivate Honolulu Community College's "culturally deprived" students. She sees the problem of what is wrong with the survey course largely in terms of the irrelevance of much of the subject matter but apparently has no quarrel with traditional teaching methods; she continues to make heavy use of the lecture method.¹²

Still other historians are experimenting with making history important to the student, not by discarding traditional topics, but by relating them to the present and future. In fact, historians at Kansas State College of Pittsburg offer a course entitled "The Future as History," which is "an attempt to bridge the chasm separating past from present and future, to determine the contribution of historical study for an understanding of past and present, and to form a realistic concept of the future based on that understanding." Advocates of this approach may or may not supplement the traditional lecture with other activities; their innovation lies not in their method of presentation, but in their belief that the past must be linked to both the present and the future so that students will understand the process of change. Demonstrating an acute need to justify their subject, these historians contend that "historians have too often failed to convey to general students any real sense of the importance and relevance of history."¹³

Gerald Baydo of Grossmont College, editor of The Community College Social Science Quarterly, contends that more than a novel or interesting method of presentation is needed to make history significant to the students. Displaying keen insight, Baydo implies that many have overlooked the basic fact that classroom procedure is far less important than what is taught. Baydo proposes a topical approach, in which topics such as war, the environment, foreign policy, minorities, economics, general and popular culture, and the presidents are covered vertically, from the beginning to the present, so that "students can begin to see the continuity of America's past." An instructor interested in this approach "must first decide that he is not committing a mortal sin by leaving out some of the details of American History," and "that

relating the present to the past is not necessarily distorting history and that history must be made more 'relevant.'" Baydo contends that "Students remember little of the names, dates, and facts that are thrown at them within a seventeen or eighteen week semester (or quarter). Why try to teach them everything, why not teach them something they can tie down in the present within the realm of their own experiences?"¹⁴

Writing from a similar perspective, in his analysis of the teaching of survey history courses, Bennett Jordan, who teaches in an Alabama junior college, concludes that while "There are definite uses, values, and pleasures to be derived from the study of history," most students in introductory courses are not profiting from them. According to Jordan, most history teachers need to become familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives because the stated objectives (when they exist) of most survey history courses conflict with what actually goes on in the classroom. For example, Jordan found that while typical course objectives include the development of the power of analysis and interpretation and the development of an appreciation for the value and importance of history, most teachers, both in presentation and testing, "tend to focus on factual recall which means that most history courses are simply a compilation of selected facts, more often political facts, arranged in chronological order. This establishes a very shallow teaching-learning situation." Part of this problem stems from the fact, as Baydo also points out, that "the average [history] teacher frantically approaches the history class with a cover-the-material syndrome."¹⁵

Since a justification of the study of history in terms of making the student aware of "the uses, values, and pleasures" of studying the subject is universally considered an important goal, the student should leave the course with some understanding of what history is, how and why the historian writes history, and some knowledge of the changing trends of historical interpretation. Above all, however, the student should leave the course with a good attitude about history; unfortunately, as Jordan points out, the reverse is usually the case:

Most history students are turned-out, turned-off. They will not read history on their own--they have no interest in such nor do they feel time spent in such an endeavor would be worthwhile. These students become part of our work force and as such may help make the four-day work week a reality, but the reading of history will not, for most, occupy any of the increased leisure time. Is this not a failure for the history teaching profession? How successful has a teacher been who can guide a student through a course with a good final course grade if that student exists with a dislike for that subject?¹⁶

The question of objectives for any history course is inextricably involved with the method of testing. A college course should ask different questions of the material and demand more mature responses from more mature students than do public school courses. Unfortunately, the objective test is the most widely used exam in history survey courses because of such reasons as large student load, lack of understanding on the part of teachers about the nature and definition of history, the meaning of course objectives, and the correlation between course objectives and their implementation. Los Angeles Valley College professor Richard Allen Heckman suggests two basic reasons why many history teachers use objective exams: "It saves time in grading and requires less of them in rating students." However, it should be noted that the use of essay exams *per se* does not guarantee an advantage over the use of objective exams; some "essay" exams are "written objective exams," which require little more than memorization and regurgitation of lectures and reading assignments.¹⁷

Ben M. Enis of the University of Houston, a professor of marketing, concludes that "so-called 'objective' tests are irrelevant to education."

What our students should be developing, with our help, is the ability to think conceptually, to relate ideas and facts to each other and to apply them to real-world situations. Well-designed essay tests encourage this development; so-called "objective" tests (even when masterfully constructed) inhibit it.

A student who faces several broad questions to which he must respond meaningfully within a limited time is strongly motivated to recall concepts and facts, to extend or modify them to fit the specific situation outlined in the question and to organize and phrase his own thoughts on that topic. He also gets practice in writing quickly and concisely. These are traits which are useful to students and will be invaluable in later life.

An "objective" test, on the other hand, gives the student practice at a skill he will seldom use once he leaves academe. He will not often be faced, in any field, with a situation in which he must select the "right" answer from several given alternatives. There are very few eternally correct answers in my field, and I suspect this is also true in . . . all other disciplines.¹⁸

Certainly these comments on "eternally correct answers" are most appropriate for teachers of history, a discipline whose very essence consists of analysis and interpretation.

It is interesting, in fact an ironical truism, that, in the current predicament of college history courses, the profession faces a challenge analogous to that which students should encounter in their history courses: investigation, analysis, and interpretation. This emphasis is in essence what much of the literature surveyed above suggests is needed to revitalize the teaching of history; it follows that teacher-historians likewise must investigate thoroughly the state of history courses. They must submit their findings to vigorous analysis and thereupon derive interpretations from which corrective action should emanate. Can teachers of history expect to do any less than what it is suggested that history students do? Teacher-historians are well advised to read, reflect, and react to the growing literature concerning the poor and declining state of history teaching. The status of the profession is at stake should less be done.

NOTES

¹John A. Crowl, "Declining Appeal of Introductory Courses Causes Concern Among Historians," Chronicle of Higher Education, VI (January 10, 1972), 6; Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," Journal of American History, LXII (September, 1975), 557-570.

²Crowl, "Declining Appeal of Introductory Courses," 6; Larry A. Van Dyne, "Many 2-year Colleges Resist Hiring Ph.D.'s; Doubt Their Teaching Ability," The Chronicle of Higher Education, VI (January 24, 1972), 1.

³Benjamin S. Bloom, et al., Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (New York, 1964); Robert F. Mager, Preparing Instructional Objectives (Palo Alto, California, 1962).

⁴See, for example, Deane C. Thompson, "What to Do Until Bloom Comes: Behavioral Objectives That Work," The History Teacher, VII (February, 1974),

216-219; Reid Holland, "Behavioral Objectives and Community College History," Community and Junior College Journal, XLIV (April, 1974), 13, 15. See also Lester A. Stephens, Probing the Past: A Guide to the Study and Teaching of History (Boston, 1974), 152-158.

⁵ Leslie E. Shumway, "An Audio-Tutorial Approach to the Teaching of History," Community College Social Science Quarterly, II (Fall, 1971), 7-9.

⁶ James A. Carter, "Developing an Individualized Approach to the Teaching of History," ibid., III (Fall, 1972), 9-12.

⁷ See "News and Trends," Today's Education, LXI (February, 1972), 3: "A Novel Plan for Teaching Gets Low Grades in New Report," U.S. News and World Report, LXXII (February 14, 1972), 52.

⁸ Shumway, "An Audio-Tutorial Approach," 7-9; Carter, "Developing an Individualized Approach," 9-12.

⁹ Stephens, Probing the Past, 182. For discussion of the inquiry method, including sample lessons, see pp. 182-245. Also see Stephens' article, "Proteus at Play with the Past: Historical Versus Mythical Thinking," The History Teacher, VIII (May, 1975), 410-423.

¹⁰ See Meyer M. Cahn, "In Praise of the Classroom Lecture," Community College Social Science Quarterly, II (Winter, 1972), 28-31, 109; Gilbert Hight, The Art of Teaching (New York, 1950), 89-107.

¹¹ James W. Hurst, "Alternatives to the Survey History Courses," Community College Social Science Quarterly, III (Summer, 1973), 37-40.

¹² Barbara Bennett Peterson, "Revolution Within the American History Faculty," ibid., III (Spring, 1973), 1-5.

¹³ James B. Schick, Fred B. Misse, Jr., and David A. Hackett, "The Future as History': An Experimental Approach to Introductory History for the General Student," The History Teacher, VII (February, 1974), 220-227; David Pratt, "The Functions of Teaching History," ibid., VII (May, 1974), 410-425.

¹⁴ Gerald Baydo, "Some Random Thoughts of Chicken Little, or the Frustrations of Teaching the American History Survey," Journal of Expression, I (October, 1973), 19-23. Also see Baydo, A Topical History of the United States (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1974).

¹⁵ Bennett Jordan, "A Look Toward Reality in the Teaching of Survey History Courses," Community College Social Science Quarterly, II (Spring, 1972), 4-6. Also see Jordan's "Evaluation of Students in History Courses in Southern Junior Colleges" (unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, Auburn University, 1970).

¹⁶ Jordan, "A Look Toward Reality," 4-6.

¹⁷ Richard Allen Heckman, "Objective or Subjective?" Community College Social Science Quarterly, III (Winter, 1973), 24-28; Henry W. Bragdon, "Teaching Writing Through History," The Atlantic Monthly, CCIV (November, 1959), 118-120; and Norman F. Cantor and Richard I. Schneider, How to Study History (New York, 1967), 148-164. Stephens, Probing the Past, 247-248, also discusses the relationship between objectives and testing but justifies some use of objective questions, largely because of the large student loads of most history teachers. See also Chester Handleman, "Must Good Teaching

Always Be Innovative?" Community College Social Science Quarterly, V (Spring, 1975), 13-17, 23.

¹⁸ Ben M. Enis in undated newspaper clipping in authors' possession, The Daily Cougar, University of Houston student newspaper.