

## AN ABORTIVE EXPERIMENT IN WORLD HISTORY

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Historians, more than other academicians, should be aware that lessons can be learned from failure as well as success. The past offers evidence from both sides of the ledger. This is the story of a flawed effort to improve the teaching of the freshman World History course.

For many years those of us in the teaching profession as well as the general population have been bombarded with criticism about what is wrong with traditional methods of instruction. From the elementary grades through high schools to the university classroom, the theme has been persistent. The lecture, we are told, is the worst possible technique to employ in education. Students in a lecture course are passive learners; listening to a dull professor drone on for an hour, insist the critics, is a sure way to "turn off" students. Education specialists, grant holders, entrepreneurs with foundations and government agencies, speakers at professional society meetings--everybody who is anybody--seemingly agree with the proposition that the lecture is out; inquiry, discussion, contracting--anything but the lecture--is in. Only old fogies or those too lazy to make a change in their habits would continue to lecture to their students.

Fired by the findings of the educational elite, and determined to do my bit in the improvement of American education (and try to help history survive in an increasingly hostile environment), I planned a "no lecture" course in World History. While my goal was a "zero lecture" course, my initial plan was to have a course in which the lecture would be held to a minimum; perhaps ten percent of class time would be used for lecture, the remainder for other activities. This involved a drastic change in the format of a course I had taught for many years, and a drastic change in my own philosophy of education. I had taken the title of "professor" quite literally; as I frequently told my students, my job was to "profess," to discourse on my field of specialization, to run the risks of thinking aloud in public. But under the new dispensation, such a traditional view was clearly obsolete.

Lecture halls and traditional classroom physical arrangements encourage the lecture. Despite the fact that I was teaching in a new building, the rooms in which I taught were thoroughly traditional. Four walls, forty to fifty chairs filling the available floor space, a lectern, a chalk board, and, as a gesture toward the new dispensation, a permanently mounted screen made up my teaching environment. Equipment available to instructors included wall maps, projectors, and TV, as well as record players, tape recorders, and other hardware.

My first move was to change the physical environment as much as possible. The theory was to discourage the lecture and encourage student participation. Out went the rigid rows of chairs, and in came a group of tables. Five to six students were to occupy each table, and each group of students would be involved in a series of classroom exercises. With modest outside funding, I acquired a collection of museum replicas, made a large number of slides, and duplicated a variety of "inquiry" exercises. It might be well to add at this point the fact that our departmental budget was so limited that outside funds had to be obtained to provide anything beyond such bare necessities as duplicated examinations. The administration's philosophy was that a history instructor needed only a piece of chalk to run a classroom.

World History is a difficult course to teach--"challenging" might be a better term--under the best of circumstances. The course begins with Creation and comes as close to the present as the instructor can manage before the year ends. The perspective is global; the instructor is expected to be an expert

in everything from Neolithic China to Nazi Germany, from Sumeria to the Cold War, from Pericles to Kissinger. But it has one great advantage: since it is impossible to teach, the instructor has almost unlimited opportunities to change it every year to investigate his own current interests, and to focus on those things in the past that might shed some light on the present. Since the New History stresses methodology, the evaluation of evidence, critical thinking and the like, World History offers the creative instructor ample room for experimentation.

My own experiences with students convinced me that the typical freshman lacked communication skills. He might be literate, but he had difficulty with the spoken and written word. He had little sense of old-fashioned location geography; he might have heard of Japan, but he could not find it on a map. He certainly had heard of Greece, but he had no inkling of what the physical environment and resources of the area were like. The freshman did not read much, but he had a tendency to assume that the printed word was truth incarnate. My mission, as I defined it, was to try to remedy some of these perceived deficiencies as I struggled to teach some history as well.

Three themes were stressed in this experimental course. The first was evidence. What is it? How does one evaluate it? How is evidence used to present a rational argument, a reasoned discourse? How do we determine what evidence is pertinent to a given inquiry, and what is not? Exercises were devised to encourage students to use internal as well as physical evidence as they studied, and to be critical of the use of evidence by historians, anthropologists, politicians, journalists, and others.

A second theme was related to the first. The study of history should encourage critical thinking. History is really more than "one damned thing after another," as it has been so eloquently described. Emphasis was placed on what Halvdan Koht has called the "driving forces in History."<sup>1</sup> Such "driving forces" include war, religion, technology, nationalism, the physical environment, accident, and the irrational element in man. One does not have to be a determinist to recognize the fact that human events are often powerfully influenced by such factors. Students were encouraged to ponder alternatives, to consider the complex nature of significant events, to be conscious of multiple causation and to beware the simple explanation. In a primitive way, the course took up the manner in which history has a predictive value.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, efforts were made to apply historical study to contemporary problems. The New History abhors dilettantism; history must be useful. Moreover, today's generation of students is quite present-minded. Many are convinced that the past is dead and has no influence on the present. Part of my enthusiasm included the utilization of Herbert J. Muller's The Uses of the Past, a splendid and eloquent book on historical understanding.<sup>3</sup> No civilization of antiquity would be examined without efforts to consider the application of our knowledge to current affairs.

Space limitations and modesty forbid a detailed summary of the whole course. However, selected illustrations should provide an impression of the approaches used in this experimental effort. Museum replicas were used to stimulate thinking about physical evidence and promote skills in verbalization. For example, in one exercise each group of students was given an unidentified artifact and asked to associate it with an historic culture. The group had to be specific about the evidence used to reach its conclusion. When each group reported, others were encouraged to propose alternative interpretations of the same evidence. Some rather heated arguments occurred, as did embarrassing silences from singularly unimaginative and/or unprepared students.

Slides were sometimes employed in the same way, with students asked to identify slide content rather than having the instructor explicate as slides

were projected. Slides were used in several other ways too. Comparisons were made of the early stages of writing in several civilizations. Evidence could be shown for both the diffusionist and the independent invention theories of the spread of civilization. Students were given practice in the recognition and use of internal evidence; the overhead projector could also be employed in this fashion. And slides were used in examinations; enough emphasis and class time were devoted to slides to justify examination questions based upon slides projected during the examination.

Unidentified documents were used as both in-class and library exercises. Students were asked to date, locate, and identify events and persons mentioned in such documents. Since the document itself made no such identifications, the students had to proceed from clue to clue within the document, and utilize library resources to answer questions. Volunteer feedback from librarians let me know that students indeed immersed themselves in such projects, and examination questions were also based upon such exercises; students were asked to identify internal evidence that could be used to answer questions about the events and persons mentioned in them.

Attempts were made to understand both past and present by applying modern terminology to past events, and then proposing analogies between past and present.<sup>4</sup> The medieval knight, for example, can be regarded as a "weapons system." This warrior required support personnel; his equipment was expensive for society to maintain; and his fall from battlefield supremacy was in part the result of the introduction of cheaper weapons on a mass basis along with the democratization of warfare. Several different modern weapons systems offer rather obvious points of departure for classroom discussion of such phenomena, along with speculation about likely consequences on society when expensive, complex weapons systems are introduced. Society must often make hard decisions about various alternatives, and the medieval knight can be used to cast light on such alternatives.

Experimental World History sections died after a year. Why? It will gladden the heart of the historian to know that the causation was complex. Students quickly learned that this approach was more work than a normal section. Greater responsibility was placed upon the individual student. He could not be a passive observer in a lecture. Thus, the unprepared student was conspicuous in class. Many exercises were based on the assumption that the individual student actually read his assignment before coming to class. Such daily preparation was alien to university student psychology.

Experimental World History sections won approval from a tiny minority of more able students. Average and below average students gave scathing course evaluations. Those students who wanted to be fed a diet of "facts" that could be recalled for examination purposes and then promptly forgotten were unhappy with the whole approach. Similarly, many students did not take kindly to criticism of empty rhetoric. We are all familiar with the student who cheerfully engages in discussion void of meaning and purpose, who can argue and debate endlessly so long as he does not have to be bothered with learning anything. This type of student found experimental World History sections an uncomfortable environment.

Some exercises were flops. Their purpose was unclear, and students failed to profit from them in any way. Either because of structural flaws or poor procedure, no connection was made between the announced goals of the course and some individual exercises. Such exercises were buried along with the course.

Lastly, there were problems with other faculty members. One instructor cannot monopolize a classroom. The re-arranged room proved unpopular with

my colleagues. It was difficult to find volunteers willing to use the room. It was quietly restored to its previous configuration.

With few mourners, then, the experimental effort expired. Not all was lost. Many activities and units have been transferred in pure or modified form to other courses or to other World History sections. A few students did contact the instructor the following year to express their enthusiasm for the course. And one can learn from failure as well as success.

Several comfortable and uncomfortable conclusions could be drawn from the experience. Lecturing is a lot less work than the approach used in this experimental course. Instructors as well as students can get through a course with less effort the old way. Think for a moment about the memorable instructors and courses you have had yourself. How many of these involved skilled and eloquent lecturers? How many of the generally acknowledged leaders of our profession are known as good lecturers? When we all go to professional meetings, how often are we lectured to, and how often exposed to some other form of instruction?

The critical student and the critical public may loudly deplore what they perceive as boring traditional history, but when they buy books and watch "history" on TV, what attracts them is quite traditional history told with skill and a sense of excitement. The Morisons, Commagers, and McNeills in our profession have a far greater influence on society than the most ardent practitioners of New History.

The relative unpopularity of history on the campus today is probably far more dependent upon factors beyond the control of either the individual instructor or the profession at large than it is upon the skills and innovation we demonstrate. This is not to denigrate efforts at improvement, or to whimper "sour grapes." It is to acknowledge the influence of the job market and the unrealistic expectations too many students have about the immediate and financial gratifications expected of college education.

I retain my own enthusiasm for those goals I sought to implement in the experimental sections. I still think they encompass some of the main reasons we teach, and I still try to achieve those goals in my classes. However, I have lowered my expectations of what the typical student is willing to do in terms of effort to share in those goals.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Halvdan Koht, Driving Forces in History (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).

<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Heilbroner, The Future as History (New York, 1961).

<sup>3</sup>Herbert J. Muller, The Uses of the Past (New York, 1963).

<sup>4</sup>Such a procedure has obvious dangers. Caution must be used in such applications, and both students and instructor must be constantly aware of pitfalls and the fact that conclusions are never firm, only suggestive. It might also be noted that most students in my classes found Muller's book "too difficult."