

STUDENTS AS APPRENTICE HISTORIANS

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Teaching history on the undergraduate level is always a demanding and exacting task, but some challenges are much greater than others. There is the problem of how to set up an honors course, or what should be taught in the senior seminar. But perhaps the greatest challenge facing any teacher of history comes in planning for the introductory course. It is now moderately fashionable for historians to criticize the traditional survey course, which has too often been taught by the lecture method with students playing a decidedly passive role. When students leave their high schools and come to college, they quite rightly expect a significantly new experience. But this sometimes fails to materialize. Many students legitimately can complain that university survey courses in format are not unlike their high school courses, complete with lectures, bulky textbook, supplementary paperbacks, contrived discussions, and the predictable assortment of quizzes and papers. The quality of instruction is undoubtedly superior and the courses more intellectually challenging, but the survey approach is all too familiar to them.

In addition, there is another problem. Realistically, history teachers know that a large percentage of students in their introductory courses will never take any history beyond that level. To put it another way, whatever these students know about history throughout life will, in many cases, be largely formed on the basis of one or two intro courses. Consequently, many college history departments have a dual problem to solve: how to give students a significantly new experience; and what to include in the content of a course designed for those students who will never take any history beyond the introductory level.

The history department at Hamline University has responded to this challenge by creating a new one-term course, entitled "History 13: Historical Evidence and Analysis," the basic objective of which is to introduce students to the nature of history. It is not a required course, except for majors, and optimal class size is estimated at about twenty-five students. Introductory courses in Ancient history, American history, and Western Civilization are still offered for those who prefer the more traditional approach. The basic purpose of History 13 is not to teach students some history, but rather to allow them to explore what history is and what the historian does. By the end of the course, the students should have developed an understanding of the nature of our discipline, have mastered some of the methodologies of our craft, and have some idea of the philosophic problems involved in trying to recreate the past "exactly as it happened." The basic method to accomplish these goals is rather simple: make the students do what the practicing historian has to do. They have to gather evidence, analyze it, and write up the results of their research in a competent manner, always being sensitive to the larger philosophic questions involved in the quest for truth and accuracy.

Obviously, such a course cannot be taught in a vacuum; real documents emanating from a definable period of history must be used. We decided to build the course around the period 1919 to 1939. Several other possibilities were entertained, including the French Revolution, but it was felt that the interwar period had distinct advantages. First, it had moderately valid chronological limits, from one major conflict to another. Secondly, it is an exciting period of history, filled with many intriguing historical figures and highly dramatic events. Thirdly, we believed that it was necessary to select a period of history where many of the important documents were in English; hence our rejection of the French Revolution. Finally, this period of history had a central experience linking most Western nations together, the Great Depression, which would be useful for purposes of comparative history.

While members of the history department are in general agreement with the principles of the course, we all teach it in a different manner, often tailoring the course to meet our own interests and areas of expertise. The following is a description of how my sections are taught. The course is divided roughly into three segments. During the first part of the course students handle and analyze conventional historical documents, such as government publications, statutes, newspapers, memoirs, and journals. During the second part less conventional types of evidence are studied, as well as some of the methodologies employed by historians. Among the off-beat sources of evidence used are films, novels, paintings, tapestries, music, clothing, and oral history. In the final segment students read selected essays on the philosophic problems confronting historians, as the basis of class discussions.

During the course, students write six short papers and one moderately lengthy research paper. There is a decided emphasis on good writing, and it is impressed upon the students that historians must develop the facility to demonstrate at the very least a mechanical expertise of the language and at best a desire to write history in a pleasing and artistic manner. An entire class period is always set aside for returning papers. My usual procedure is first to comment on the grammatical errors, then discuss the content of the assignment, and finally solicit comments and discussion. The fact that an entire class period is devoted to the return of papers, which have extended comments on them, leads students to take their own work more seriously. The course evaluation forms consistently show that students are surprised and flattered that their ideas and literary style were subjected to such extensive scrutiny and commentary.

There is a deliberate attempt while the course is in progress to create an atmosphere where class time is played down in importance. Students are told that the most important work will be done outside the classroom: in the library, in the viewing auditorium, in the community at large, and in consultation with me in the office. Classes are treated as a convenient meeting time where assignments can be set up or papers returned, and when discussions can be held occasionally. The idea is to make students work, not merely occupy certain chairs at certain times of the week.

It has already been remarked that the first part of the course is devoted to the use of more traditional types of evidence. Students are always made to work with actual documents in the library. Published readers and workbooks which tend to reduce all types of documents to uniform print are avoided, since they create artificial working conditions, are often dreary and oppressive in appearance, and deprive students of the excitement and pleasure that comes with handling the actual documents under normal circumstances. The format employed is usually to have students read from these sources and then have one or two class periods devoted to a discussion of the advantages and limitations of each type of historical source. For example, students are required to read a newspaper for a period covering three consecutive months during the Hoover administration. Then a discussion ensues: What is the function of a newspaper? How trustworthy are reporters? How reliable is a newspaper as a source of historical evidence? What are the most valuable sections of a paper? The discussion invariably reveals that students exaggerate the importance of the front page and editorial page, and either underestimate or ignore the value of the women's section, comic strips, obituaries, sports, and advertisements. Students are delighted to find out that historians are not completely wedded to political and diplomatic history, but attach importance to what went on in the streets as well as in the palaces.

The second part of the course, which is decidedly the most popular, and lasts for approximately six weeks, deals with the less conventional sources of

evidence. Many of the discussions and written assignments again center around the advantages and limitations of these sources. Here the student deals with films, tapestries, music, clothing, paintings, photographs, and oral history. It does not take students long to realize that modern technology with its computers, sophisticated cameras, and electronic recording equipment has created a whole new range of research opportunities. Students learn that an historian must be rather imaginative in tracking down sources, and that it is necessary to be visually perceptive and mechanically able. Needless to say, visual aids are an integral part of this section of the course. In order to teach this phase efficiently, it is helpful to establish close ties with museums, theatres, and art galleries, both on campus and in the community at large.

The third part of the course deals with the historiographic and philosophic issues facing the historian. Often a book of readings is used, such as Leonard Marsak's The Nature of Historical Inquiry, so that the students can broaden their understanding of the issues, with the articles serving as a focal point during discussions. It is in this part of the course that basic philosophic questions are discussed: What is a fact? What is a cause? Can history be scientific? Are there laws in history? The advantage of leaving this section to the end is that the students can discuss these topics from experience and not simply in theoretical terms, since they have already completed a number of assignments. A chemistry major in class can be asked whether the techniques that she uses in the laboratory are different from those she used when researching and writing her history paper. A student who is an art major can be asked whether he thinks that history is an art too, and the entire class can benefit from this dialogue. The pedagogical goal here is to convince students that, whether they realize it or not, their research and papers are based upon certain philosophic premises which in turn are conditioned by their cultural milieu. The better they understand this, the more accurate or at least the more honest their recreation of the past will be.

It already has been mentioned that the students usually have to write approximately seven papers. I do not wish to go into detail for each assignment, but I will select a few examples and discuss those. One problem that faces historians is the periodization of history: When do events begin and end? In this course one can ask the question: When did the Great Depression begin? The students are given a list of over one hundred periodicals available in our library, which were published during the inter-war period. They are asked to select three journals from this list and determine the exact date when each of those journals recognized for the first time that a depression was indeed upon the country. Invariably, two or three students using the same journal will not agree upon the date, and then they must settle their differences in front of the class. Some of the more imaginative students do not rely exclusively upon the editorial content of their periodicals, but trace the beginnings of the depression by noting a decrease in price, a shift in what is advertised, a poorer grade of paper, fewer pictures and plates, or a reduction in number of pages.

This assignment is then followed by a written assignment in which students are asked to utilize economic statistics in order to determine the origins of the Depression. In this assignment, they must use two sets of statistics, perhaps to include GNP, unemployment, bankruptcies, or new housing starts. The two statistics almost never match up and students have to explain what an historian should do in that case. They are further encouraged to compare this information with what they uncovered in the case of periodicals. The results are often confusing to the students, and some of them are tempted to make rash judgments or even fiddle with their numbers, but it is a good lesson in the difficulties of periodization. They see that even economic statistics, often

regarded as highly objective evidence, cannot always yield exact answers, and it is impressed upon the students that, if they cannot determine the date of the Great Depression with any exactitude, then how much more difficult it is when trying to determine the dates for the decline of the Roman Empire or the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

The written assignments for the unconventional sources often revolve around their advantages and limitations as well. One obvious assignment is to let the students view a documentary film on, say, the Warsaw Ghetto or the life of Winston Churchill. The students are then asked to write a short paper on the value of motion picture film as a source of historical evidence, and they are further encouraged to make comparisons between film and more conventional types of evidence on the same topic.

Another assignment deals with music as a source of historical evidence. First, there is a demonstration in class of how music can be of value to the historian. I play a selection of various types of songs and solicit discussion after each recording. For example, I try to demonstrate the value of folk songs for immigrant history, cowboy ballads for western history, and the blues for Black history. As for the written assignment, I first make up two cassette tapes, each having six different songs on them, and place them on reserve in the library. The students have to listen to one of these tapes and then write a lengthy paragraph on each song, commenting on its value to the historian and trying to discern whether the lyrics and melody give some special insight into the culture of the period. This past year I put together the following selections, trying to insure that a wide range of songs and variety of topics were represented. On one tape were "Coming Into Los Angeles" by Arlo Guthrie; "Paddy Works on the Railroad" by Pete Seeger; "Heil Hitler Dir" by the Berlin Sturmabteilungen; "Take Me Back to My Boots and Saddle" by Roy Rogers; "Mercedes Benz" by Janis Joplin; and "Miss America Pie" by Don McLain. On the other tape were: Joan Baez, "We Shall Overcome;" the "Horst Wessel Lied;" Helen Reddy, "I Am Woman;" Pete Seeger, "Little Boxes;" Vera Lynn, "There'll Always be an England;" and Neil Young, "The Needle and the Damage Done." Any instructor who has used such an assignment will attest to the fact that it is terribly time consuming to put the tapes together. If your knowledge of modern music is limited, it will be necessary to solicit help from students and local rock-and-roll radio stations.

The major written assignment in the course is a research paper in which students have to examine how the Great Depression affected some aspect of state or local history. They must use primary sources and include at least one interview with a person who lived through the event. Among the topics selected by students over the years are the Minneapolis Police Department, the First National Bank of St. Paul, Two Harbors High School, St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch, the Minnesota State Fair, Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, Como Park and Zoo, Winona State College, Goodwill Industries of St. Paul, Buerkle Buick New Car Dealership, a shoe store in Sheboygan, a farm in North Dakota, and a small town in southern Minnesota. The obvious advantage of this assignment is that seldom are monographs written on such parochial topics, and therefore students are forced to piece together their own history from the documents, usually unpublished. It has the further advantage of getting students off campus and forcing them to play the role of an archivist while searching out their documents. When setting up this assignment, students are given very detailed and extensive instructions so that, when they approach city hall, school districts, state agencies, churches, and private companies, they know what to do, what to ask for, and how to deal with people in a courteous and efficient manner.

Student evaluation forms and casual comments reveal that this assignment is by far the most demanding and the most popular. Students appear to show

no resentment about doing a great deal of work and travelling off campus. What is particularly rewarding is to see students catching on to what kinds of documents they should be looking for, and they quickly discern the reasons why some organizations refuse to release certain documents of a sensitive nature. They find that interviewing people can be pleasant as well as informative. After returning their papers, I always set aside at least one class period so that students can share with one another what was most discouraging and most enjoyable about doing this assignment. After spending much of the term being on the telephone, waiting in offices, dealing with irascible archivists, interviewing pompous or senile people, driving back and forth from the depositories, and lugging heavy boxes around, students lose forever their stereotyped image of the historian as some kind of mossback who sits comfortably slouched over books in the library.

For the final exam, I usually try to devise an assignment where students can bring into play all the skills and information they have accumulated over the term. One year I had students read Erich von Daniken's Chariots of the Gods?, asking them to evaluate the author's dubious hypothesis that the earth was once visited by ancient astronauts. By then they had a good deal of experience handling the kinds of evidence that von Daniken relies upon: paintings, conventional documents, aerial photography, epic poems and legends, and quantified data. They had to judge how skillfully--or recklessly--von Daniken uses evidence in order to prove his case. The final exam consisted of two items: a journal and an essay. The journal recorded the method they employed in evaluating the author's evidence. This journal was kept on a daily basis, recording what portions of the book they read, immediate reaction to these passages, conversations with friends and faculty, ideas that popped into their heads, additional readings they may have done, any trips or interviews or telephone calls relevant to the book. After they read the book and analyzed the evidence, they wrote a short paper giving their overall evaluation of the book.

Another type of final is to hand students a packet of documents during the scheduled exam period and ask them to write a biography of some famous historical figure, such as Hitler, Stalin, or Churchill. Among the documents used are excerpts from Who's Who, memoirs (reliable and unreliable), speeches, poems, novels, report cards, periodicals, diplomatic dispatches, and newspaper interviews. They are told not to get bogged down into a simple recital of facts and dates, but to try to capture the quality of this person and those factors and personality traits which account for greatness or evil genius. Some of the sources are identified for students, but in most cases they have to identify the nature and value of their sources by doing some skillful historical detective work. Their grade is determined by the skill with which they use their sources, the informative nature of their biography, and their writing ability.

The course as outlined above does have limitations, and it is best to state these rather frankly. First, it is difficult to organize the course and make all assignments mesh smoothly. While I do try to stay within the limits of the inter-war period, it is sometimes necessary to utilize another period of history for an assignment, and this can upset the student's sense of chronology. For example, students probably should be exposed to the value of tapestries, brass rubbings, and woodcuts as sources of visual historical evidence, but obviously these appear out of place in a course dealing with the twentieth century. Second, the students are not exposed to the sweep and scope of history as they would be in a survey course. Third, there is a danger of the course degenerating into "pop history" and becoming too gimmicky, thereby misleading students into believing that history is without integrity and intellectual rigor. Fourth, the course can never hope to deal with all types of evidence

and methodologies, and so the instructor must cope with the problem of what to omit. Fifth, the course has a built-in bias towards social history and will displease instructors who believe in the value of political, military, and diplomatic history. Finally, it has to be faced that many of the assignments cannot be done on a very sophisticated level, since the clientele is usually eighteen-year-old freshmen; some may believe legitimately that either an assignment should be done at the highest level of competence or not done at all.

However, despite these limitations and the trade-offs involved, this course has much to recommend it. Evaluation forms reveal that students appreciate the departure from the lecture-survey format. By and large, they tend to prefer the multiplicity of written assignments as opposed to wading through ponderous textbooks and readers. In the course, they develop substantial skills in writing and research, and they, as well as their faculty advisors, are not unaware of the fact that these skills have considerable "transfer value" and will serve them in good stead in other courses, particularly in the social sciences. Many have remarked on the evaluation forms that they have become decidedly more imaginative in collecting evidence, of finding valuable historical information in sources they previously believed "frivolous," such as advertisements, pop music, clothing fashions, and women's magazines. They find it more logical to do original research on a topic not previously written upon than to write a term paper on a subject which has been gone over by dozens if not hundreds of professional historians. Finally, many have quite unashamedly admitted that they found an exhilaration and romance in the historical method that they never knew existed.

For the historian, teaching this course yields much satisfaction. It weans students away from playing a passive role in their education: they do not listen to an historian but participate actively in the reconstruction of history. In the course they acquire considerable skills in how to collect, analyze, and synthesize evidence, and it is much more logical to teach these skills on the introductory level than to wait until the senior year and teach them in a research seminar. Students learn that history is not a conservative discipline, but utilizes a good deal of modern technology and is also disposed towards applying other disciplines, such as sociology, mathematics, and psychology, in order to better understand the past. From their own experience, they find out that an historian must possess a rare combination of qualities: patience, politeness, imagination, shrewdness, intelligence, and a good deal of physical energy. But perhaps the strongest argument in favor of this course is that it largely eliminates the possibility of committing the classic mistake when teaching history: assuming that students know what history is simply because they have taken a history course.