

SELF-PACED INSTRUCTION IN HISTORY
ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

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Self-paced instruction (SPI) and its use in teaching the humanities have drawn increasing interest from historians as convention papers and journal articles have explained experimental applications. Similarly, debate over the suitability of SPI in a discipline such as history has grown with the attention being given to the technique. We would like to share the results from five years of SPI in a variety of history courses in several major subject areas. Detailed outlines of models for structuring such courses may be found readily elsewhere, but our practical experience over an extended period may also be beneficial to historians investigating the advantages and the limitations of the method.¹

Since the founding of the University of Texas of the Permian Basin in 1973, the administrative officers have stressed the teaching role of the faculty at the university. They decided in advance of hiring faculty to adopt SPI in every subject (though not in all courses) and endorsed the term "self-paced instruction" to describe the teaching technique they wished to implement: the instructors organizing courses in advance and the students proceeding through the materials at their own rates of progress. Although there are differences, SPI is similar to other systems variously described as mastery learning, learning management systems, competency-based learning, criteria-based education, programmed instruction, and personalized system of instruction.

The terms of the debate over SPI were drawn during training sessions which were conducted when the initial faculty arrived. Clashes among faculty members frequently centered over the issue of predetermined behavioral objectives: whether cognitive education goals--understanding, critical thinking, and creativity--could be specified in advance and measured. Some individuals argued that they could not be and that SPI merely manipulated students and constantly required memorization. Claiming that they could be, other professors insisted that all teachers have subjective expectations for student achievement, even if they do not bother to figure out and formulate them formally.²

Whether skeptical or enthusiastic, the faculty learned about the SPI technique of teaching structured around five basic steps:

- (1) Objectives: what students should be able to do;
- (2) Activities: the activities through which competency will be attained;
- (3) Rationale: how and why the activities will lead to the objectives;
- (4) Criteria: the means of measuring acceptable performance;
- (5) Assessment: the determination of the degree of competency.³

The training sessions also revealed that many of the humanists resented what they saw as an attack on their disciplines by behavioralists. They could not believe that the beauty of the language of Shakespeare could be conveyed by an apparently mechanistic method that might be applicable in a math course, and they started their classes yearning mainly for a simple room with a blackboard and chalk and for some students who would occasionally come to sit and listen there. The debate over SPI has continued since 1973 at UT-Permian, but practical experience has led to an awareness of its advantages and limitations.

To begin with favorable results, students have found that SPI helps to make obtaining their education easier. Although there is housing on campus, most of the students commute from their homes in Odessa, its twin city of Midland twenty miles away, and other surrounding towns. Whether commuters or not, they like to attend courses only on days that provide a convenient overall schedule.

They choose SPI options when traditionally taught courses conflict with desired attendance schedules, with part-time employment, or with a required course. Continuous or rolling enrollment in SPI also allows flexibility in planning programs. Students may register either before or after the beginning of a semester, which cannot be done with traditional courses. They often begin a class at mid-term with no intention of completing it during that semester. Or they may concentrate on accelerating their rate of progress in one SPI course and, upon completion, enroll immediately in another.⁴

Students have made clear that they like the organizational structure of SPI courses. They like to know fully and unambiguously from the beginning what the instructor's requirements and expectations are. They can examine beforehand what they are getting into with SPI. Moreover, students read and study by schedules that they determine anyway, regardless of what the instructor in a traditional course may urge. They have found that they waste time in a learning process that is not coordinated, for example listening to a lecture a week before they do the corresponding reading. In SPI they can decide when they wish to meet for an individual consultation with the instructor, a regular requirement of most such courses. Finally, students in every sort of class typically worry about grades. SPI is usually structured so that at least part and sometimes all of the assignments need not be failed but rather may be revised until satisfactory mastery (often C-level) of the materials has been attained. Learning based on demonstrating competency and not on overcoming hurdles has helped to lessen tensions about both failure and grades.⁵

SPI has definite advantages for the members of the history faculty who choose to offer such instruction. Most importantly, the quality and effectiveness of teaching has improved because SPI requires instructors to know and to be able to convey what they and their students are trying to accomplish. Clearly formulated objectives and requirements must be thought out in advance and incorporated in writing directly into the organizational structure of the course. Many instructors, who orally assign tasks with nothing more than hope that somehow students will divine what is supposed to be done, would be surprised by the insights gained simply from practice in writing assignments. This attention to purpose has carried over into clearer and better organization, lectures, and assignments in traditionally taught courses as well, an unexpected but important indirect result of the SPI experience.

Many instructors have found that they receive more beneficial feedback about the effectiveness of their teaching in SPI than in traditional courses. Logic would seem to indicate otherwise, since they are in contact with students regularly in the classroom and only occasionally in SPI. The contact in SPI, however, is not merely a casual remark upon entering or leaving a lecture hall. Rather, students are required to seek direct, individual consultation with the instructor, thereby providing a close means of monitoring the progress and problems of both the students and the course. The instructor has the free time for such consultations, as well as for other professional work, because the SPI course has been organized since the beginning of the semester and thereafter does not demand much further preparation or time in the classroom. Here too there has been some beneficial carry over to traditional instruction, such as requiring a meeting with each student regarding certain assignments. The constant feedback about the effectiveness of the course materials and tasks allows instructors, once they have a basically sound structure developed, to make minor adjustments relatively easily before offering the course again.

What about the actual subject matter of history? Both authors originally knew nothing about SPI. Since 1973, however, we have taught separate classes of the same subject by SPI and traditional instruction at the same time, enrolled students together under both teaching methods in the same course, and designed special courses only for SPI. We are satisfied that it has done no

harm to the subject matter. In fact, SPI has assisted us in introducing our fields successfully to students, some of whom could not have been reached by traditional instruction. Our records indicate that, overall, students have learned as much and performed as well under SPI as under traditional methods, with the will of the individual remaining a more important determinant than the teaching technique.

SPI has served the history discipline at UT-Permian by drawing students into its courses. Students with deficient backgrounds, usually lacking part or all of the two semesters of American history required in Texas, can enroll in a SPI course at UT-Permian, which is an upper-level institution, without having to compete directly with more advanced students and history majors. This allows the discipline to create an environment of good will while its courses are being used to meet state requirements. Otherwise, the students frequently would have to be sent back to a community college for their credits. Similarly, individuals without previous training in history are not at a disadvantage in SPI introductory surveys in colleges which offer such instruction. SPI courses on interesting subjects also attract students for elective credits when otherwise they would be reluctant to enroll. And SPI draws additional people to history by making it easier for them to schedule courses without time conflicts and easier for the discipline to prevent the overlapping of history courses themselves. The advantages to the discipline are shown clearly by enrollment statistics: one-fifth of the history courses are self-paced, but they draw one-third of the history students, including individuals who would not be there without SPI.

The institution as a whole has also gained from SPI. Administrative officers originally wanted approximately one-third of all courses to be SPI, but the percentage that emerged has been closer to one-fifth, with the figure varying considerably among the disciplines but still showing the institution's firm commitment to SPI. Advantages have accrued in alleviating overloading in limited classroom space at the most popular hours and in allowing regular faculty to teach as part of their course load classes that ordinarily would be scheduled at night, at increased expense for operating the physical plant and for paying part-time or extension faculty. Most importantly, the university through SPI has expanded the educational services that it offers and has attracted a larger number of students as a result. Each year there have been students who have chosen to come to UT-Permian rather than to one of several nearby institutions because it provided SPI. Again, these were individuals who would not have enrolled otherwise. SPI has enhanced the ability of the university to serve students and has increased enrollment without any negative repercussions for the relations of the institution with the community at large.

Thus far it has been shown that SPI offers major advantages for the students, the faculty, the discipline, and the institution. Important limitations, however, also have become associated with SPI history courses. While it has been possible to overcome or, at least, to mitigate some of these disadvantages, others have remained problems despite considerable attention to them and may well be inherent to self-pacing.

Students have encountered several significant difficulties with SPI. First of all, self-pacing requires a maturity and self-discipline that many individuals lack. At the beginning of a semester, some students optimistically register for more hours of credit than they realistically can expect to master. They typically enroll in three or four conventional and one or two SPI courses. Students with an overload tend to complete their conventional courses but to stop work on their SPI because of the absence of deadlines or penalties for failure to finish. This lack of goal attainment understandably leaves them very frustrated. Not uncommonly, half of the individuals registering for SPI in history fail to complete the work by the end of the initial semester. This

situation has been alleviated, but not solved, by the setting of target completion dates for each unit. The target dates have been inserted into course syllabi to suggest to students the desirability of not procrastinating and putting off assignments.⁶

A tendency to uneven performance also has been a problem for individuals taking SPI. Some students do certain units very well and others quite poorly. Inferior work frequently occurs when they are rushing to complete several units at the end of the semester. Also, several weeks and even months can conceivably pass between the time a student finishes one unit and begins work on the next. Such breaks in the continuity of the learning process are usually undesirable, especially when a task has been designed to incorporate skill developments or informational relationships covered in a previous assignment. To overcome these closely related problems, some instructors not only use target due dates but also place limits on the number of units that may be turned in during the last two weeks of a semester. Both corrective measures are intended to provide additional guidance, to encourage systematic progress in the learning process, and to uphold standards expected for performance.

Meetings with the instructor on a regular basis are an important part of the self-paced concept, but such consultations often are not easily arranged. Instructors and students may not be on campus at mutually convenient times. Unfortunately, this means that some individuals must do without the instructor's explanation of an important but unfamiliar point at the moment when they most need the assistance. Since some self-paced tasks are designed in such a way that students will be better able to perform them after consultations with their instructors, individuals who rarely if ever meet with them face a considerable handicap. To cope with this problem, many professors attempt to schedule office hours to serve the widest possible number of students. Others hold optional biweekly discussion sessions. These meetings also help to overcome another disadvantage of SPI, the inability of students to participate in and benefit from group discussion.

A disadvantage has emerged for students not completing SPI by the end of the semester. They must re-register and pay again in order to receive credit in the semester when the course work ultimately is finished. Aside from taking steps designed to encourage completion, instructors are unable to do anything about this problem of double tuition jeopardy.⁷ The rules of the University of Texas system and the state College Coordinating Board were established originally to govern conventional courses only and, unfortunately, have failed to make adequate allowance for the peculiar needs of SPI.

Faculty members also must contend with certain significant disadvantages. The initial preparation of a SPI package demands much time and effort, usually during the faculty member's vacation because the syllabus has to be ready for the beginning of the semester. Even after a course has been offered successfully for a semester or two, certain minor changes are usually necessary in its structure to eliminate problems which have occurred. Also, as with conventional instruction, reading lists and assignments must be modified and updated periodically, but such revisions in SPI frequently require more clerical busy work because of the more complicated nature of the syllabus. While teaching SPI tends to take less time overall than a conventional course, there are days, often at the end of the semester, when the instructor becomes inundated with papers from students trying to finish the course and turning in the assignments for several units at once. Too frequently the SPI burden falls not evenly throughout the semester but disproportionately at those times when instructors are already overloaded.

Many faculty members frankly do not enjoy SPI as a method of teaching. They find it personally far less rewarding and stimulating than conventional classes. They miss the interplay of ideas and personalities which takes place in lecture and seminar courses. The optional biweekly meetings help alleviate the problem of the lack of personal contact, as do the individual conferences. Still, for many in SPI the intangible rewards of teaching remain fewer than in conventional instruction. Moreover, some faculty members tend to resist trying new teaching methods and restructuring their course materials. Consequently, the responsibility of developing and teaching SPI often rests exclusively with a few members of a history department.

SPI instructors frequently are exploited by not receiving credit in their course loads for teaching students who carry over SPI into a subsequent semester. As has been explained, students have the right to continue to re-register until they have completed an SPI study, regardless of whether the instructor is again offering that particular course. Professors are obligated to meet with such individuals and grade their papers even though they receive no credit for the work. Conceivably, if there were enough enrollments to form a course, which does occasionally occur, the instructor could include it as part of his regular load. In practice this usually cannot be done, however, because teaching schedules must be determined long before the beginning of the semester, when it can first be learned how many such carry-overs there will be.

Important aspects of the discipline of history simply do not lend themselves to SPI. Certain courses and instructional techniques by their natures cannot be successfully self-paced. This is true of undergraduate seminars and of most graduate study with the exception of directed readings. The stimulation and enjoyment which most students receive from listening to an exciting lecturer provide an invaluable educational experience that can never be gained through SPI. Moreover, much of the subject matter of history cannot be reduced to an objective, quantifiable behavioral science. The discipline is, after all, a humanity that requires subjective analysis and interpretation, even when the quantitative approach is being used. Therefore, the objectives, the structure, and the assignments of SPI must be carefully formulated to insure that the technique is not allowed to determine the content. Rather, it is essential to shape the methodology to serve the discipline.

SPI has created internal administrative problems for the institution. There will always be some students who register for SPI solely to bring their credit hours to the level necessary to collect either veteran's benefits or scholarship money. Since deadlines for SPI by definition must be flexible, students who have no intention whatsoever of doing the work often cannot be identified. As a result, the institution can be held responsible by outside sources of funds, such as the Veterans Administration, for failure to monitor adequately enrollment requirements and benefit payments. The registrar and the deans charged with such responsibilities have no satisfactory means for fulfilling them. No foolproof solution to the problem of ghost enrollees has yet been found, nor is one likely to be. SPI has also complicated the registrar's job. The registrar's office has had to devise methods to make possible continuous SPI enrollment and to allow students to carry over such courses from one semester to another. Consequently, paperwork has been increased substantially. 8

An institutional commitment to SPI requires additional materials and competent support staffs to produce instructional packages. It is sometimes difficult to get the clerical and printing personnel to prepare the more extensive syllabi and assignments required for SPI. Problems can develop because of the lack of trained individuals to process special materials, such as video tapes. Furthermore, expensive audio and video tape recorders may be unavailable or broken when students request them. One colleague was

understandably alarmed to learn that a member of the library staff inadvertently had erased an oral presentation which he had taped for SPI students.⁹

Institutions considering the adoption of SPI as an important component of their instructional program should be aware of one further possible disadvantage. At public universities in Texas, semester credit hours, which are the basis for institutional funding, are calculated differently for SPI than for conventional courses. For reasons best known to members of the state legislature, six students enrolled in SPI are regarded as the equivalent of five students under traditional instruction. In order not to be canceled, an SPI course is required to draw a minimum of twelve individuals while a conventional class needs only ten. An institutional commitment to SPI can be better implemented from the beginning if the applicable rules do not penalize instructional innovation.

In assessing the overall value of SPI in history, the advantages, of course, must be carefully weighed against the limitations. Based on our five years of experience, we believe that, by modifying the pure concept of self-pacing, we have compensated for many of the shortcomings of SPI. The teaching technique that has resulted falls somewhere in between the behaviorally oriented course and the traditional lecture class. We find that the experience gained from self-pacing also has made us more effective teachers in conventional courses that are now better organized. Self-paced instruction has become an important part of our undergraduate history curriculum that is regarded as worthwhile by all parties concerned--the students, the faculty, the discipline, and the institution. It complements traditional lecture and seminar discussion classes but certainly does not replace them.

NOTES

¹ See Barry K. Beyer, "Self-Paced Learning in Undergraduate History: From Theory into Practice," The History Teacher, X (August, 1977), 549-573. For bibliographical references on SPI see ibid., 570-573, and James N. Olson, Robert N. Rothstein, and Steven Kaufman, "College Students Completion of Course Work: A Comparison of Individualized and Traditional Methods of Instruction," In-Ed, V (September, 1977), 6-7.

² Andre Joseph, "To Self-Pace or Not to Self-Pace," In-Ed, VI (April, 1976), 1. See Robert F. Mager, Goal Analysis, and Preparing Instructional Objectives (Belmont, California, 1972); Henry H. Walbesser, Constructing Behavioral Objectives (College Park, Maryland, 1970).

³ Joseph, "To Self-Pace or Not to Self-Pace," 1.

⁴ A. Woody Keith, "A Registrar's View of Self-Paced Instruction," In-Ed, IX (September, 1974), 1-3.

⁵ See Beyer, "Self-Paced Learning in Undergraduate History," 552, 561, 565; Joel Asbury, "Self-Paced Instruction from a Student's Viewpoint," In-Ed, I (May, 1974), 2-3.

⁶ Ibid., 1-2; Olson, Rothstein, and Kaufman, "College Students Completion of Course Work," 2-5; Beyer, "Self-Paced Learning in Undergraduate History," 566-567.

⁷ Keith, "A Registrar's View of Self-Paced Instruction," 2-3.

⁸ See ibid., 3.

⁹ Joel Greenspoon, "Staff Support in Individualized Instruction," In-Ed., V (December, 1976), 1-3.