WESTERN CIV: STUDENTS, STRUCTURES, AND STRATEGIES

Frederic A. Youngs, Jr.
Louisiana State University

That the western civ survey is fraught with difficulties, both in concept and in practice, is certain. If one is equally convinced, however, that the course is indispensable for the college student as an element of great importance in the student's acculturation, then one must squarely face the difficulties and seek to find in them solutions and strategies for success. What follows is one approach based on the conviction that the structure of historical understanding can be a most helpful tool in making the course more manageable and more challenging.

The major objections to the study of western civ can be briefly stated.

Objection 1: Our students are ill prepared and historically unaware. They are uninterested in history, have retained little of what was presented in high school, and do not know how to go about "doing history."

Objection 2[1]: Our universities and colleges often compound the difficulty of the course. Legislatures adopt formula funding which results in overly large classes; there are curricular complications within the university; and often support facilities for teaching are sadly lacking.

Objection 3: The resources available for teaching western civ are often sadly lacking. Textbooks are often too long or too superficial; it is hard to find supplementary books which are neither too detailed nor too brief; and visual aids are often ill-suited or sophomoric.

Objection 4: Western civ is often a blur of seemingly unending facts among which the students become hopelessly lost. Students cannot cope with four thousand years of "one damn thing after another."

Objection 5: Testing and evaluation is hopelessly difficult. How many of us could excel if tested on all those facts?

Objection 6: Instructors are not trained in each and every time period or often in teaching techniques. Given the flood of published history, we are facing an impossible task in trying to keep up with our own specialties, a task compounded many times over if we are to keep up with all the specialties which together constitute "western civ."

The proper starting point is found, of course, in objection 1, the students. What do we really mean when we say the students are "unprepared"? We often mean in general that they lack study skills--on the first day of class I have seen over half the class sheepishly put their hands up when asked who did no real studying the last two years of high school--but certainly we do not refer to how few "facts" they know. Do we not really mean that they lack skills in determining the "what" of history (the important factual events as selected from the trivial), the "where" (the importance of geographical settings), the "when" (the relations between the time and character of two different periods), and the "who" (the role and importance of personality in shaping historical eras)? Fraught with these deficiencies, they fall far short of what we reasonably expect of their skills in analysis and interpretation, the "why" of history. But in each instance, are we not really saying that the students have not yet grasped the structure of our discipline, or even grasped that it has a structure of understanding? Nearly every other discipline in which a freshman enrolls has a recognizable structure, whether in grammar or literature, in mathematics or science, or in foreign languages. History's "unobvious" structure and the nature of the students' lack of preparation dictates, in my opinion, that we

must help them deal with the structure of history in its two forms, chronology and analysis.

Therefore, I deal first in the survey with the structure of chronology and analysis, letting the students know that their main goal is to learn skills in historical understanding and then to apply them to the matter at hand, the history of western Europe. Borrowing in part from excellent studies of social science concepts, in part from an appreciation of how well-written histories proceed, and in part from my own attempt to understand that type of exposition which best leads to a grasp of the essentials of a subject, I present the major forms of analysis. I explain that we seek an understanding of six aspects of civilization: first, politics and the flow of events; second, the structures and practices of governmental institutions; third, the organization of society and how people function within it; fourth, the economy in which men and women earn a living; fifth, the role of religion; and sixth, the intellectual and artistic expressions of cultures.

Each of these six main areas is then subdivided into a few constituent parts. About religion, for example, I suggest that we want to understand four things: the beliefs people have about God; the types of worship and religious practices which flow from the beliefs; the manner in which churches and other religious groups are organized; and the relationship between religion and the secular states. Culture is to be studied in three aspects: the written word (literature), artistic media (painting and music for example), and monuments (architecture). As to the economy, I set forth five categories of economic activities in pre-industrial societies: agriculture, commerce and trading, manufacturing, transportation, and finance.

The goal of this introduction is to help the student see that history has to be broken down into "pieces" before one can hope to see the entire picture later. It is impossible to be able to compare one society with another, or to appreciate why events unfolded in a particular manner, unless one has in mind a manner of understanding which systematizes and analyzes. Because the process has been explained in the abstract, one begins to see how to approach the study of different societies without a premature consideration of this or that society in its individuality.

One must also deal with the structure of chronology. Let me take an example from the introduction to the unit on the nineteenth century, where I take fifty minutes of class time to discuss the possible meanings of "revolution." I ask nearly every student what ideas come to mind when the word "revolution" is mentioned, while two students record the answers in random fashion on the blackboard. After a good bit of cajoling, spurred by questions on familiar "revolutions" such as America's, we usually get thirty to forty phrases on the board. I then invite them to group these into categories. Eventually we arrive at seven aspects: the causes (distinguishing long-term and immediate); the nature of the revolution (was it mainly political with social aspects such as the French Revolution, or primarily economic with social and governmental ramifications such as the Industrial Revolution?); the stages through which the revolution moved over the years; the participants (the leaders, extent of popular participation, and the like); the means (revolutionary tactics, propaganda, and symbolism, among others); the concomitants (violence? opposition?); and the results (again, long-term and immediate). It would have been easier to lecture on all of this, but the process lets the student see how knowledge is ordered, and what they should look for as events are studied.

It seems to me that the western civ survey is the ideal setting for an approach such as this--it is a course which offers more than the American history survey or even a world civ approach. There is a time span long enough to provide real contrast: One can compare the experiences of both the Greeks

and the Romans while still working within the framework of ancient people, or see the contrast between the values of the twelfth century achievements and of the later renaissance while still considering medieval societies. There is enough diversity of times, areas, eras, and people to allow the student to see that understanding chronology and analysis in the abstract allows real insights regardless of whether one looks at the first century A.D., or at the sixteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth centuries. Yet western civ works within the framework of one context alone, the western European setting, so that the basic chronological framework works for all people, nations, and cultures within it.

If, as I suggest, we have placed a great deal of emphasis on chronology and analysis as means for historical understanding, then there are four consequences--which together in my opinion deal with many of the objections to western civ posed earlier. These consequences arise in the areas of the content of the course, the texts and assigned readings, testing, and the instructor's own personal preparation.

When one introduces the student to the structures of historical understanding, it follows logically that one must set aside rather more time for case studies of very special periods in the western experience and pass rather more quickly over others. The content of the course becomes a means to an end rather than facts as an end in themselves. Textbooks of their nature must be "balanced," giving nearly equal time to most periods. The instructor, of course, has no such ideal imposed but is instead free to spend his or her time to make selections so that the content serves an educational goal. Therefore, when I want to provide a case study of the techniques of chronology, I choose, for example, two periods of Roman history, the fall of the Republic in the first century B.C. and the problem of keeping the Empire together against great opposition in the fourth century A.D. After we spend a good deal of time on "what happened," we then have the opportunity to compare the nature of the problems in the two periods--the question of leadership, or the problems in integrating non-Roman elements, or the types of literature which each period produced. When dealing at a later time with early modern Europe, one can compare the similarities and differences in the development of nation states in France, England, and Spain--three chronological threads which can then be re-evaluated within the context of what it meant in the European existence to move from the medieval to the early modern eras. The students have known from the very first day of class what the themes are for each unit, and thus know where to concentrate their attention--with less fear of being responsible for "learning everything."

The second consequence of the structural approach has to do with the resources for the course. I tried once to teach the course without a textbook, but proved to myself (and to the students, unfortunately) that the movement of events of such a long span of time creates the need for a guide in a chronological framework. In my own experiences, first as a co-author and general editor of a textbook in British history, and then as a general editor of a revision of a textbook in western civ, I have found that textbooks must be chronological rather than analytical to help the student. But I have also come to believe that the textbook should be very brief and only one of a number of types of readings: The text provides the chronological thread, introducing eras, institutions, and values, while additional assigned readings provide the material for a fuller study of chronology and analysis. I try to make each additional assigned book of a different type, with one on politics, another on society, and another of a cultural nature. The use of authors writing on the same period but with different approaches and different emphases means that the student, with guidance, begins to develop skills of comparison, criticism, and above all, the reconstruction of a part of the past. When one adds audio-visual materials, a must in the consideration of social and cultural themes, then one adds a visual dimension to the written dimension gleamed from different writers.

The third consequence of the structural approach has to do with testing. If the goal has been to develop skills in handling chronological periods and in analysis, then how else to test except by essay questions? I do not mean to say that objective questions do not have a place: They are exceptionally useful as study items before a major exam, since their use allows the student to pre-test his or her grasp of the basic necessary facts. But the major examinations are another matter, and should be, in my opinion, exercises in historical reconstruction, a putting back together into a coherent whole the separate pieces seen variously in lectures, discussions, visual presentations, assigned readings, and the textbook. Therefore, a week before the exam each student receives a study sheet with six essay questions, three clearly labelled as chronological, three as analytical. The questions are broad but the instructor's expectations are specific, keyed to the structural skills. Three of the questions, as the students are told, will appear word-for-word on the exam, together counting for 70% of the grade. The ten-point map quiz and the four or five short answer identification questions which count twenty points will, of course, not have been seen by the students prior to the exam. The students dislike essay questions, but this can be turned to advantage in class: The perceptive student majoring in business will readily if grudgingly accept the point that report writing a marketing plan requires writing skills, while an engineering major knows that a project not explained convincingly and forcefully in writing to management will not be approved regardless of the technical skills used in its preparation. The students also know that exercises in writing outside courses in English and history are woefully few and on the decline--indeed, that a number two pencil and an optiscan grading sheet are the beginning and end of expression in all too many courses. But the instructor who would ask the students to write essays must also be prepared to take the time to assist in developing writing skill, a responsibility at the heart of an education in the liberal arts.

The fourth and final consequence of the structural approach has to do with the professional preparation of the instructor. Because it is impossible to keep up with the flood of publications in our own areas, does it not logically flow that we cannot keep up with western civ as a totality? Yet if we limit the course to an emphasis on a few major periods as testing grounds for skills in the structures of chronology and analysis, then the task becomes a good deal less hopeless. The necessity of keeping up with a small number of periods outside our specialty has an added advantage in that we do not give in to the temptation of insularity. In this sense, western civ is a necessary professional challenge for those with European specialties.

The structures and strategies just suggested are means to overcome the difficulties in the course. Their use offers an opportunity to rise above problems and to recapture the positive values which are inherent in the study. Western civ is important because we are western people. Students in the course are always amazed to discover how many of their ways of thinking and of their everyday practices flow directly from the European experience, no matter how modified they might have been by the American setting. This discovery of self by a study of the past is the heart of the matter. But if the approach has been structural, then the student has also gained skills in understanding, analysis, reconstruction, and comparison which can be carried forward into other aspects of learning. All of this should contribute to an appreciation that we are part of a wider society, that there is more than one way to view a problem, meet a challenge, or solve a difficulty, and that it is our responsibility to make our own personal contribution to the western experience.

NOTES

[1]This objection is ignored in this paper. The circumstances vary too much, and our attempts to correct problems in our own institution evoke our efforts as citizens of particular academic communities rather than as classroom instructors.