

SELF-PACED HISTORY IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE:  
OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

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Five years ago, when the administration of my college mandated that self-paced sections of certain courses should be offered by 1980, I decided to tackle our U.S. History survey, Colonial to 1877. I concluded that the classic Keller approach, using student proctors or tutors, would present problems in a two-year college, with its typical rapid student turnover. I am not absolutely certain that the Keller system could not work, but I decided against trying it.<sup>1</sup>

Having heard the stories about the enormous amount of time it takes to develop a self-paced course, I first tried the easy way out and looked for a "packaged" course already developed. I found two, but they were not satisfactory for my purposes. So I would have to create my own course from scratch. Although this was not the "easy way out," it may be the best way. Anyone planning to implement a self-paced course must feel totally comfortable with the materials being used, and this may mean creating them oneself.

Probably any textbook of one's choice could be used in a self-paced course. I use Weinstein and Gatell (formerly Weinstein and Wilson) Freedom and Crisis.<sup>2</sup> I had used it successfully before in traditional classes and found it to be one of the few creative and different U.S. history texts on the market. Half the chapters are devoted to case studies of particular persons or events, such as the Boston Massacre, the Constitutional Convention, the Salem witchcraft episode, the Nat Turner revolt, and the like. In my experience students like it better than more traditional texts.

I use the first three class periods to orient students to the course. Inevitably, some students who fail to read the class schedule closely at registration will unwittingly enroll for the course without realizing it is self-paced. It is therefore important in the first class meeting to explain fully what the students are getting into--that this course is not easier than a traditional lecture/discussion course and that it takes more self-discipline. In no uncertain terms, I encourage students who know they are lazy or who are immediately turned off by the idea of self-pacing to get out of the course right away. Some do, and this cuts down on the failure rate later.

Freedom and Crisis has 24 chapters divided into two-chapter units. Thus the course has twelve units, with a quiz on each, plus a final exam. For each two-chapter unit, I wrote a study guide of three to four mimeographed pages; each student gets a copy. It gives a general overview of that unit, terms to learn, additional interesting information I want to include, and tips on studying that unit. In some ways the study guide serves as a substitute for a lecture, although it is more than that. Writing the twelve study guides was easily the most time-consuming part of developing the course.<sup>3</sup>

Since the students will be working largely on their own, I also spend time in the first three classes explaining how to read a textbook chapter (the SQ3R system) and how to study for and take exams.<sup>4</sup> Students also receive a handout with this information.

After the student reads and studies each unit and the accompanying study guide, he or she is ready to take the unit quiz. I am fortunate in that my college has a testing center where quizzes can be deposited for students to take on their own. Lacking a testing center, an instructor would have to devote some of his office hours to administering tests, plus provide a place with reasonably good security for test-taking. This might be an important consideration in deciding whether to offer such a course.

The twelve quizzes are of equal point value. I drop the two lowest before computing the final grade. The final exam counts more and is mandatory. Quizzes are a mixture of multiple-choice, identification, and essay. Of course, an instructor can do what suits him or her best in matters such as these.

Keeping contact with students in a self-paced course can be a problem. There is no required class attendance after the first three class sessions. However, I do require a minimum of three conferences with each student during the semester (about one a month) to discuss how he or she is doing in the course or to work on any student difficulties. Normally students will be stopping by periodically anyway to pick up study guides and quizzes they have taken. At the beginning of the course I get phone numbers from all class members and try to track down the errant ones. However, there are always a few whom it seems I almost never see. One of the much-publicized advantages of self-pacing is that it supposedly provides the student more contact with the instructor than in a large lecture course. This is true, if the student in fact comes to his conferences as required.

Of all the problems that can befall students in a course like this, procrastination is the fatal one. Students who are lazy or who lack self-discipline will simply not make it. The temptation to let the course slide under the press of other classes, and then try to cram three or four quizzes into one week, also is usually fatal. This cannot be emphasized too much at the outset of the course. It is imperative to build deadlines into the course and stick with them. I require that the first six units (half the course) be completed by the ninth week of a sixteen-week semester. Anyone missing that deadline is dropped. Also, the course itself ends at the end of the semester; there is no carry-over into the next semester. Some instructors of self-paced courses use more deadlines than these. More on this later.

A myth about self-paced courses, perpetrated only by those who have never taught them, is that they require less instructor time than a more traditional class. Grading quizzes daily and meeting with students practically every day consumes as much time over a semester as a regular lecture class--and perhaps more.

This raises the question: How many students should be in a self-paced course? It really depends on instructor time available. At my college we normally have history classes of about 40 maximum. My first time with this course, I kept it to one section of 25; the second time, 30, with little more effort. However, I would not want to go much above 30, since over half my quizzes are essay or identification.

How do students do, grade-wise, in a self-paced course? The first time, 39% withdrew along the way, a disturbingly high percentage, but not unusual for self-paced courses. The second time, withdrawals were down significantly, to 23%. Of those remaining to the end, the first time 86% earned an A, B, or C. The second time, 100% did. I attribute the improvement the second time to the fact that I was quite stern at the beginning about weeding out students who had signed up without knowing it was a self-paced course or who had doubts about their ability to handle the course.

Just as important, how did the students like the course? According to an anonymous evaluation they completed near the end of the semester, 84% thought the number of quizzes was about right, 96% liked the textbook, the study guides, and the meetings with the instructor, 67% indicated they would take another self-paced course if given the opportunity, and, asked to "grade" the course itself, 80% gave it an A or B. A few did indicate that although they did well,

they had learned that self-paced courses were not their cup of tea and they would not take any more--a valuable learning experience itself!

What types of students do best in a course like this? Not surprisingly, those who are highly motivated to learn, those who can work well on their own with relatively little guidance, those who have a considerable amount of self-discipline, and those who for personal or family reasons are bothered by the time constraints of formal class schedules. Ironically, one of the few complaints of students such as these is that they miss the classroom interaction with the instructor and other students. On the other hand, they usually are the ones who come by my office most often to pick up quizzes, ask questions, and keep in touch.

However, my institution is an open-door community college and most of our students are not like those described above. The blunt fact is that many of our students do not have the academic skills and self-discipline, at least when they first come to us, to complete successfully a self-paced course. This may account for the high withdrawal rates in such courses. This leads to one of the most difficult questions to resolve about self-pacing: Given the time and effort that go into developing and teaching such a course, plus the vast quantities of paper and secretarial typing time, is it worth it, considering the small number of students who really profit from such a course? In spite of the negatives, my answer is yes, for two reasons. (1) As instructors we spend much time trying to help to pull up the weaker students. This is admirable, but often in the process our stronger students are practically ignored. A self-paced course can be ideal for some of them. (2) College ought to involve more than simply instilling academic or technical knowledge. Equally important is learning to take responsibility, meet deadlines, and work on one's own. A self-paced course can help develop such attitudes and skills.

Do students learn as much in a self-paced as in a more traditional course? As for straight factual material out of the textbook, I think they learn as much or more, for the text is their major source of information. What they don't get--and this is a big minus--is what any good classroom setting can provide--the insights of an exciting teacher, interaction with other students, the spontaneity that discussion can provide, and the sudden recognition or understanding that comes from minds working together. This is what my best students repeatedly told me they missed most. In short, one can learn in a vacuum, but he or she misses something along the way.

What are the future prospects for the course? I intend to keep it and make two significant changes. (1) More deadlines. At present I have only one deadline, halfway through the course. I believe deadlines 1/3 and 2/3 of the way through would discourage procrastinating by students. Indeed, some students themselves made this suggestion. (2) More class sessions. This idea also came from students. I intend to add more class meetings to the course beyond the initial three--perhaps one a month--where students who wish can come together, discuss the material, ask questions, and see how each other are doing. This will, I hope, break down the isolation many of the students now feel. Finally, I plan to develop our second survey course--1877 to the present--into a self-paced mode. Some of the more successful students have asked for this.

To conclude, self-pacing can work in the two-year college, but the instructor must be aware that it is better for the more mature students. The student who is lazy or is a professional procrastinator will either not make it or, preferably, will snap out of his sloth as he faces the challenge. Perhaps providing the challenge is reason enough to continue offering self-paced courses.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Fred Keller, "Goodbye Teacher . . .," Journal of Applied Analysis, I (Spring, 1968), 78-89. For two other views of the Keller Plan, see Richard M. Bernard, "Personalizing Clio: History's Introduction to the Keller Plan," Teaching History, II (Spring, 1977), 13-16; and David McComb, "Clio and Keller: PSI in the History Classroom," ibid., 17-21.

<sup>2</sup>Allen Weinstein and Frank Otto Gatell, Freedom and Crisis: An American History, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>The author would be willing to share copies of the study guides with interested teachers. Contact William Mugleston, Mountain View College, Dallas, Texas 75211.

<sup>4</sup>The SQ3R system is Survey/Question/Read/Recite/Review, a widely used five-step system for reading and understanding a chapter in a textbook.