GUIDED DESIGN AS A TEACHING TOOL: "LIFE AND DEATH IN NAZI GERMANY"

Gordon R. Mork
Purdue University

There are many valid teaching techniques for involving students in an active consideration of historical reality. Traditional ones like assigning term papers or administering essay examinations on significant questions are not to be despised. Yet there are other available approaches under development by colleagues in unrelated academic disciplines which are capable of adaptation to the historian's classroom. They should not be expected to replace the traditional methods of the history class, but they might well make a useful contribution by supplementing time honored classroom activites.

Charles Wales and Robert Stager, professors of engineering, have developed a closely structured technique of classroom interaction for their students to encourage them to combine the acquisition of information with practice in the skills of problem solving. They present an engineering problem, such as "what does one do to prevent traffic hazards on a slippery bridge?" and lead the students step by step through appropriate reasoning techniques by releasing information and argument a bit at a time in a systematic way. All the while, the students must actively interact with the problem at hand, proposing and evaluating partial solutions. They call this system the Guided Design. Their approach is used not simply as one exercise among many, but as the organizing principle for whole courses and even sequences of courses. A single Guided Design project may take up several weeks of classroom activity.[1]

This article will describe a far more modest application of the Guided Design approach than those suggested by Wales and Stager. It will show how the procedure can be applied within the history classroom by presenting a single Guided Design exercise I prepared for undergraduate classes in European history. Readers may wish to try out this example on their own classes, or use it to create parallel exercises pertaining to their own content areas. This Guided Design, "Life and Death in Nazi Germany," was constructed for use within a single 50-minute class hour. It has been used with some 200 Purdue students in sections of twenty to thirty individuals, over a one year period. Some of these students were in a freshman-level survey of the modern world, others in a junior-level course introducing modern German history.

The Guided Design was presented on a regular class day, without prior announcement. Textbook assignments had covered Nazi Germany and World War II in general, and some examples of totalitarianism in practice had been presented through lectures, but no specific details concerning the content of "Life and Death in Nazi Germany" were released ahead of time. Students in the junior-level course had somewhat more detailed knowledge of Nazism than those in the freshman-level general survey, but neither group had been especially primed with materials on Nazi eugenics, euthanasia, or genocide.[2]

In practice the Guided Design works as follows. Students are divided into three or four-person "decision groups" and the rules of the Guided Design exercise briefly explained. They are told the groups would be asked to consider a realistic set of problems faced by ordinary people during the Nazi era. The students should spend several minutes discussing the problem presented within the small group, arrive at a common solution, and be ready to report it back to the class as a whole. Each student then receives an instruction sheet:

(sheet 1)

"Life and Death in Nazi Germany"

The Nazi years are the object of horror and fascination for many an American student of your generation. But what was it like to have lived then and to have faced the choices which were confronted by individual Germans?

Using the Guided Design format, this exercise will ask you to put yourself in the shoes of Germans who lived in those days. Read "Instruction A" on the other side of this paper when you are asked to do so. Then discuss the matter with your fellow students in your decision group and be prepared to share your decision with the class as a whole. After the class has discussed the matter you will be given a written "Feedback A" to check against your decision. Academically speaking, there is no "right" or "wrong" answer. The exercise is designed to simulate the practical and ethical problems confronted by real people in Nazi Germany.

(please do not turn page till told to do so)

If no one raises further questions at this point, all are told to turn over their sheets to:

Instruction A

Let us say you are an ordinary German, Marie Holz, and it is August 1940. Your husband has been institutionalized for several years with mental illness. He is harmless enough, but unable to care for himself. His hospital is nearby, on the other side of Berlin, so you try to visit him about twice a month.

One day you receive a form letter, as follows:

COUNTY NURSING HOME GRAFENECK

Date of postal cancellation

The patient George Holz was moved to this institution today. The reasons for the move are war-connected, and in compliance with a directive of the Reich Defense Commissioner.

In case you intend to visit the patient, we suggest that you inquire here beforehand.

Heil Hitler!
(Institution's rubber stamp)[3]

What do you do? Discuss your options with the members of your decision group and select one. Why have you selected that option?

During the discussion within the decision groups concerning Instruction A, one or more instructors should circulate among the groups fielding questions, consulting on possible solutions, and encouraging active participation. In about five minutes the students are told to cease their small group discussions and several groups are called upon to report their conclusions. Some students raise questions of historical fact ("What was going on in the war just then?") or of hypothetical detail ("How well off economically was our Marie Holz? Was she pro or anti-Nazi?" etc.) Such questions are answered briefly and the students are pressed for their conclusions. Occasionally one will suggest an activist response, such as traveling unannounced to the new institution and demanding to see the husband. But generally, students respond similarly to the description in Feedback A, which is now handed out.

(sheet 2)

Feedback A

Historians cannot be sure what any hypothetical "Marie Holz" would do under those circumstances. But we do know such form letters were sent out by the thousands. (The quote is from The Nazi Years: A Documentary History, Joachim Remak, ed., Prentice-Hall, 1969.)

Most Germans, concerned with the war-time situation, probably grumbled a bit about the impersonal bureaucracy but did not get around to doing anything right away. "After all, there is a war on, and everyone has to make sacrifices."

(please do not turn page till told to do so)

When the students have read these paragraphs silently, they are instructed to turn the page, read Instruction B, and discuss it within their decision groups.

Instruction B

The situation is the same. You have not had official word of your husband's whereabouts since receiving the form letter about a month ago. Then the following letter arrives:

COUNTY NURSING HOME GRAFENECK
P.O. Box 17
Münsingen
September 24, 1940

Mrs. Marie Holz
Berlin . . .
Dear Mrs. Holz:

We are sincerely sorry to be compelled to inform you that on September 23, 1940, your husband, George Holz, who was moved to this institution on September 10, 1940, pursuant to a directive of the Reich Defense Commissioner, died here, suddenly and unexpectedly, of heart failure.

Considering his grave mental illness, life for the deceased had meant torture. Thus you must look upon his death as a release.

Since, at the moment, there is a danger of contagious disease at this institution, the police department ordered the immediate cremation of the body.

We request that you advise us of the name of the cemetary to which we shall have the police authorities send the urn with the mortal remains of the departed. If applicable, confirmation of the acquisition of a vault is to be sent here.

We request that any possible inquiries be made in writing, since by police order, visits are not permitted at the present time due to risk of contagion.

If we should receive no reply from within the next two weeks, we will have the urn interred elsewhere and without charge.

Two death certificates are enclosed. We request that they be kept carefully, in case they need to be submitted for any official purposes.

Heil Hitler!
[Signature]

What do you do?

Discussions become more lively. Some students say that they would suspect nothing and simply follow instructions. Some immediately suspect outright murder, but fear for their own lives if they take the wrong action. Some raise basic questions of role playing, e.g., "How can I, as an American in the '80s, answer for a German of the Nazi era?" Occasionally instructors might have to prod a lagging group, but more often they must cut off the small group discussions apparently prematurely. Hopefully some group will hit upon the idea that Marie Holz should compare notes with the next-of-kin of other hospital inmates. That suggestion is reinforced with the next feedback sheet:

(sheet 3)

Feedback B

As an historian, I cannot tell you what our Marie Holz did. But we do know that when letters like this suddenly arrived in great numbers to next-of-kin, they began to get suspicious and to discuss the matter with each other. Some also turned to their clergymen, Protestant ministers or Catholic priests. As a matter of fact, Nazi officials were systematically gassing to death the "useless eaters," acting on the following secret order:

Adolf Hitler Berlin, September 1, 1939

Reichsleiter Bouhler and Dr. Brandt:

are authorized to extend the responsibilities of physicians still to be named in such a manner that patients whose illness, according to the most critical application of human judgment, is incurable, can be granted release by euthanasia.

s. ADOLF HITLER

[Hand-written notation;] Given to me by Bouhler, August 24, 1940
s. DR. GÜRTNER (German Minister of Justice.)

(please do not turn page till told to do so)

The scene changes now, the students are told, and they are instructed to turn over sheet 3 and read:

Instruction C

You are the Bishop of Münster, a medium sized city in Westphalia, Germany. From a number of priests in your diocese you have heard about the many sudden deaths. Attempts to investigate the circumstances have proven futile. As a Roman Catholic bishop, and as a member of the aristocratic von Galen family, you have considerable prestige, but you find yourself powerless under the Nazi regime.

What do you do? Carefully consider your options with your decision group. Narrow them down to two, and be prepared to explain why you will choose one over the other.

Student suggestions diverge dramatically at this point. Not one, among the students with whom I used this Guided Design, knew the story of Bishop Clemens Count von Galen, so their considerations of possible alternatives were not inhibited by "the facts." Many argue for a passive stance, comforting the

afflicted, but doing so quietly to minimize risks to the bishop as an individual and to the church as an institution. During the feedback discussion the instructor can point out that even Americans, with their presumed traditions of individual freedom, can succumb to the futility of opposing overwhelming force, or threat of force. A few students call for bold action, arguing that a believing Christian had no reason to fear a martyr's death. Most advocate some actions out of public view, such as contacting Rome and asking for a papal denunciation, or protesting to Nazi officials behind closed doors. The implications of the points raised give the class material for more discussion of historical and ethical issues than the five or ten minutes allotted under this format. If time is short, this might be an appropriate place to break off the discussion, resuming it at the next class meeting, thus allowing students time for further reflection. Yet, the instructor is motivated to press on, because students are anxious to see the feedback sheet in order to find out what the good bishop actually did.

(sheet 4)

Feedback C

On August 3, 1941, Bishop Clemens Count Galen gave his regular sermon in the St. Lambert's Church in Münster. It contained the following words:

> . . . As I am reliably informed, lists are being made up in the hospitals and nursing homes of Westphalia, too, of those patients who, as so-called "unproductive citizens," are to be moved and soon thereafter killed. The first such transport left the institution of Marienthal near Münster this past week.
>
> German men and women! Paragraph 211 of the German legal code still has force of law. It states, "An individual who, acting with premeditation, kills another person shall, if he killed while of sound mind, be punished by death for murder."
>
> It probably is to protect the men who, with premeditation, kill those poor, sick people, members of our families, that the patients selected for death are moved from near their homes to a distant institution. Some illness is then given as the cause of death. Since the body is cremated immediately, neither the family nor the criminal investigation department can later discover whether there really was such an illness and what the cause of death was.
>
> I have been assured, however, that neither in the Ministry of the Interior nor in the Office of the Reich Leader of Physicians Dr. Conti is there much effort to hide the fact that premeditated killings of large numbers of the mentally ill have already taken place, and that more are planned for the future. But the German legal code also states in paragraph 139, "A person who receives credible information about an intended crime against life . . .* and refrains from

informing the authorities of the person endangered at the proper time, is subject to punishment . . . ."*

When I heard of the intention to move patients from Marienthal in order to kill them, I preferred charges on July 28 with the District Attorney of the County Court at Münster as well as with the Chief of Police in Münster. I did so by registered letter, which reads as follows:

"According to information reaching me, a large number of patients from the County Medical Hospital near Marienthal in Münster are to be moved as so-called 'unproductive citizens,' to the hospital at Eichberg in the course of this week. (The date of July 31 is being mentioned.) At Eichberg, they are to be premeditatedly put to death, just as members of similar transports from other institutions were, as is generally believed, so killed."

"Since such an action violates not only divine and natural moral law, but is punishable by death under paragraph 211 of the German legal code, I am preferring charges, as I am obligated to under paragraph 139 of the legal code, and ask that the citizens so threatened be immediately protected by having action taken against the authorities intending their transport and murder, and to inform me of the steps taken."

I have received no information concerning any action on the part of the district attorney's office or of the police . . . .

*Ellipsis in original

It is a long passage, but it takes only two or three mintues to read. Read aloud by the instructor, while the students follow on each of their sheets, it can be very effective; such a procedure allows vocal emphasis upon certain portions of the dense prose. The impact on the students is profound. Having just grappled with the alternatives once faced by von Galen, and realizing how few of them were willing to argue that they would take such openly defiant action, they find the bishop's sermon impressive indeed. The instructor can follow up with a few details, as time allows, noting that the sermon was surreptitiously duplicated and widely circulated in Germany.

This Guided Design ends here. But students are full of unanswered questions. What happened next? What did the Nazis do? What happened to Bishop von Galen? Did the killings continue? Did anyone raise similar public objections to the deportation of the German Jews? etc. The rest of the story is well told in the standard literature.[4] Nazi authorities, right up to Goebbels and Hitler, were enraged, but they were disinclined to make a martyr of von Galen, because they needed strong popular support for the war on Soviet Russia. The large scale euthanasia program was suspended, after having claimed some 70,000 victims, although other more secretive programs continued. The killing centers intended for Europe's Jews were established far to the East, on Polish, rather than German territory. No public protest such as von

Galen's was made as German Jews were rounded up over the following months for "resettlement."

There is sufficient documentary material available to construct several more rounds of Instruction/Feedback material if one wishes to continue to use the Guided Design Format on this topic.[5]

Does the Guided Design work? Wales and Stager report systematically gathered educational research indicating that indeed it does.[6] Subjectively, I can report that the just described exercise also works well. Students experience some frustration trying to put themselves into unfamiliar roles, forcing themselves to face tough choices, all within a rather rigid time constraint. But the quality and quantity of their verbal responses during the exercise indicates that they are highly involved with the material. They are both learning content and confronting an ethical problem-solving process.

In the junior-level German history course I gathered more systematic information of the efficacy of this Guided Design by putting Bishop Count von Galen on the list of identification items in the final examination. The students responded more than satisfactorily to the item, showing both a grasp of "the facts" and interpretive insight. "Many Nazi plans succeeded because people unquestioningly obeyed orders and believed reports," wrote one pre-law student. "Count von Galen proved that opposition to the Nazis was possible by using public opinion and the law."

The students also expressed favorable attitudes about this Guided Design. On an anonymous instructor and course appraisal[7] I included the following item:

"The Guided Design on euthanasia and Bishop von Galen was an effective way to teach about that topic."

Nineteen students agreed, one was undecided, and none disagreed. As one added in the written portion of that questionnaire, "the student has to think about history instead of just memorizing it."

The Guided Design approach was created for engineering students to stress the importance of developing problem solving skills. At first blush, it appears to have limited applicability for most undergraduate history classes, which stress acquisition of information rather than acquisition of skills. Yet, on second thought, there are many areas of possible adaptation: "How do you write a good book review?" "How do you separate myth from reality?" and, as in "Life and Death in Nazi Germany," "What was it like to have faced tough ethical and practical decisions in an historical context?"

Educationalists have spent a good deal of time and effort trying to isolate easily measurable behavorial objectives for history classes. Certainly at the college level--and hopefully at every level--history teachers have long sought ways to go beyond objectives which can be simply defined and measured, and try to bring students to insights which will influence their long run behavior as morally responsible individuals participating in our society. That pre-law student cited above may find himself in a position of significant power someday, where he will face some difficult choices. If he remembers Bishop von Galen because of the Guided Design exercise, he might choose a decision which would make the world just a bit better place for us all.

NOTES

[1]See Charles E. Wales and Robert A. Stager, The Guided Design Approach (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications, 1978). The author wishes to thank Professor Wales and John F. Feldhusen for introducing him to this approach at a Purdue faculty seminar.

[2]Textbooks were Donald S. Detwiler, Germany: A Short History (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), for the junior-level course, and Gordon R. Mork, Modern Western Civilization (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey, 1976), for the freshman survey.

[3]The documents are adapted from Joachim Remak, The Nazi Years: A Documentary History (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 133-134, 137, 138-139, and 139-140. Reprinted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc.

[4]J.S. Conway, The Nazi Persecution of the Churches: 1933-45 (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 280 ff.; Gordon C. Zahn, German Catholics and Hitler's Wars (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), 83-100; Guenter Lewy, The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 263-267.

[5]For example Goebbels in Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression (Washington, D.C., 1946), VI, 405-410; Hitler's Secret Conversations: 1941-1944 (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1953), 74; and Marlis G. Steinert, Hitler's War and the Germans (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), 79-83.

[6]Wales and Stager, The Guided Design Approach, 57-65.

[7]"Cafeteria" system, copyright 1975 by Purdue Research Foundation.