

PROBLEMS AND PROCEDURES IN TEACHING
AN INTRODUCTORY PUBLIC HISTORY COURSE

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During the past five years the public history movement has become a significant influence upon the historical profession. Through its efforts, many people within and out of academe have not only become aware of the existence of thousands of professional historians who labor in museums, historical societies, government offices, preservation agencies, historical consulting firms, and other institutional and business settings, but have come to appreciate the diverse and valuable contributions that these public historians make to American society and culture.

Many history students especially demonstrate an intense interest in the newly-recognized field of applied history. Hesitant regarding their commitment to teaching history or already certain of their desire to pursue the practice of history outside the academy, these students find their curiosity piqued by tales of burgeoning numbers of public history graduate training programs and career opportunities. Yet as they look at the role models about them, students observe historians who teach, research, and write. The applied historian impinges upon their consciousness only occasionally, perhaps during a visit to a historical agency or through contact with a local government office.

Despite this lack of role models, the determined student who actively pursues career information regarding public history is frequently met with a lack of data and even a lack of interest on the part of traditionally trained professors and myopic career counselors and placement services. Frustrated and thwarted in their desire to enter a non-teaching history career, these talented and enthusiastic students too often become discontented teachers or unemployed graduates.

This tragic waste of talent can be at least partially avoided by an introductory public history course that supplies career information, exposes students to role models, and acquaints students with basic skills utilized by applied history practitioners. With the aid of a National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Education Pilot Grant, such a course was established at the University of Northern Iowa during the spring semester of 1981.

The "Introduction to Public History" course was designed with non-teaching undergraduate history majors in mind, but of the fifteen students who participated in the course there were also several history teaching majors, several history masters level students, and one English major. On their course information surveys, all of the fifteen students indicated a strong desire to learn more about career opportunities, training programs, salaries, and other job conditions, and to assess the possibility of such careers in their own future.

Despite the students strong orientation towards career-related issues, the course aimed to be more than just career counseling or even vocational training. It had three primary objectives: to expose students to public history career opportunities and graduate training programs; to acquaint students with basic skills utilized by most public historians such as collection techniques or interpretation of data, artifacts, or manuscripts; and to introduce students to historical agencies through a variety of field trips.

To achieve these goals a variety of speakers were invited into the class from local agencies and businesses. Various scholarly articles and American Association of State and Local History technical leaflets were placed on

library reserve as course readings. Students designed a survey sheet to help make their visits to the historical agencies systematic and meaningful. The instructor interjected lectures, slide presentations, and structured discussions in an attempt to provide continuity of theme and format. Although the students continued to evince a strong interest in career-related questions, the instructor also introduced larger issues related to the historiography and philosophy of public history, its long-term practice and short-term recognition, and its probable future roles, contributions, and development.

As the semester progressed, several problem areas began to emerge in course structure and content. The existence and validity of these problems were confirmed near the end of the semester by the written evaluation that every student in the course was asked to complete. They were further explored after the semester ended by a practicing public historian who was brought in with NEH grant funds as an outside evaluator of the project. The instructor, the students, and the evaluator generally concurred that five major problem areas prevailed.

First, course readings were the source of not-unanticipated difficulties. Since public history texts, reprints of articles, and bibliographies were generally unavailable, the readings were restricted in scope and number of copies. In addition, they were accessible only through library reserve rather than through student purchase. As a result, students occasionally bypassed the readings altogether or more frequently read them in a cursory fashion without taking notes. In either case, students were often inadequately prepared for speakers' visits, lectures, discussions, and site visits.

Secondly, media presentations were also difficult to locate. Besides a slide show titled "History Goes Public" produced by the instructor, and less formal slide presentations by the instructor and one visiting lecturer, there was no introduction of media-related information into the course. Thus, synthetic overviews were absent, while many topics such as preservation or the work of federal historians were slighted due to lack of visual materials in these areas.

Thirdly, the sheer volume of material to be covered surprised and overwhelmed both the instructor and the students. Speakers dealt with a myriad of subjects; the readings, despite their limitations, raised many diverse questions; hosts at agencies were often anxious to show and tell the class much more than its members were capable or desirous of absorbing. So, although it appeared at the inception of this three-semester-hour course that time might be difficult to fill, it instead became a premium. This situation was exacerbated by the once-a-week, three-hour session which was scheduled to accommodate the field trips but which clearly crammed too much material into one segment. In addition, one midterm and a final examination proved inadequate to pull the mass of information together in a truly productive fashion.

Fourthly, because of the limited range of readings, media, and local resources, the course inadvertently emphasized museums, historical societies, and archives at the expense of oral history, preservation, government historians, business historians, historical consultants, and other areas. An attempt to offset this tendency through student research and reports on the career areas mentioned was largely unsuccessful, again due to the lack of library and community resources.

A fifth and more abstract problem was the general lack of understanding regarding both public history in general and the public history course in particular on the part of the community people, students, faculty, and administrators. It was learned, for example, that some students had not

registered for the course because, despite publicity, they did not understand what topics it would address. Some faculty members were hesitant to publicize it in their classes because they believed it did not relate to the areas covered by or the students enrolled in their course. And even potential speakers were uncertain regarding their own contributions to students interested in public history careers. Since the historical profession itself as well as the course instructor are at this point less than clear on crucial questions such as the meaning and usage of the term public history, this was not unexpected. It did, however, impede implementation of projects inside and outside the classroom because so much discussion and explanation were necessary before a project could be launched.

This list may at first glance appear to present an insurmountable set of obstacles to the creation of an introductory public history course. Upon further examination, however, many of the obstacles appear to be manageable after all. In the 1982 version of the course the time factor was dealt with by meeting the students twice a week, scheduling three instead of two examinations, cutting down the number of site visits, and exercising tighter control over the variety of topics and issues to be introduced by speakers and readings.

The general unavailability of appropriate texts, collections of essays, and reprints of articles is more challenging. Of course, an instructor will eventually build his or her own readings file and bibliography but that does not alleviate the immediate situation. It also does not compensate for the instructor's own weak areas, the expense of reproducing even a few copies of readings, or the difficulties arising from library reserve restrictions. Instructors of public history courses must quickly begin to share readings and bibliography, pressure practitioners in the field to produce teaching materials, and request such groups as the National Council on Public History to supply bibliographies, reprints, and other printed matter in addition to the helpful journal, The Public Historian, that they already sponsor. Even brochures or newsletters, as of the Society of History in the Federal Government or the National Council on Public History, could partially bridge the gap between the student in the classroom and the practitioner in the field. Fortunately, some efforts to meet these needs have already been initiated. Both the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History and the Organization of American Historians are generating useful materials, while the National Council on Public History is currently compiling "The Craft of Public History: An Annotated Bibliography."

There is also a need to alert applied historians and their organizations to the necessity of generating student-oriented media presentations. The National Council on Public History is presently attempting to produce and distribute an inexpensive filmstrip on the nature of public history for both general and classroom use. Certainly, the number of similar projects that might be envisioned and undertaken in the near future are great.

Such an increased supply of printed and media resources, which might also include aids such as state or regional speakers directories, would help alleviate the temptation to focus on accessible and visible museums and historical societies. In the many college and university towns where federal historians or historical consulting firms, for example, do not operate, the existence of such career areas need not be slighted. Rather, these career possibilities could be effectively presented to students through means such as out-of-town speakers, tapes, or films.

Some of these printed and visual materials might also be used to inform and pique the interest of the public as well as of students, faculty, and

administrators in the subject of applied history. At UNI the showing of the slide presentations "History Goes Public" to classes, faculty, applied historians, and other interested groups proved to be an effective public relations device. It was followed up by radio interviews on local and university stations and articles in local newspapers. Posters and brochures augmented these efforts to engender interest in the public history program at UNI.

Although all these public information efforts were useful, more outreach tactics are clearly necessary in order to develop the network of support that such a course needs to be successful. Workshops and conferences could be offered to inform a variety of people about public history and to involve them in some aspect of the course. At UNI we initiated a recognition luncheon, including speakers on the practice and philosophy of our undertaking, for faculty and community people who had participated in some aspect of the program. Another possible tactic would be the formation or enlistment of an existing history students' organization to present programs, speakers, and discussions related to public history. In our case, Phi Alpha Theta and the Historical Association at UNI have been more than willing to institute a series of presentations, panels, and other projects regarding public history.

As a result of the pilot grant project at UNI, we have concluded that not only are the problems attendant to an introductory public history course possible to solve, but that they are well worth solving. We are also convinced that an introductory public history course needs to be accompanied by a historical internship experience, in order to be most beneficial to students interested in pursuing an applied history career. Although the course can make students aware of the many possibilities in the field of public history, only a field experience can provide the laboratory necessary to test the validity of a personal career commitment in an area of applied history.

Therefore, as another dimension of this pilot project, we have been expanding a historical internship program first initiated in 1975. The purpose of the internship is to alert history majors to careers other than teaching in the historical field and to give them experience regarding what such a non-academic career might entail. Student interns follow a plan of unpaid work experience in a local museum, archives, or other organization, pursue individual readings relating to their work, and produce a short paper or project related to the nature of their own specific internship. The internships, typically involving ten hours of work per week in an agency for three semester hours credit, are primarily in historical societies, museums, and archives. But with the aid of the NEH Grant, faculty time became available to widen the scope of the internship to include placements as a historical researcher with a local newspaper, a researcher and compiler of the history of the local Chamber of Commerce, a researcher and interpreter of a cemetery managed by the County Conservation Board, and a researcher for a law firm.

At the present time, the internship and public history course are independent of each other in that a student may take one but not the other. It is envisioned, however, that eventually matters of scheduling, course prerequisites, and credit toward the history major may be arranged in such a way that the course and the internship will be a two-part package for most students. Those students who take the public history course and decide that such a career is not for them would understandably not want to pursue an internship, but those students who react positively to the idea of their own involvement in the field of applied history would presumably wish to become involved in further work and would benefit by taking the public history course before entering an agency as an intern. The first two students to follow this sequence have completed their internship field placements, and, although there is no valid way to test their adaptability to their internship

compared with other students who did not take the public history course, their supervisors feel confident that they were more productive and derived more from their internships than did previous interns who did not have the benefit of the course.

This discussion is not intended to suggest that a lack of such a historical internship program be a deterrent to the establishment of an introductory public history course. Rather, if the course proves successful and effective an internship program could logically and methodically grow from the course itself.

Clearly there are many disparate considerations to be faced, not the least of which is the tremendous consumption of a faculty member's time, before either an introductory public history course or a historical internship program is undertaken. Yet evaluations from both internship students and their supervisors enthusiastically indicate the value of such programs for history majors, historical agencies, and the field of public history. If one of our major goals is to serve our history majors by preparing them for a world of employment filled with complex choices, then it seems mandatory that such an effort must at least be considered.

APPENDIX

Examples of types of speakers used in 1981 and 1982 offerings of "Introductory Public History at the University of Northern Iowa:

Director, University of Northern Iowa Museum, Cedar Falls. On functions and responsibilities of a director of a historical agency.

Director, Grout Museum of History and Science, Waterloo; Director, Cedar Falls Historical Society; Archivist, University of Northern Iowa Archives; and Naturalist, Hartman Nature Reserve, Cedar Falls. Panel on types and implementation of collection theory for various agencies.

Registrar, Grout Museum of History and Science and Registrar, University of Northern Iowa Museum. On registration procedures and problems.

Field Officer, Iowa State Historical Society, Iowa City. On interpretive methods.

Editor, The Annals of Iowa, Des Moines. On functions and responsibilities of a historical editor.

Researcher and Internship Supervisor, Living History Farms, Des Moines. On mission of living history facilities and summer internships for history students.

Examples of types of site visits:

Archives, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls.

Museum, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls.

Cedar Falls Historical Society.

Ice House Museum, Cedar Falls.

Hartman Nature Reserve, Cedar Falls. (The objective was to discover how the natural environment served as a historical resource).

Rensselaer Russell House, Waterloo.

Grout Museum of History and Science, Waterloo.

John Deere Company, Waterloo. (The objective was to discover how business historians work and how that work affects the company, the geographic area, and the public.)

Students were also asked to make independent site visits on their own outside of the Cedar Falls-Waterloo area. It was assumed that they would undertake these visits during their spring break period and could utilize the resources of their home area. They were asked to report back to the rest of the class on their experiences and reactions to their own individual excursions. These included the Villa Louis at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin; the John Deere Museum at Moline, Illinois; the Old Capitol at Iowa City; the Mesquakie Indian Museum at Tama, Iowa; the Historical Archives and Museum in Des Moines; and the Capitol in Des Moines.

Examples of types of readings:

"Alternative Careers," AHA Newsletter (November, 1976), 2.

American Association of State and Local History technical leaflets on topics such as "Local History Manuscripts: Sources, Uses, and Preservation," "Local Historical Records: Programs for Historical Agencies," "Manuscript Collections: Initial Procedures and Policies," "Maps in the Small Historical Society: Care and Cataloging," "Antique Farm Equipment," "The Eight Most Common Mistakes in Restoring Houses," "Protecting Your Exhibits," "Making Exhibit Labels," "Craft Festivals," "Ethnic Groups," "Planning Museum Tours," "Authentic Costuming For Historic Site Guides," and "Historical Markers."

Benson, Sumner, "The Historian as Foreign Policy Analyst: The Challenge of the CIA," The Public Historian, III, 1 (Winter, 1981), 15-25.

Bigelow, Bruce, "The Historian in Government," AHA Newsletter (January, 1980), 12-13.

Casterline, Gail Farr, Archives and Manuscripts: Exhibits (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980).

Crook, Leonard, "Alternative Occupations for the Environmental Historian," Environmental History Newsletter, II, 2 (December, 1975), 12-13.

Cox, Richard J., "A Reappraisal of Municipal Records in the United States," The Public Historian, 3, 1 (Winter, 1981), 49-63.

Degler, Carl N., "Remaking American History," Journal of American History, LXVII, 1 (June, 1980), 7-25.

Gracy, David B., II, Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977).

Gracy, John B., "Starting on Archives," Georgia Archives, I, 1 (Fall, 1972), 20-29.

- Grahm, Otis L., Jr., "Historians and the World of (Off-Campus) Power," The Public Historian, I, 2 (Winter, 1979), 34-40.
- Guzzo, Peter P., "State Legislative Research: Opportunities for Historians in Applied Research," The Public Historian, II, 3 (Spring, 1980), 39-42.
- Hedlin, Edie, Business Archives: An Introduction (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1978).
- Hewlett, Richard G., "The Practice of History in the Federal Government," The Public Historian, I, 1 (Fall, 1978), 29-36.
- Hosmer, Charles B., Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949, 2 volumes (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia for the Preservation Press of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1980).
- Johnson, Ronald W., "The Historian and Cultural Resource Management," The Public Historian, III, 2 (Spring, 1981), 43-51.
- Jones, H.G., Local Government Records: An Introduction to Their Management, Preservation and Use (Nashville, American Association of State and Local History, 1980).
- Keller, Morton, "Business History and Legal History," Business History Review, LIII, III (Autumn, 1979), 295-303.
- Livengood, Steve, "Employment Opportunities for Historians in Historic Preservation," AHA Newsletter (October, 1976), 10-11.
- Lukacs, John, "Obsolete Historians," Harper's (November, 1980), 80-84.
- Malaro, Marie, "Collections Management Policies," Museum News, LVIII, 2 (November/December, 1979), 57-61.
- Martin, Dianne, "History Goes Public," History News, XXXIV, 5 (May, 1979), 121-126, 143.
- Matloff, Maurice, "Government and Public History: The Army," The Public Historian, II, 3 (Spring, 1980), 43-51.
- Moore, Jamie W., "History, the Historian, and the Corps of Engineers," The Public Historian, III, 1 (Winter, 1981), 64-74.
- Morrissey, Charles T., "Public Historians and Oral History: Problems of Concepts and Methods," The Public Historian, II, 2 (Winter, 1980), 22-29.
- Neil, J. Meredith, "Is There a Historian in the House? The Curious Case of Historic Preservation," The Public Historian, II, 2 (Winter, 1980), 30-38.
- Orser, Charles E., Jr., "United Public History and Historical Archaeology," The Public Historian, III, 1 (Winter, 1981), 75-83.
- Petulla, Joseph M., American Environmentalism: Values, Tactics, Priorities, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1980).
- Pomeroy, Robert W., "Historians' Skills and Business Needs," The Public Historian, I, 2 (Winter, 1979), 8-14.

Powers, Sandra, "Why Exhibit? The Risks Versus the Benefits," American Archivist, XLI (July, 1978), 297-306.

"Public History: State of the Art, 1980," Special Issue, The Public Historian, II, 1 (Fall, 1979).

Reed, James, "Business and Public History: Management Consulting," The Public Historian, II, 3 (Spring, 1980), 60-64.

Rosenthal, Rob, "The Interview and Beyond: Some Methodological Questions for Oral Historians," The Public Historian, I, 3 (Spring, 1979), 58-67.

"Roundtable: The Challenge of Editing Local History," The Public Historian, II, 4 (Summer, 1980), 84-100.

Scheips, Paul J. et al., "What is a Federal Historian?" The Public Historian, II, 4 (Summer, 1980), 84-100.

Sharlin, Harold I., "What's Historical About Science and Technology Policy?" The Public Historian, II, 3 (Spring, 1980), 26-38.

Stevens, Mary Lyon, "Wistful Thinking: The Effect of Nostalgia on Interpretation," History News, XXXVI, 12 (December, 1981), 10-13.

Teresko, John, "Should You Keep an Archives," Industry Week (March 15, 1976).

Teute, Fredricka J., "Views in Review: A Historiographical Perspective on Historical Editing," American Archivist, XLIII (Winter, 1980), 43-56.

Thompson, Garry, "Planning the Preservation of Our Cultural Heritage," Museum, XXV, I (1973), 15-25.

Utley, Robert M., "Beyond Pedagogy: History Out of School," Western Historical Quarterly, VIII, 4 (October, 1977), 397-404.

Wilson, Joan Hoff, "Is the Historical Profession an 'Endangered Species,'" The Public Historian, II, 2 (Winter, 1980), 4-21.

Winkler, Karen J., "Decline of History Blamed on Tendency of Scholars to Write for Each Other," Chronicle of Higher Education (April 21, 1980), 10-11.

Examples of evaluation questions given regarding course:

What specific dimensions of public history do you understand better as a result of this course?

What specific dimensions of public history would you like to see receive more coverage in this course?

In what ways (positively or negatively) have your attitudes changed towards your own possible involvement in a public history career as a result of this course?

In what specific ways would you revise the structure of the course?