

TEACHING IN THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT: CASE STUDY AND MODEST PROPOSAL

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In life much depends on the year of one's birth. Those of us who worked through graduate school and into our first jobs by 1970 have had the opportunity to observe two quite different academic generations. We arrived early enough to drain the dregs of the good times. There was NDEA money for graduate school, and, although the jobs that were available were often not those we had hoped for, degrees still led to places on the lower rungs of the professional ladder. After us came the deluge and the glut of worthy young academics who were forced to postpone or forego their dream of teaching. As news of the shrinking job market in education spread, students fled history majors and history courses. Positions in the humanities were recycled to shift resources to glamorous business and technical fields. Once again historians began to think of themselves as an endangered species.

Although humanists had experienced hard times before, the historical profession seemed to have no wisdom from the past to guide it through the 1970s. Its response to the situation was chaotic and inconsistent. Empty classrooms suddenly led departments, which previously had given little thought to the matter, to declare that teaching should be a high priority activity--at least for junior faculty who created the survey courses from which majors were recruited. But the declining number of tenure slots also enabled departments to escalate their research expectations from these same junior faculty. Turning to their older colleagues for advice, young scholars often found themselves urged to be teaching specialists and research wizards. Teaching and research have a mutually enlivening relationship, but the direct connections between them are surely most tenuous for young faculty who teach surveys and have little or no responsibility for graduate instruction.

In retrospect, the discovery of the importance of teaching by history professionals in the early 1970s seems pathetically amusing. In 1974 the *American Historical Association Newsletter* had a regular, major section entitled "Research and Publication" in which information on teaching appeared only incidentally and sporadically. Under "General Announcements" news of new programs and what would now be called "public history" was occasionally published. In March 1974 the

AHA's Council advised departments, "whenever possible, [to] assign their best teachers to beginning courses" and to use evidence of teaching effectiveness in personnel decisions. It also suggested that departments consider preparing students for careers as teachers in two-year colleges and secondary schools.¹ The *Newsletter* then began to carry a series of articles on "innovations" in undergraduate teaching.² Fourteen schools submitted reports. Princeton announced a "renaissance" of its program caused by flexibility" ("Flexibility means an absence of prerequisites or required courses").³ Harvard met its concern that its teaching fellows "did not receive sufficient instruction in the art of teaching" with a two-day conference on the subject at a Catholic retreat center.⁴

In January 1975 "Innovations" became "Teaching History Today" and joined "Research and Publication" as a regular column in the *Newsletter*. The new feature was introduced with apparent concern that some might consider it inappropriate. In September 1975 the editors of the column used their space to argue that "The AHA's decision to distinguish the teaching function of the profession--by forming a Teaching Division . . . and by devoting space in the *Newsletter* to the teaching of history--should require no defense."⁵ And they warned against the polarization of faculties into camps of teaching "hucksters" and research "recluses."

In December 1975 Norman Graebner contributed his view of the relationship between teaching and research and urged that schools become more serious in their pursuit of excellent instruction.⁶ He stated that he believed some student complaints about the quality of teaching to be justified, and he confessed that he had sat in on department meetings at a number of universities for a quarter of a century without every hearing a discussion of ways to improve teaching. The topic was of little interest, for the academic reward structure (promotion, tenure, and salary for individuals; national and international reputation for institutions) was not designed

¹The Council's Statement on Ph.D. Programs and Job Crisis," *American Historical Association Newsletter*, 12, 3 (March 1974): 3-4.

²Articles (under the common title "Innovation in Undergraduate History," ed. by Henry Bausum and Myron Marty) in volume 12, nos. 6, 7, 8, & 9, solicited reports from departments and individuals on approaches that had been useful in stemming the undergraduate exodus from history.

³*Ibid.*, no. 6: 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, no. 7: 10.

⁵*Ibid.*, 13, 6: 4.

⁶*Ibid.*, 13, 9: 5-7. "Observations on University Teaching and Research."

to encourage faculty to work at improving their teaching skills. Skills were, however, in Graebner's opinion, not everything. Graebner argued that "the ability to communicate well in writing is far more common than the ability to communicate through the spoken word, especially for periods as long as an hour." He seemed, therefore, to imply, although he did not say, that the improvement of teaching depended not on giving poor teachers more time to work at the craft, but in recruiting and retaining those who had natural talent. This idea recently has become popular among secondary school reformers, but it has not made headway at the college and university levels.

The articles on teaching that appeared in the *Newsletter* (and continue to appear in its successor, *Perspectives*) focused almost exclusively on program, syllabus, and examination redesign. Little has been said about methods for encouraging the reconsideration of departmental or institutional priorities and reward systems. It may be that hope for such reform is generally conceded to be unrealistic. But many of the most sincere proposals for the improvement of teaching have recommended labor intensive activities (like small group discussions and extensive writing assignments) that could be professionally suicidal for young faculty scrambling along tenure's track and for tenured faculty whose salary increases hang on annual reviews of publication records.

If professors of history are to be helpful to one another in sharing their thoughts about teaching, they must begin to put their suggestions for improved teaching techniques into the context of their broader professional responsibilities. They should describe what they do in their classrooms and how it affects or relates to their other duties. It is useful to be told that the author of an article teaches at a university, college, community college, or high school, but much more needs to be done to provide a context for the author's proposals. Some colleges have research expectations comparable to those of universities, and community college administrators have been known not to be indifferent to the research output of their instructors. High school faculty may find themselves judged by a complex formula that evaluates their performance in extra-curricular activities and their efficiency in dispatching burdensome amounts of paperwork.

To illustrate the kind of information that might be helpful I offer the following description of my own situation and the pedagogical strategy that has helped me survive in my environment.⁷

⁷Disclosure of my professional record may be relevant, or at least interesting, at this point. Tenured in 1977 and promoted to the rank of professor in 1988, I have published 3 books and 13 articles and have received 3 teaching awards (1973, the Behrend College; 1980, the College of Liberal Arts; and, 1985, the Penn State University).

The Behrend College is a satellite campus of the Pennsylvania State University, with BA and BS programs in humanities, business, and engineering, and a modest MA program in technical fields. It serves about 2,000 students, and, since many of them eventually transfer to the largest campus of the university at University Park, PA, the student body contains disproportionately large numbers of freshmen and sophomores. Average SAT scores of applicants fall in the 900s. While there is no program of open admissions, significant numbers of poorly prepared students are permitted to attend classes in "provisional" or "non-degree" categories. History faculty are assigned three sections per semester: two are limited to 45 students and the third is targeted at twice that number. Courses designed for juniors and seniors in the major are limited to 25. I offer nine different courses--two of which are in medieval studies, my research specialty.

Tenure, promotion, and annual review at all university locations are governed by a document known as PS-23. It defines four areas in which faculty must demonstrate productivity: Teaching, Research (primarily publication), Scholarly Activity (participation in conferences and professional organizations), and Service (committee work or use of one's professional skills by the public). Each of these categories is weighted: 40% for teaching; 30% for research; 20% for scholarly activity; and 10% for service. Tenure-track faculty are reviewed every two years and often terminated at the fourth year if it is judged that they have not demonstrated consistent, significant productivity in all areas. No one has received tenure in history at the College since my tenuring in 1977. There have been four terminations. Salary increases for all faculty are determined annually by a review process that grades their performance on a curve with the records of colleagues in their academic divisions. Each individual is ranked in a hierarchy of most to least productive in the four areas of PS-23. All salary increases are based on merit, and there is no cost of living adjustment.

This professional context requires faculty to use their teaching time as economically as possible. If one assumes a standard forty hour work week, faculty are encouraged to give no more than sixteen hours to teaching. Nine of these must be spent in the classroom. Three more are scheduled office hours (advising is evaluated as part of teaching). This leaves four hours per week for the tasks of class preparation, revision of class content, and grading. Teaching faculty have nine-month contracts. During those months there are three weeks when classes are not in session and a total of 36 hours is saved from class presentation for class preparation. There are, therefore, clearly limited parameters of time for the discharge of the teaching responsibility. Also to be kept in mind is the fact that teaching effectiveness is measured primarily by performance on a student evaluation

form. Whatever is required in a course must be presented in such a way as to win wide student support.

Class size encourages extensive use of the lecture method. Students have responded well to vigorous, fast-paced presentations. Some have confessed that they have never read a book that was not assigned to them by a teacher, but that, unfortunately, does not mean that they have developed compensatory skills for assimilating the spoken word. They are encouraged to think of lectures as opportunities to develop the ability to listen and organize information--a skill that will be vital to them later in life when they enter their professions. Time is taken to explain outlining, and the first examination tests outlining skills. Lectures are planned in detail to conform to clear, obvious outlines, and they are memorized so that the lecturer can free himself from the podium, maintain eye-contact, and move about the room. Slides and transparencies are used sparingly. Long films or videotapes are assumed by students to be "entertainment," and students do not give them the active attention they accord lectures. Time is made for questions that students volunteer, but more can be learned about what the majority is thinking by occasionally circulating cards and asking for anonymous submissions of questions or comments.

Examinations rely on a mixture of objective and essay questions. Many students are sent into history survey courses before they have completed or been admitted to the basic freshman English composition course. Total reliance on essay questions defeats them, and there is inadequate time in our system for grading large blocks of writing. Historians have, in my opinion, been unduly contemptuous of objective examination instruments. It is certainly true that history is more than a list of names, dates, and places. But it is equally the case that history is not less than the information out of which it is built. Colleagues in chemistry, biology, languages, anthropology, and numerous other disciplines make no apology for requiring their students to memorize the basic data with which they work in class. Historians should feel as free to expect a disciplined, methodical approach to the mastering of their materials. Preparation for objective examinations seems to improve performance on essays by forcing students to equip themselves with information with which they can work while writing.

Improved efficiency in dealing with lecture and examination responsibilities can be gained by mastering rudimentary word processing skills. A personal computer allows lectures and examinations quickly to be revised. Computer scoring of large numbers of examinations is of obvious utility. The popularity of computers among the students has also shaped experiences, a new world of analogy, and a

vocabulary that can be useful in bridging generation gaps and helping them formulate historical interpretations.

None of the techniques described above is unique or original, and they are certainly not presented as a program that should be widely adopted. They are a description of an adaptation to a particular environment that, thus far, seems to work. They are intended simply to illustrate the method that I would recommend for the continued discussion of teaching techniques. If those who have ideas to offer will keep in mind that for most of us teaching is only a part of our professional responsibility and if they will share with us frank, detailed disclosure of the conditions of their work place, our interactions may make more progress than they have in the past. Perhaps, when enough information has been published, it will cluster into clearer pictures of the types of institutions that have evolved in American education than now are communicated by terms like "college" or "university." A new typography of the profession would enable like to speak to like and bring some order to what has largely been a swirl of untargeted ideas. In the best of all possible worlds it might also lead some institutions to rethink their missions and devote themselves to the creation of environments that would promote a true renaissance in the teaching of history.