

## TEACHING HISTORY IN HISTORICAL TIMES: A SIDE STAGE APPROACH

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A paradox confronts professional historians in the United States today—although there is intense interest on the part of the public in matters historical, there is yawning apathy toward history in the college classroom among traditional-aged students. Nationally there has been a series of recent controversies including how to portray the events surrounding the ending of World War II at the Smithsonian Institution and what to teach our children in the wake of the publication of the national history standards by the Gary Nash group at UCLA. In contrast, teaching historians walk into classrooms every day and encounter students who seem largely apathetic to anything that happened longer ago than last weekend. Although frequently willing to offer opinions about past events and actors, these students often seem incapable of analyzing documents, drawing conclusions based on evidence, or constructing a coherent narrative.

Historians traditionally address student apathy by arguing for a reconceptualization of history to include new topics and unrepresented groups in a fresh narrative or, in another favorite solution, to employ technological delivery systems more in tune with student experience. In practice this means the use of more video because it is more like television, or multimedia because it is more like home computers. The conceptualization issue, expressed either as the development of a new national story or as the development of ways to connect student experience with the historical past is also important. There are, however, fundamental questions that logically precede the consideration of course content and modes of instruction: "Where do I stand—intellectually as a historian—when I deal with my students? Where do my students stand—intellectually—when they deal with history?" A thoughtful answer to these questions should help facilitate our ability to connect the past and present of our students.

Historians need to reconsider their classroom presentation of history and adopt a "side stage approach" to their subject matter and their students. This term and its meanings are drawn from the work of Joshua Meyrowitz whose study of the impact of television on American society combines the work of various theorists about media with the insights of sociologist Erving Goffman.<sup>1</sup> The Meyrowitz approach stands in sharp contrast to the more familiar instrumentalist arguments that often dominate discussion

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<sup>1</sup>Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). All analyses of the media and its general impact on society are drawn from this work unless otherwise noted. All analyses of the specific impacts on historical study are this author's unless otherwise noted.

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about the impact of media on society. These latter arguments, for example, focus on the degree to which television programs promote violence with the implicit assumption that a modification of program content will ameliorate the bad impacts of television. The Meyrowitz approach demonstrates ways in which television alters the viewers understanding of the world regardless of specific program content. He argues, along with others, that television and the emerging computer-based technologies, such as multimedia and the Internet, affect our understanding of our world and our place in it. This development affects the preconceptions that students and faculty bring to the classroom and requires us to rethink our presentation of history.

Although the analysis in this essay focuses on ways in which television has changed society's perceptions of the world and thereby undermined the utility and effectiveness of traditional lecture presentations, neither this paper nor Meyrowitz's work is intended as television bashing in the luddite tradition. As Meyrowitz notes, the impact of television on society is broad and includes many developments that analysts and many Americans regard favorably. For example, the success of the civil rights movement in the South and the ending of the war in Vietnam were made possible, in the terminology to be explained in this paper, by exposing the "backstages" of southern race relations and warfare to the general public. The increased diversity of historians and the changing story that we tell can also be tied, at least in part, to the rise of television. Because this essay deals with the impact of television on traditional, widely used modes of instruction, the tenor of the analysis is negative. The solution offered in this essay, the side stage approach, builds on this analysis to argue for classroom presentations that explicitly incorporate the thought processes of the historian into the lecture presentation. In a sense I argue that historians should not conceal the ways in which they made the judgments that led to the particular form of the paper or lecture they present.

The term "side stage" has a theatrical connotation derived from Erving Goffman's analysis of how people present themselves to others and how these presentations change as individuals move from setting to setting. In general, people tailor their performances to their "theater" audiences. For example, what teenagers tell their parents about the party they attended recently is undoubtedly different from what they told their peers. The tone a doctor uses to explain a medical condition to a patient may be very different from how she discusses it with colleagues. Decisions about how to present oneself in different settings are not random. Historians, like other professionals, typically divide their worlds into front stage and back stage regions. The former involves the presentation of the fruits of historical study in an authoritative manner to audiences frequently composed of non-historians. Earlier generations of historians, as experts in historical study and specialists in a particular branch of that work, often presented their conclusions as findings brought down from Mt. Olympus. Theirs was the sort of work labeled "magisterial" by its admirers and seemed incontestable in the minds of the "layperson," a term placed deliberately within quotation marks to underscore the sense

that the front stage is a public area different from the setting where historians do their work of research and analysis.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, although differences of interpretation, disputes over evidence, and personalities were a part of the profession in its Olympian past, these aspects of professional life were kept "backstage," out of view of all but those fully initiated to the profession. Students entered this region gradually as they progressed from the general student population to the status of major to graduate student to graduate and on up the ranks of the professoriate, at least according to the assumptions of the old job market. This arrangement separated the products of history—books, articles, lectures—from the process of doing history and made it easier for historians to claim a unique authority for understanding and explaining the nation's past. Historical expertise was a trait of society at large. Television has changed this situation for historians—and for doctors and lawyers and politicians—while it has also changed the relationships between men and women and adults and children.<sup>3</sup>

In a word television has greatly reduced the size of the backstage area that groups kept for themselves away from the view of outsiders. Through television children have gained more knowledge of the adult world; men's and women's knowledge of each other has been expanded; and much of professional life has been revealed to the "layperson." In each instance the result has been a demystification of the group by undercutting their public, front stage personas with information showing these groups to be less Olympian, more human. The appeal to professional authority is less effective as the professional seems less different from the rest of society. Meyrowitz argues that the ability to separate what different groups in society know is a prerequisite for a hierarchically organized society and "the more a medium of communication tends to merge informational worlds, the more the medium will encourage egalitarian forms of interaction."<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the problem of the historian's relationship with the public may not simply be, as is often charged, that historians have withdrawn into a world of private jargon and esoteric issues. Instead the problem may be that the public now regards special language and obscure knowledge as average folks playacting as experts and not worthy of the uncritical acceptance of former days.

Although television has made few portrayals of working historians, the public has encountered the back stage regions of enough professionals to generalize those insights and resulting attitudes to a broad range of professionals including ourselves. Public acceptance of attacks on the American Historical Association as elitist are paralleled by growing acceptance of alternative medicine, do-it-yourself divorce kits, and

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<sup>2</sup>Meyrowitz, 46-51.

<sup>3</sup>See Meyrowitz, Chapter 12, "The Merging of Masculinity and Femininity," and chapter 13, "The Blurring of Childhood and Adulthood."

<sup>4</sup>Meyrowitz, 64.

home schooling. The implications of this public attitude for the historical profession is clearest in judgments made about the past by nonhistorians about the judgments of the historians. From this perspective the paradox of national contention over the nation's history coupled with widespread student apathy appears to be more apparent than real. Behind the *sturm und drang* generated by the national debates over the *Enola Gay* or the UCLA standards, the public attitude toward history frequently boils down to the question of whose judgments about the past will prevail rather than over how to evaluate different judgments or how to ground a judgment in evidence. For the public, history has become an aspect of memory or a by-product of politics rather than a rigorous examination of evidence preparatory to reaching conclusions about the past.<sup>5</sup>

This reality was driven home on a CNN "Crossfire" on the UCLA History Standards with guests Lynne Cheney and Eric Foner. Co-moderator Patrick Buchanan attacked the standards on the basis of the argument that history is the judgment of what is good and bad in the past, praiseworthy and blameworthy. He also asserted that classroom history should convey those judgments. This attitude reaches beyond the political arena. One community college instructor was quoted in a student newspaper as saying it was unfair to ask students to learn in eleven weeks what it took a professor twenty years to write. He tells students, "I've learned to sort out the most important parts and to forget the rest."<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the nation is returning to the history of Parson Weems, who invented episodes in George Washington's life to illustrate moral points.

This position, whether on CNN or in the classroom, reduces a three dimensional past to a series of one-line judgments comparable to the pronouncements made in the political arena and the radio talk show. This trend toward unsupported judgments is troubling in several ways—(a) there is very little effort, interest, or ability to compare or validate judgments; and (b) this condition encourages an a-historical history that decontextualizes judgments. As long as the knowledge of events and the use of evidence are not prerequisites for making judgments, there is no distinction between historian and "layperson." Students often reduce faculty presentations to the status of one person's opinion that may or may not accord with their own. In general, the nation seems to be at a point where citizens do not have the ability to move beyond the issuing of judgments to an analysis of the history involved in the judgment. Viewed in this way, the attitudes of our students are not that different from the national norm. They seem willing to regard their own judgments as equivalent to those made by instructors, although they lack the ability to show how they reached their own judgment or how to evaluate other judgments beyond an initial impression of whether or not they agree with the idea.

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<sup>5</sup>For fuller discussions of the impact of memory on the work of the historian, see the special theme issue, "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History*, 75 (March, 1989), and also Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), especially Part Four that deals with the period from 1945 to 1990.

<sup>6</sup>"Faculty Spotlight," *GTCC Gazette* (Guilford Technical Community College, Jamestown, NC), 2, No. 5 (February, 1995), 3. I do not have the date of the "Crossfire" program.

This condition, common to society and the classroom, can be identified as one of the by-products of the television age. The view that people have gotten of the back stage activities of doctors or historians has demystified the profession without shedding added light for the public on how these groups did their work. In other words, the awareness of the back stage activities of professionals was not followed by appropriation by the public of the methods of analysis that helped establish the expertise that separated the professional from the rest of society in the first place. This problem is compounded by the realization that television has restructured knowledge in society.

For example, the children of print media (most teachers) can usually point to the specific sources for their knowledge—"I got this idea from that book." Furthermore, in a recent survey many historians reported which books specifically influenced their decision to become historians or their outlook on a particular topic. In contrast, television is a general source of information about the world; all knowledge comes from the same place—the television set—and it comes without footnotes and generally vanishes the moment it reaches our ears. Except for videotaping (which is not that widely used, according to Meyrowitz), the program has no continuing presence that can be referred back to, that can be examined more closely and validated or denied. Furthermore, television emphasizes individual feelings rather than hard information. Meyrowitz argues that, in the presence of a national issue, print media present the analyses of experts while television shows interviews with people who are experiencing the problem. This also prepares our students to think that the most important part of any issue is one's own reaction to it.<sup>7</sup>

Also, as Neal Postman has pointed out, the new conjunction that connects thoughts in the television age is "now, this," which is used by newscasters to tie their stories together. A viewer with a remote control can achieve the same affect by jumping from channel to channel with a logic not apparent to any other viewers in the room. The original context that gave order to a set of facts or events is lost on the television viewer who is left with factoids (a CNN term) to rearrange at will. The conjunction "now, this," according to Postman, actually means "that the world as mapped by the speeded-up electronic media has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously."<sup>8</sup>

The impact of television, as outlined above, appears in student work as (a) generalizations without support, (b) "analytical" papers that convey student reactions rather than analysis, (c) inability to present events in a chronological sequence, (d) memorization of groups of facts accompanied by no ability to manipulate these events, (e) resistance to reading.

Before turning to classroom practice, it is important to underscore the role of professional judgment because it lies at the core of the argument for a "side stage"

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<sup>7</sup>Meyrowitz, 90.

<sup>8</sup>Neal Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 99-113. The quotation is on page 99.

approach to history. Some people may object to the focus on "judgment" as the critical distinction separating historians from the general public. First of all, citizens have to be aware of the background to a variety of issues in order to act as informed voters. To question their judgment on historical issues is to question their competence as citizens, although many of us cringe at the judgmentalism of the voters that passes for judgment. In addition, for historians, the proximity of the definitions of "judgment" and "judgmental" may make us uneasy in ways that did not seem to afflict our "Olympian" forebears. What has happened? In Meyrowitz's terminology, historians have lost much of their back stage area because people have seen or assume they know what is there. Therefore, for students who are unaware of the thought processes behind judgments—the rationales for what we do—our judgments can look as arbitrary as those made by students. Insisting for the validity of the teacher's judgments merely makes instructors look arbitrary and judgmental in the eyes of our students. The solution to the problem is to introduce students to the world behind the front stage performance, to acquaint them with the back stage processes that they overlooked as they assumed familiarity with what we do as historians. In short, teachers need to introduce students to elements of the world of the professional historian. This effort should present history as a way of knowing the world, as a process, not simply as a body of data to be memorized. What we need to do in the classroom is not lament the good old days when historians were regarded as Olympians presenting the fruits of their study on a classroom stage (which may be a highly idealized reading of the past). Rather students need to gain an awareness of the nature of historical study and the production of historical knowledge that ought to underlie the judgments they are so willing to make. The side stage perspective gives students insight into these issues without losing some sense of what the product of historical study looks like.

Before the first day of class faculty members should reassess their assumptions about their courses and their students. Do they really teach the course in accordance with their assumptions of what students should gain from historical study? In addition to believing in the value of teaching history as a way of thinking about the world and as a necessary preparation for being an effective citizen, this essay makes other assumptions that underscore the value of a side stage approach.

1. Students will take no history courses beyond the introductory survey. Although the number of history majors may be on the rise at elite colleges and *Workplace 2000*<sup>9</sup> may state that the study of history will prove valuable in the twenty-first century job market, most students at present seem intent on selecting majors tied to specific career choices. This reality has an important implication for historians. The introductory course must be a complete introduction to the study of history—faculty cannot present a partial package that will attain "completeness" when followed by advanced study. For example, teachers cannot argue that the survey presents the "basic facts" as preparation for

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<sup>9</sup>Joseph H. Boyett and Henry P. Conn, *Workplace 2000: The Revolution Reshaping American Business* (New York: "Plume Books," Penguin, 1992), 294-298.

advanced study that will show students the way historians locate, validate, and interpret these facts. This notion that students move along a continuum from facts toward interpretation in higher-level courses breaks down for the average student. The model makes sense to those who took the whole trip, but if our students are only going to sample our subject, they need to take more than just the first steps of the longer journey—they need some idea of the whole venture from the outset.

2. The function of college is to promote thinking rather than learning.<sup>10</sup> Behavioral scientists use the term “learning” within the context of operant conditioning. In this field learning occurs when the test subject learns to produce a particular response in the presence of a particular stimulus. Pavlov’s dog learned to associate the ringing of a bell with food and salivated at the stimulus of the bell without the presence of food. Similarly, students learn to respond “George Washington” when given the stimulus of “who chopped down the cherry tree.” Although this may be a valuable preparation for an appearance on “Jeopardy,” it is not college. Thinking involves solving puzzles where there is no one correct answer and being able to show another person the process of analysis that led to any particular solution.

3. One of the major lessons of graduate school, a back stage activity from the perspective of the student in the survey course, is seldom presented in class. Graduate education usually includes the inculcation of a sense of the limits of a person’s historical expertise on any subject. The historian should possess a clear awareness of the line between what one knows and what one doesn’t know and should have developed the ability to extend the borders of that knowledge. Shouldn’t this aspect of historical study be conveyed to students?

The classroom implementation of a side stage view requires that students receive clear insights into the back stage regions of the historian in order to appreciate more fully what is involved in the preparation of the front stage products of historical study. In the classroom faculty should convey to students some of the perspectives and skills that students as well as society at large failed to appropriate during the process of demystifying the study of history.

1. Place your course and your structuring of the course into larger contexts on the first day of class. In general, faculty are encouraged to spell out to students the course requirements and how the grade will be determined. Historians seldom discuss why they do what they do.

a) Whether the course is western civilization or American history, faculty could discuss the genealogy of the course. For example, why do Americans require western civilization when it is not offered in Europe? Discuss the historical events that prompted Americans to adopt required sequences in U.S. history or western civilization.

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<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, “Puzzlements,” lecture delivered to Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation/Exxon Corporation Summer Institute, “Interpreting the Humanities,” June, 1986.

b) Students are often unaware that textbooks differ beyond the color of the cover. Faculty should explain what a textbook is, their rationale for using textbooks, and the reasons for selecting the particular one listed in the syllabus.

c) Discuss the mode of testing used in the course and show how it is related to the nature of historical study.

2. Historians should incorporate a side stage approach into their lectures. A front stage lecture contains a series of judgments about past historical actions. For historians listening to historians, this is the moment to evaluate and appreciate historical judgment. Historians carry on a silent dialogue with the presenter. How were conflicting notions of causation of the particular event handled? How did the lecturer deal with alternative theories or conflicting evidence? Were there holes in the argument? Was adequate attention paid to alternative analyses? But for students the lecture may be regarded as a series of arbitrary statements no different from the arbitrary statements they hear in other contexts, be they at the dinner table or the radio talk show. They have learned to devalue expertise because they have seen so many backstages and so many experts in roles where they are merely fellow humans. Consequently, a well-crafted lecture loses a lot of its appeal.

A side stage lecture addresses the thought processes of the historian as part of the presentation of the finished product. Include discussion of the following questions: "How do I know what I know about this subject?" "What were the alternative explanations that I rejected?" "On what basis were they rejected?" For more recent topics include a discussion of the difference between history and memory, which was the distinction used by the Smithsonian Institution to justify scrapping the bulk of the *Enola Gay* exhibition. For years historians have asserted without demonstration that there is a line between history and current events. Select an example from the recent past to show how an actual historical perspective is different from what was known at the time for a specific issue. This can simply be a discussion of evidence that was not available at the time. In general, walk students through the process of making judgments. Show them the difference and have them carry out the assignments that involve this issue: Do not simply assert that there is a difference.

One model of this kind of analysis is Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire*, a series of analytical essays in which the author takes the reader through the thought processes undergirding his explanation for the death of thirteen smokejumpers at the Mann Gulch fire in Montana in 1949.<sup>11</sup> This tragedy represented the greatest loss of life experienced by U.S. Forest Service smokejumpers, parachuting firefighters who work in the roadless areas of the Rocky Mountains. Each chapter addresses a riddle that Maclean believed had not been adequately addressed in the official investigation. The author talks the reader through his analysis and includes the initial puzzlement over why things happened the way they did, consideration of a range of possible explanations, and the

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<sup>11</sup>Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).



reasons for preferring one explanation over the others. Maclean died before he could transform his study into a traditional historical narrative, an act that would have deprived the reader of the opportunity to see the "back stage" operations of his mind.

3. Introduce the historiography of at least one topic into each course. This can be done by choosing two or more major interpretations and showing how and, where possible, why interpretations have changed over time. This approach should treat points of view as part of a conversation among historians that ought to reveal how historians think and why viewpoints can vary among historians and over time.

4. Use at least one "posthole" or "moment" in each course. A posthole approach devotes a significant portion of the course to the analysis of a single topic from a variety of perspectives usually using primary source materials. Students are assigned a broad range of materials that have to be organized into a coherent treatment by their use of the analytical perspectives of historians. Although the method sacrifices chronological coverage, the loss is more than offset by the increased ability of students to approach topics historically. And learning how to do this will stay with them far longer than any traditional coverage.

5. Use essay exams that require students to think historically and then evaluate their work for its effectiveness in presenting an historical argument. The exam is the students' opportunity to use their side stage insights as the basis for developing their own front stage presentations. Test questions that simply call for the restatement of a series of events reinforce student wisdom that history is "one damn thing after another."

6. Allow students to bring a 5" x 8" card of information to the first test—a cheat sheet, if you will. Have students hand it in with the test. Review the cards to see what students regard as important; the results can be illuminating. Students frequently list the generalizations they remember from class. Do they do this in the apparent hope that this information will stimulate the recall of appropriate supporting examples or do they regard examples as outside the scope of what is important to them in knowing the world? The Meyrowitz critique suggests that the latter statement is the correct analysis. In any case the card gives the instructor insight into student thought processes. In the terminology of this paper, this represents an opportunity for the instructor to see into the student's back stage area.

Classroom experience shows that students are interested in the past even though they may not approach it or comprehend it in the same way that historians do. It is the instructor's task to ensure that student interest in that past is historical. To achieve that goal they need more insight into historical thought processes than are present in the television environment. The side stage approach holds the answer—it is itself a product of the television age.