

## PAINTING SOCIETAL PORTRAITS: ONE APPROACH TO TEACHING CRITICAL READING AND WRITING

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The advent of active learning strategies and process-oriented writing in college courses in the last two decades offers historians tremendous opportunities for employing a contextual field to teach analytical reading and writing skills to all levels of college students. For myself, using "societal portraits" drawn from intercultural and international relations has provided both content and format to engage students in course materials and to help them become more effective in critical reading, thinking, and writing.

### **The Context**

From August 1993 to December 1994, I was a teaching assistant in the Department of American Thought and Language (ATL) at Michigan State University. ATL is organized solely to teach critical reading and writing skills to first-year students. It operates in close coordination with the university's Writing Center, and it specializes in teaching writing through a content-driven American Cultures reading curriculum. In essence, professor, lecturers, and teaching assistants teach critical writing through the introduction of primary materials, such as documents, novels, ballads, and poetry, with American cultural themes as their common intellectual link.

All undergraduates students at Michigan State must pass an English proficiency examination and a two-tier writing requirement to graduate. Those admitted to the university lacking a minimum level of proficiency are admitted to ATL to take a one-semester "Preparation for College Writing" course. These students then proceed onto the "regular track," which entails taking one of a number of specialized courses, such as radical thought in American society, the impact of science and technology, the racial and ethnic experience in America, and gender issues in American society. Students in their second year then take another writing intensive course, entitled "America and the World," a course that includes video introductions to major schools of thought in American historiography, class discussion of primary documents, and critical analysis of major periods and issues in American cultural and society.

Working as a teaching assistant at an institution with more than 40,000 students usually means grading papers or running discussion sections in large lecture courses. ATL is different. Class sizes are capped at about 27 students per section and teaching assistants are assigned their own section. Teaching assistants are responsible for producing a syllabus, lectures, and lesson plans, as well as grading, advising their students, and administering the course. Supervision of TAs is maintained by assigning a full-time professor as a mentor to each TA. There is a collegiality in the department that I had not experienced in other parts of MSU, primarily owing to the commonality of the teaching assignments, the small size of the courses, and attempts by the departmental leadership to fully integrate teaching assistants into the department with weekly meetings, informal sessions, and departmental functions.

### Course Themes

The most broadly based of ATL's specialized courses is "Writing: The Evolution of American Thought," which I was assigned to teach in 1994. I had free rein to teach the course with a reading list of my own choice, as long as I fulfilled certain departmental guidelines. I used the History of American Foreign Relations as the reading context, but the course material emphasized writing at all times.

Weekly lectures and writing assignments were each wedded to the introduction of a specific writing skill. For example, the first week's assignment emphasized note-taking skills and strategies. The class then moved on to detecting and analyzing a thesis in a primary source, analyzing evidence, generating ideas for writing topics, critically reviewing a scholarly journal article and a personal memoir, and dissecting films and ballads as historical documents.

I decided that the best way to teach the course was to paint what I call "societal portraits" for the students. It seemed that "diplomatic history," or strictly government-to-government relations, would be too narrow a perspective to demonstrate to college students the evolution of American thought and language in the last five hundred years. Instead, I employed traditional diplomatic and military history, along with more contemporary interpretations of social, gender, economic, and ethnocultural history, to teach students about international and intercultural relations. Students could learn about North American and United States international relations by encountering societies that differed in areas such as political governance, economic subsistence, religious belief systems, the sexual division of labor, and methods of diplomacy and war. The role that these differences played in becoming the basis for culture clashing, diplomatic disagreements, and even armed conflict could then be explored to their fullest. Painting societal portraits was one way of teaching how and why societies mix, conflict, and, at times, peacefully coexist.<sup>1</sup>

For example, the very violent nature of colonial North America was not helped at all by the cultural animosity that arose as the result of misunderstandings between Europeans and Indians over religious belief systems, economic subsistence, and diplomatic symbols. It is easier to demonstrate to students how and why wars occurred in colonial North America when the instructor can provide a European "drawing room" perspective about

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<sup>1</sup>In their presidential addresses to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations in 1978 and 1995, respectively, Akira Iriye and Melvyn Leffler both discussed the means by which traditional diplomatic history can be transformed into broader forms of international and intercultural relations history. See Iriye, "Culture and Power: International Relations as Intercultural Relations," *Diplomatic History*, 3 (Spring 1979), 115-128; and Leffler, "Presidential Address: New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History*, 19 (Spring 1995), 173-196.

colonial politics and diplomacy *combined* with an "on the spot" perspective about how culture clash contributed to a dehumanization of the "other" by both sides. Anglo-Americans deriding the Indian sexual division of labor because women worked in the field while men prepared for the hunt is just one example of how ethnocentrism helped fuel cultural animosity and physical violence on the colonial American frontier where the politico-economic context was set by a competitive fur trade, mercantilist ideology, and balance of power politics. Moreover, these examples illustrate how seemingly unimportant events could take on life and death importance for nations, colonies, and peoples, and they illustrate to students how decisions made at policy levels affected commoners in a myriad of ways.<sup>2</sup>

Given the writing emphasis of the course, contextual lectures were kept to a minimum, only nine for the entire fifteen-week course. Only one lecture was devoted to "Ideas in Early American Foreign Relations, 1607-1789," but two entire weeks were devoted to analyzing and discussing reading assignments and primary documents about the same period. I assigned Thomas Paterson's *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy* as the documentary text, and I also required the Paterson-Clifford-Hagan *American Foreign Policy: A History* as the general text for the course.<sup>3</sup> Ideally, students were to read in the general text as they received a lecture, which occurred about once every ten days. The general material, which introduced ideas as motivating factors in history, was to guide students through the documents. These included pieces such as John Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill," Ezra Stiles's "The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor," and George Washington's "Farewell Address."

For the first five weeks of the course, documents such as these were the focus of the assignments. Each week, a one-page "documentary analysis paper" was due after presentation of general material by the instructor and small-group discussion by the students. Students were generally hesitant to discuss matters in a single group of 26, so I decided to divide groups into four students each. Discussion improved markedly and I was able to monitor that discussion by "floating around" to each group on various days.

These first weeks also entailed introducing students to concepts of writing and primary source analysis. Since this was a beginning writing course, I decided to start at "ground zero" and teach them about note-taking techniques, defining and identifying a

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<sup>2</sup>For an excellent example of how policy-level decisionmaking effected commoners in colonial North America, see John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story From Early America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>For the most recent editions of these texts, which emphasize a broader conception of international relations than previous versions, see Thomas G. Paterson and Dennis Merrill, eds., *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Vol. 1: to 1920 and Vol. 2: Since 1914*, 4th Edition (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1995); and Thomas G. Paterson, J. Garry Clifford, and Kenneth J. Hagan, *American Foreign Relations, Vol. 1: A History to 1920 and Vol. 2: A History Since 1895*, 4th Edition (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1995).

thesis, recognizing the difference between primary and secondary sources, analyzing evidence, and understanding the concepts of voice and audience in sources. These aspects of writing were the elements emphasized in the one-page papers. The papers, in turn, not only served as an introduction to primary source analysis but also as a convenient and easy way to gauge the students' writing capabilities at the beginning of the course.

The next section of the course dealt with the early national period of U.S. international relations. Students analyzed a scholarly article in the field. Lecture material provided information about what constituted a scholarly article, the variety of journals one could encounter in the historical field, and journals in other professional areas as well. *Diplomatic History* and *The International History Review* were emphasized as sources for articles, but students received a list of 43 journals from which to choose one article for a three-page analytical paper. The instructor had to approve the article, but students were given a wide latitude as to what constituted "international relations." Students chose, among other things, an article about U.S. Army officers' views on Indians during the early nineteenth century, Alexander Hamilton's perspective on international law as an adjunct to U.S. foreign policy, an analysis of NSC 68, and American views of the Cherokee Indians at the time of removal. Drafts of papers were photocopied and discussed in small groups so that students could obtain feedback about their theses, use of evidence, and analysis of the article's voice, audience, and sources. Moreover, these in-class discussions were supplemented with out-of-class student-instructor conferences where the instructor was able to read the paper and provide direct feedback to the student.

The middle to late nineteenth century was dealt with by viewing three films that moved the class from the colonial, early national, and antebellum periods to the Civil War and World War One. *Black Robe*, *Glory*, and *Men of Bronze* are all films about cultural contact issues and culture clash between Euro-Americans, American Indians, and African-Americans. Although these three films do not all deal with periods of United States history, they certainly address issues central to the evolution of American thought and language, and they allowed students the opportunity to analyze films as genre, historical documents, and even texts. Again, to introduce students to analyzing a film's voice, audience, and use of literary devices, two-page papers were discussed, analyzed in class, revised, discussed again, and presented in another round of student-instructor conferences.<sup>4</sup>

Films, in particular, can add to the effectiveness of courses. Several additional films, in fact, touch upon key issues in colonial American and United States history during various wartime periods. For example, *Last of the Mohicans*, with Daniel Day-Lewis, is an excellent introduction to analyzing how and why mythological history became the basis

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<sup>4</sup>See Robert Lantos, Stephane Reichel, and Sue Milliken, *Black Robe* (Hollywood, CA: Samuel Goldwyn Home Entertainment, Inc., 1991); Freddie Fields, *Glory* (Culver City, CA: Tri Star Pictures, Inc., 1991); and William Miles and Killiam Shows, *Men of Bronze: The Black American Heroes of World War I* (Beverly Hills, CA: Pacific Arts Video, 1977).

for eighteenth and nineteenth-century accounts of intercultural relations on the North American continent. Moving to the twentieth century, *Swing Shift*, with Goldie Hawn, a film about female aircraft factory workers in California during the Second World War, can introduce students to the changes that have come about in American society because of the Revolutionary, Civil, and World Wars, changes especially apparent in gender roles and relations. In effect, students learn that war, the basest form of international relations, not only changes the nation-state system, but produces change in domestic societies as well. Finally, *Gardens of Stone*, a depiction of the Honor Guard at Arlington National Cemetery during the Vietnam War, provides students with a view of that war's domestic results that they probably have not encountered. In *Gardens of Stone*, a career Army sergeant, played by James Caan, opposes the war in Vietnam because of his nationalism. His love of the United States Army dictates that he oppose the war because of its deleterious effects on "his army."<sup>5</sup>

The next section of the course dealt with the U.S.'s transition to imperial power status in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After an introductory lecture, students had to choose an autobiography or memoir of a person in the history of U.S. international relations and write a five-page analytical paper on the thesis, voice, audience, sources, and credibility of the volume. The subject's involvement in international relations could again be defined widely. Students read about immigrants encountering cultural animosity in the United States, common soldiers in wartime, and the experiences of Americans traveling abroad, as well as traditional accounts by presidents, diplomats, and generals. One student, for instance, analyzed Charlie Chaplin's account as an English immigrant to the United States in the early twentieth century. Most importantly, students learned first-hand how valuable revisions in scholarly papers could be, since the papers were turned in for an initial grade and then rewritten for a second reading and grading.

The final type of assignment was an essay examination, specifically chosen to simulate future testing conditions that students would undoubtedly encounter in other, larger classes at Michigan State. However, I was also hoping to simulate conditions students might encounter in the job market, such as timed writing tests as part of job interviews. To prepare the students for the examination, which was to cover Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, I first lectured on the Vietnam War and then had the students

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<sup>5</sup>See Michael Mann, *Last of the Mohicans* (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Video, Inc., 1993); Jerry Bick, *Swing Shift* (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, Inc., 1990); and Michael Levy and Francis Coppola, *Gardens of Stone* (Livonia, MI: CBS/Fox Video, 1987). The film *Mary Silliman's War*, produced by Steven Schecter, would be equally effective as a study of the American Home Front during the Revolutionary War era. American women taking on wartime responsibilities in significant numbers at that time in history would probably be an entirely unknown phenomenon to most undergraduate students. See Schecter, *Mary Silliman's War* (Claremont, CA: Heritage Films, Inc., 1993).

write a mock exam analyzing Billy Joel's ballad "Goodnight Saigon."<sup>6</sup> This assignment not only introduced students to a ballad as historical document and text, but also allowed them to analyze elements of the American experience in Southeast Asia directly from Joel's prose. The mock exam was not graded in order to alleviate pressure for the students, some of whom had never taken blue-book exams before this time. The lack of pressure on students, I think, helped them prepare for the "real thing" since it demonstrated to them the need for time management and the necessity for organization without the fear of damaging their grades.

Finally, the course also emphasized to students that critical reading and writing skills are highly marketable commodities in today's competitive job market. No matter the career field, be it business, government, or education, analytical skills are highly sought after and seemingly increasingly rare. Students were much more receptive and open to analyzing a myriad of issues from a variety of sources when they realized that the lessons were not just preparing them for survival in a Big Ten university or for life as an educated and informed American citizen, but also for obtaining their desired professional position in the world outside of academia.

In evaluating the course, students generally found that the format and assignments helped them in their preparation for other college courses. They seemed particularly intrigued by my use of North American history for the earlier portions of the course, and some even labeled the course a "writing of history" class. The following remarks were typical:

I found this class helped me write in a way I wasn't taught before. It showed me how to analyze papers and documents and write about them. I also learned a lot about American foreign relations, which was helpful because the information coincided with several of the other classes I had at the time.

Another student, a history education major, asserted,

I was bound and determined not to enjoy this class, yet somehow I failed. My major has forced me to acquire a broad American history background, yet this class introduced so much *new subject matter* and focused on such untraditional areas of U.S. history, I felt ignorant. *Excellent approach + incredible understanding* of students individual needs ...

Finally, I received the following evaluation:

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<sup>6</sup>See Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994); and Billy Joel, "Goodnight Saigon," part of *Billy Joel, Greatest Hits, Vol. 1 & @, 1973-1980*, produced by Phil Ramone (New York: Columbia Records, Inc., 1985).

I think that this History class taught me more about how to write an analytical paper than any other English or non-English class has in my 4 years of education.

### Changes to the Course and Suggestions for the Future

Since teaching this original course, I have devoted even more thought and practice to the teaching of specialty and survey courses. In the winter of 1995, I taught a 300-level course in U.S. International Relations from 1776 to 1914 to a group of MSU James Madison College international relations majors. Much to the chagrin of these students, who wanted primarily to study post-1815 balance of power diplomatic affairs, I emphasized non-traditional aspects of diplomatic history, such as the cultural role of American missionaries overseas, the diplomatic status of the various Indian nations during removal, and the United States's establishment of Liberia. In future courses dealing with the history of the United States international relations, I think the ideal two-semester survey would, in fact, entail one entire semester devoted to the study of North American international and intercultural history from the time of encounter to the Declaration of Independence, while the second semester would focus on U.S. international relations from 1776 to the present.

Now that I am teaching early American, modern American, and modern world history at Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn, Michigan, I have even begun to teach survey courses with different emphases on periodic coverage, topical treatment, and writing content. The early American survey not only encompasses critical writing via primary sources, discussion, draft reviews, and student-instructor conferences, but also goes far in demonstrating to students what a central role the North American Indians had in post-1492 affairs, as well as the role non-English European powers had in exploring, exploiting, and "Europeanizing" the continent. A broadened conception of "international relations" also suggests to students that early American history was much more complex than merely a "triumphant" westward migration of Anglo-American settlers. The fact that early American history was made on several conflicting frontiers fosters discussions about the definition of a frontier and the differing views of American historiography that have arisen since the 1960s. In addition, the presence of the Indians and their very different conceptions of government and diplomacy introduces students to debates about what constitutes a "nation-state" or "international relations." In effect, the existence of the Indian nations allows us to question if the European definition of international relations is the only possible one "suitable" for historical study and debate.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Excellent examples of this type of work include D.W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, Vol. 1, Atlantic America, 1492-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) and James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1992).

The modern American course, which I have rewritten along a thematic approach, carries on these issues of U.S.-Indian relations, but devotes much more time to analyzing international relations in broader global aspects since the United States began to participate in the global balance of power system as early as 1776. For example, what role did gender play in U.S. international relations, even before the 1840s?<sup>8</sup> What role did technology transfer play in U.S. relations with other nations during the antebellum period, especially with great powers like Britain or Russia?<sup>9</sup> What role did travel abroad by Americans play in the development or maturation of American exceptionalism?<sup>10</sup> When it comes to the twentieth century, was the space race just a sub-theme of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, a more general aspect of international relations history, or both?<sup>11</sup> Moreover, have we fully studied the effect of phenomena like the Cold War on domestic American society? What, for example, were the implications for the civil rights movement since the United States was waging the Cold War on a platform of individual political, economic, and social rights?<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

These questions are just a sample of the potential for content-based writing courses. Nor is the context limited to the history of U.S. international relations or American survey courses. In the fall semester of 1995, I began teaching a course entitled "Introduction to Science and Technology Studies" in Michigan State University's residential science program, the Lyman Briggs School. The course entailed teaching analytical reading and writings skills to first-year science students with a context of American technological and

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<sup>8</sup>See Edward Crapol, ed., *Women and American Foreign Policy: Lobbyists, Critics, and Insiders* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992); and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

<sup>9</sup>Norman Saul and Robert Allen, for instance, have both demonstrated how Imperial Russia looked to the United States as a reservoir of naval, industrial, and agricultural technology in the early nineteenth century. See Saul, *Distant Friends: The United States & Russia, 1763-1867* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), and Allen, *Russia Looks at America: The View to 1917* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1988). Alan Marcus and Howard Wiegel also demonstrates the significant degree to which Great Britain contributed to the American Industrial Revolution through the emigration of technicians and other forms of international technology transfer. See Marcus and Siegel, *Technology in America: A Brief History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

<sup>10</sup>See William Stowe, *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth Century American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>See Walter A. McDougall, ... *the Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985).

<sup>12</sup>See Thomas Noer, *Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948-1968* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985).



environmental history. Moreover, at Henry Ford Community College, I have rewritten my modern world history course. Previously, the course offered chronological coverage of the European world since 1750. It is now a thematic, transnational history course that explores major themes in world history since the European Enlightenment, such as war, diplomacy, imperialism, disease, industrialization, migration, environmental affairs, gender issues, labor history, world religions, and racism. This format breaks from my previous Eurocentric model and demonstrates to students continuities and changes in world history in a way that focuses their attention on broad themes and ideas, rather than chronological minutia.

The key advantage of teaching writing through history is that *any* instructor can teach the course using her or his specialty, especially given the ease with which primary sources can be presented to students through edited volumes in documents series such as D.C. Heath's *Major Problems in American History*. While many instructors, present company included, are limited by the number of writing assignments they can grade each semester because of class sizes and teaching loads, the key to teaching writing in an innovative, interactive way is to remain open and receptive to these new ideas, material, and techniques. Teaching writing through history is an ideal way to present students with intellectual challenges which will assist them in their collegiate and professional careers and, at the same time, introduce them to the scholar's craft in a meaningful, thought-provoking, and lasting manner.