

QUALITY CONTROL IN DISTANCE LEARNING: PRODUCING AND TEACHING A U.S. HISTORY TELECOURSE

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Even though some professors in the social sciences may wish it otherwise, technology has become increasingly significant in our professional as well as our personal lives. We know that colleges are using technology to broaden and enhance their educational offerings to "distant learners." Students who may be far removed from a traditional classroom setting can now use an array of video and/or computer connections to complete most if not all of their credits toward a college degree. As educators, we are concerned about the quality of all course work, and courses offered in an "unusual" way draw special scrutiny. As two professors who have been intimately involved in producing and teaching a telecourse, we believe that we can attest to the quality of this type of distance learning.

Television has become a major and respected source of history for masses of Americans. Well-crafted documentaries such as *Lincoln* and *The Civil War* have shown millions of viewers the real-life drama, glory, and heartbreak of history. A&E's Biography series and The History Channel are welcome additions to the cable line-up. Moreover, most of our students have grown up in the television age and feel more comfortable in front of a TV set than with a book in their hands. We may deplore this fact, but because of it, it is incumbent upon us to see that our students, if they are going to get some of their history from television, view materials that are accurate and well-produced.

Telecourses (regular college courses using television as a major disseminator of information) have come a long way from the "talking heads" of years ago. Film, interviews with respected authorities, and first-rate graphics are now characteristic of the best telecourses in such diverse areas as history, government, sociology, psychology, anthropology, business, health, English, writing, and earth science.

Educational institutions themselves have become producers of quality telecourses, among them the Coast Community College District in California and the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) in Dallas, Texas. This essay is based on our experience in producing and teaching the second-semester U.S. history survey telecourse, "America in Perspective: United States History Since 1877," produced by the Center for Telecommunications of the Dallas County Community College District.

To have credibility with faculty, it is imperative to involve them at every step in the production. The content specialist for the course was a full-time history faculty member from the District, on loan to the center for two years. The research associate, also a history faculty member, worked on the project the first year. The faculty advisory committee was made up of one historian from each of the District's seven campuses, plus history faculty from seven other two- and four-year colleges in Texas, Oklahoma, Florida, Illinois, and

Wisconsin. Appointment to this committee was not just an empty honor or an adornment to one's resumé. The committee met frequently to plan the broad outline of the course, provide historical expertise, and, most important, review scripts for historical accuracy. Some faculty will denigrate telecourses as somehow lacking in quality; an actively involved advisory committee can do much to defuse such criticism.

We included in the course interviews with over 40 historians (and a few political scientists and economists), among them David Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Darlene Clark Hine, and George Herring. (For a complete list of professors interviewed, see the Appendix.) We believe that historians of this caliber added credibility to the course. Interviews with such first-rate authorities as these are something no traditional course can deliver, except through limited readings and occasional videos. Among the other interviewees were people who had lived through the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor survivors and other World War II veterans, a Japanese-American couple who had been interned during the war, and activists from the Civil Rights movement, including Julian Bond. We made a special effort to include racial minorities among the veterans interviewed, as a reminder to students that World War II was not just a "white man's war."

"America in Perspective" consists of 26 half-hour video programs, each of which is an integral part of a lesson in the course. We used professional writers to help draft the scripts, based on materials supplied by the content specialist and the research associate. It is important to use professional writers at this stage. They have the ability to make material understandable and interesting to the television viewer, which we historians sometimes have trouble doing. But the content specialist and advisory committee must have the final say over the content of each lesson.

Dallas's LeCroy Center for Telecommunications employs a number of people who have worked in instructional design and television production. Their skills are essential in the editing and final production stages of the lessons.

The research associate provided historical materials to the script writers and researched film and photo stills. For the latter we used the National Archives, the Library of Congress, photos in the public domain, a few state historical societies, film and stills from libraries in Dallas, and the generosity of some of those interviewed.

Besides watching the videos critically, students must read assignments in a textbook and a book of essays. The text for the course is Gary B. Nash et al., *The American People*, Vol. II--Since 1865 (4th edition, Addison Wesley Longman, 1998). The essay reader is Kenneth G. Alferts, C. Larry Pool, William F. Mugleston, eds., *Perspectives on America: Readings in U.S. History Since 1877* (American Heritage Custom Publishing, 1997). Text, reader, and videos are all correlated by a carefully drafted Study Guide, which is essential to student success (Kenneth G. Alferts, *Study Guide for America in Perspective: U.S. History Since 1877* [3rd edition, Addison Wesley Longman, 1998]). Each chapter in the Study Guide (corresponding to the 26 video programs) contains an overview and themes of the lesson, the reading assignments in the text and reader, focus questions for the text and video, other suggested readings, additional enrichment projects for extra

credit, and practice test questions. Successful students report that they work through these study aids in the Study Guide. Inasmuch as the amount of reading required is easily equal to that of a traditional classroom course, plus the fact that videos must be watched, skeptical faculty may be certain that the course does not "water down" the amount of study required of students.

Indeed, a well-produced telecourse might well be of higher quality than what instructors do in class each day. We all think we're pretty good in the classroom, but even the best teacher has an occasional "off day." Of more importance, an incompetent or lazy instructor, once he or she closes the classroom door, is largely a free agent, and it may take some time (if ever) to flush this person out; meanwhile, the real victims are the students. "America in Perspective" had sixteen professional historians involved. Scripts were rigorously critiqued. It would have been impossible, we believe, for major factual errors to have gotten by. That the course has received national recognition further attests to its quality (Blue Ribbon Finalist, Seventh Annual Video Competition, Community College Association for Instructional Television).

Who should take a telecourse? They are not for everyone, and this must be strongly emphasized at the initial course orientation. The DCCCD's Center for Telecommunications suggests this profile of successful telecourse students. They "are goal-oriented and self-directed, know how to learn independently, have prerequisite skills such as a college reading level, attend orientation, begin course activities immediately, set aside specific time on a routine basis for study, and contact the instructor promptly when they have questions about any aspect of the course." Students who do best are highly disciplined, motivated people capable of sticking to a schedule, meeting deadlines, and working on their own with a minimum of supervision. Students straight out of high school who lack self-discipline should be cautioned about taking telecourses. We Americans tend to view television as light entertainment, not requiring much concentration or thought. Thus some students will take a TV course thinking it is somehow "easier" than an in-class course. It is not. We always tell our telecourse students that the course will require just as much reading and work as a "regular" class, and quite likely more. From our experience, prime candidates are mature and motivated working adults whose schedules might preclude them from attending class regularly; those who live a long distance from a campus; parents with small children or elderly relatives to care for; and those in prison or otherwise confined. (The course is currently being used on U.S. submarines, for example.) Others who are hesitant or fearful about attending college may start out with a telecourse, find they like it, and go on to enroll in traditional classes.

If you offer a telecourse, the instructor must be a faculty member knowledgeable about it and committed to this type of learning. "Instructor" is a misnomer here, because you're not one in the traditional sense. What you do is provide the orientation at the beginning of the course, hold periodic group meetings with the students, administer and grade the exams, and, most important, be available regularly in your office, over the phone, and increasingly via e-mail for student questions and concerns. And you will get

questions. It should be emphasized that faculty (like students) who think a telecourse is less work than a traditional class might also be in for a surprise.

It is customary to give three or four exams during the semester. They can be multiple-choice, essay, or a mixture, depending on the wishes of the telecourse faculty, the enrollment, and your institution's emphasis on developing writing skills. The Center for Telecommunications provides a standard set of exams to users of the course, and these are a mixture of multiple-choice and essay. These can be used, or users can devise their own exams. Some colleges also assign a term paper. It is helpful to have a campus testing center where students can go on their own to take the exams, and to allow a window of 7-10 days per test, giving students maximum flexibility of testing times. However, in lieu of a testing center, the instructor can administer the exams at regularly scheduled times. But due to the varied schedules of working adults, you will find yourself giving the exam to one student at a time for as much as half the class, at all hours of the day and evening. Again, a telecourse is not a "free ride" for faculty!

The biggest downside to a telecourse is that students miss the classroom interaction of discussion with the instructor and other students. This is a big minus, and perceptive students pick up on it right away. However, a well-done telecourse can be of as high a quality as a course delivered the traditional way by a skilled instructor. Student surveys, studies of final grades, and comparisons with traditional courses reveal that students who complete telecourses experience about the same satisfaction and learning as with in-class courses.

One question we have asked on surveys administered to course completers is about the "amount of work involved." Typical responses are:

- "A lot more!"
- "more than traditional class"
- "More than usual. You need to pay strict attention to the reading material. In a class you can reinforce the reading material by the instructor's lecture."
- "more than expected"
- "Considerably more involvement with lessons. Spent ... 4 to 5 hours on each lesson"

To our question of "Amount learned":

- "Much more"
- "I learned much; it seems I have studied some material before, now it's sinking in"
- "about the same"
- "more because I had to make myself learn it"
- "probably more because you are forced to read instead of relying on lecture only"
- "tons"

Other student comments from evaluations include:

- "Read entire textbook, which is not always necessary in a regular course"
- "I learned a lot more than I usually learn in a class"
- "[This course] gives the student more responsibility. As long as we do our work we will be fine"
- "You need to be disciplined in order to do well"

In some ways, telecourses may become "traditional" compared to the courses being offered on the cutting edge of today's technology. Whatever form these courses take, we should insist that they include quality control measures similar to those used in telecourses. Only then can we be assured that our students will truly benefit from the advantages of modern technology and distance learning.

Appendix

Professors Interviewed and Topics

- Stephen Ambrose, University of New Orleans - World War II; The Nixon Presidency
 Gary Anderson, University of Oklahoma - The American Frontier
 Charles Banner-Haley, Colgate University - The Civil Rights Movement
 Robert Beisner, The American University - The Spanish-American War and Imperialism
 Tim Blessing, Pennsylvania State University-Berks Campus - The 1980s
 Julian Bond, The American University - The Civil Rights Movement
 Albert Camarillo, Stanford University - The Civil Rights Movement; The 1980s
 Calvin Christman, Cedar Valley College and University of North Texas - World War II
 Paul Conkin, Vanderbilt University - The Great Depression and the New Deal
 Roger Daniels, University of Cincinnati - World War II
 Allen F. Davis, Temple University - Progressivism
 Leonard Dinnerstein, University of Arizona - Immigration and Ethnicity
 Robert Divine, University of Texas-Austin - World War II; The Cold War; The Vietnam War
 Melvyn Dubofsky, State University of New York-Binghamton - The Labor Movement
 Peter Frederick, Wabash College - Populism
 Richard Fried, University of Illinois-Chicago - The Cold War
 Willard Gatewood, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville - Progressivism; The 1920s
 Lawrence Goodwyn, Duke University - Populism
 Lewis Gould, University of Texas-Austin - The Spanish-American War and Imperialism
 Hugh Davis Graham, Vanderbilt University - The Civil Rights Movement

- Otis Graham, University of California-Santa Barbara - World War I
 Kenneth Hamilton, Southern Methodist University - The 1950s
 Robert Heilbroner, New School for Social Research - The Great Depression; The 1980s
 George Herring, University of Kentucky - The Vietnam War
 Darlene Clark Hine, Michigan State University - African-American History and the Civil Rights Movement
 Joan Hoff, Indiana University - The Great Depression; The Nixon Presidency
 Julie Roy Jeffrey, Goucher College - The American Frontier
 David Kennedy, Stanford University - World War I
 Alice Kessler-Harris, Rutgers University - The Labor Movement; The Civil Rights Movement
 Jack Temple Kirby, Miami University (Ohio) - Progressivism
 Lester Langley, University of Georgia - The Spanish-American War and Imperialism
 Zane Miller, University of Cincinnati - Growth of Urban America
 Roderick Nash, University of California-Santa Barbara - The 1920s
 Joseph Nye, Jr., Harvard University - Recent American Foreign Policy
 William O'Neill, Rutgers University - The 1950s; The 1980s
 Ricardo Romo, University of Texas-Austin - The Civil Rights Movement
 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Writer and Historian - The New Deal; The Nixon Presidency
 John Stoessinger, Trinity University - Recent American Foreign Policy
 Studs Terkel, Author and Oral Historian - The Great Depression
 R. Hal Williams, Southern Methodist University - The Rise of Big Business
 Allan Winkler, Miami University (Ohio) - World War II; The 1980s