

HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE SURVEY

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When I finished graduate studies with a fresh Ph.D. in hand, I set out to conquer the world of academia.¹ I counted myself among the fortunate ones. I had a full-time job, one that would enable me to give up my adjunct workload of five or more classes per semester plus all of the summer session courses available. Although my field of interest was Colonial and Revolutionary America, specifically South Carolina, I had taught more World and Western Civilization (a subtle but important distinction to many historians) than the American survey. Moreover, I had been fortunate enough to land a few upper-level courses—often in areas such as Sports and Race, fields of interest to me but, again, not my research specialty. With my new position I would have the opportunity to work more frequently with students on research projects, hold office hours in an office rather than a coffee lounge, and have more substantive interactions with colleagues. It also would enable me to have the time and access to the library and funding resources to work on revising my manuscript and begin some new research projects.

Yet, what I was looking forward to most of all was getting away from the survey and instead leading discussion seminars filled with motivated undergraduate and graduate students questioning provocative readings. I would be able to select the books I wanted to use, instead of those mandated by the department, typically a single text, with no supplements and no copying budget to distribute even brief documents. I could get desk copies and even examination copies to fill out my bookshelves. (Word of caution, especially to those on one-year or other temporary appointments: Many of those exam copies become simply more boxes to lug from job to job.)

Now I realize that in many ways the survey offers the most rewarding teaching of all. Yes, you get many students who had a bad experience in high school with history. Many others are in majors completely unrelated to history who see the class as wholly irrelevant to their college experience and their world. However, all of that is more than compensated for by turning on students who previously hated history. They do not have to become a history major or minor, but just to get them to appreciate history and its utility, to see its usefulness, and to hate it no longer is, in many ways,

¹The author would like to thank his wife Martha for her help in completing this article and for making him a mindful teacher.

a much greater thrill than two hours discussing recent historiography of the American Revolution with graduate students.²

The survey is the first and often only chance to impress upon students across the college community both the beauty and importance of history. Now more than ever, as the United States confronts new challenges, American history seems to be especially relevant: Consider the violence of American foreign policy; the nation's quest for a global and national self-identity; the rise of the presidency; the balance of public and private rights; tensions with new immigrant groups in a nation of immigrants. All of these stories, generally a part of the American history survey, can and must be cast in a new light. If one of the chief complaints that our students have is that history is irrelevant to their lives and their learning, we can make them grasp its importance. History is everywhere around us and understanding not just the facts but the varied interpretations of people, events, and ideas is crucial to participating in American society.³

Pedagogically, we can do more to make history relevant to our students, their futures, and the world around them. We should emphasize writing, both the technical skills and the reflective practices, more than most academic departments do. We need to broaden our definition of texts, incorporating films, both features and documentaries, as well as music, advertising, and other forms of popular culture into how history continues to be used and contested in America today. Finally, we need to make the survey a course that is energizing and enjoyable for the professor and the students instead of a chore to teach or to take.

The history survey offers a prime opportunity to demonstrate the use and value of the basic skills of history. Many academics get frustrated with the public's understanding of history, which frequently seems more like trivia. Often at social gatherings, I would prefer to tell a new acquaintance that I am anything other than a history professor. Inevitably, you find yourself cornered by a self-proclaimed history "buff" bombarding you with minutiae and questioning how you can have a Ph.D. and not know who Lee's third in command was at Antietam. But in a world in which facts such as that are easily obtainable through a quick Google search, good history is the building block of knowledge and of information literacy. Facts are less important than the ability to read critically, the facility to look at differing opinions and points of view and understand those differences, the power to express yourself both in speaking and writing. All of these skills are useful, no matter what a person's future plans might be.

²There is a large and growing literature on ways to solve the problems of history surveys. For one recent approach see Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward the Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History*, 92 (March 2006), 1358-1370.

³For an outstanding critique of high school textbooks, some of which are used in the college survey, and the way history is taught in general, see James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

In a global economy what is essential are skills—the ability to find and make sense of all the knowledge constantly bombarding us. This is what we do everyday as historians.

History faculty can make an invaluable contribution to the university community and to society in general by helping students improve their writing. I am not advocating that we all become writing teachers, but I am confident that we can help students strengthen this vital life skill. And even those students who cannot see the relevance of history to their future should be able to see the importance of the ability to write to their future. Evaluating a variety of sources and reaching some kind of conclusion is not an exercise unique to historians.⁴ Yet, in an era in which departments throughout the Arts and Sciences compete for scarce resources, the potential to add additional majors or double majors and the ability to contribute to interdepartmental programs can make the difference in getting an additional faculty line.

I have found that writing is promoted best through short response papers. To further encourage students to work toward improving their grade over the course of the semester, I drop their lowest paper grade. Obviously some students simply take this opportunity to not hand in one of their assigned essays, but for many others it motivates them to work to improve their writing skills. It is also necessary to devise other ways to get students to think about their writing. On the day that the first essay is due, I devote the class session to peer review exercises.⁵ I have students read other student papers as peer readers and evaluate the papers according to a rubric I have developed, with points awarded for content, style, proper citation, organizations, and more. (See Appendix A for grading rubric.) This evaluation is double-blind, so that neither the reader nor the author knows who the other is. Each paper is evaluated by a minimum of two students.

This exercise works on a number of levels. It gives students feedback from their peers and not just me as the instructor. It helps them to see some common mistakes, maybe some they struggle with themselves. One unexpected benefit is that it clarifies for my students what I look for in an essay. My initial expectation was that students would award higher grades than me. I was surprised to find most of them to be tough graders, actually stricter than me in many cases. I was also pleasantly surprised by the consistency I found in having multiple students grade the same papers. More than three-fourths were within a plus or minus of their peers. The assignment has proven

⁴Stephen Adkison, Laura Woodworth-Ney, and Ronald Hatzenbuehler, "Writing History: Writing Assessment Design and Evaluation in Two American History Survey Courses," paper presented at the Annual National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, Bloomington, IN, 2001.

⁵For one look at peer review exercises, see Stephen Kneeshaw, "Using Reader Response to Improve Student Writing in History," *OAH Magazine of History*, 13 (1999), 62-65—available online at <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/progressive/kneeshaw.html>.

to be so successful that students who missed class have asked me to give their paper to other students so they can participate and benefit.⁶

These writing exercises have an additional advantage of forcing students to reflect on their writing. This adds another dimension of learning to what they have read and what we have discussed and emphasized in class. Students also begin to understand that writing is a skill, not a gift. I often point out to my classes that, if Thomas Jefferson needed help editing the Declaration of Independence, then we can all benefit from someone else reading and critiquing our written work.

But the survey cannot just be about writing. Nor can it be exclusively lecture.⁷ With evidence overwhelmingly proving that lecture is often the least effective form of conveying knowledge, other teaching styles must be brought into the classroom. Although I have found that students respond much better to PowerPoint than to my old-school lectures in which I used the chalkboard (and, no, I do not provide my PowerPoints as handouts to the students), the monotony of lecture must be broken up.⁸ This can be accomplished in a number of ways. One approach is to divide the class into small groups. Whether in breaking down the day's reading assignment or working on a project in and out of the classroom, today's students seem to respond better to working in teams.⁹

A favorite group exercise is a mock Constitutional Convention, with students working in small groups to represent a state at the Philadelphia convention. The entire class must work together, to reach compromises and overcome disagreements, to write a Constitution. In the five years I have done this assignment, the finished project rarely looks like what the Founders devised in 1787. In order to prevent students who do not contribute from benefitting from the handiwork of their team, each member gives a grade to each student in the group and evaluates their own contribution to the rest of the group, using a rubric that each student receives in advance. (See Appendix B for

⁶Peer grading was upheld by the United State Supreme court in *Owasso Independent School District vs. Falvo*, in February 2002. See Philip M. Sadler and Eddie Good, "The Impact of Self and Peer Grading on Student Learning," *Educational Assessment*, 11 (March 2006), 1-31. Other research indicates that peer grading is generally seen as successful by students and is generally an accurate measure of student achievement. See Patricia McLaughlin and Nicholas Simpson, "Peer Assessment in First Year University: How the Students Feel," *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 30 (2004), 135-49.

⁷For an interesting commentary on the lecture method, see Robert Blackey, "New Wine in Old Bottles: Revitalizing the Traditional History Lecture," *Teaching History*, 22:1 (Spring 1997), 3-25.

⁸Barbara A. Frey and David J. Birnbaum, "Learners Perceptions on the Value of PowerPoint in Lectures," January 31, 2002, accessed via ERIC.

⁹Diana Oblinger, "Boomers, Gen-Xers and Millenials: Understanding the New Students," *EDUCAUSE*, July/August 2003, 37-47.

grading rubric.) When read collectively, these give a good impression of what went on behind the scenes and enables me to adjust individual grades appropriately.

I also use a variety of audio-visual resources as another way to alter my classroom pedagogy. I have screened Hollywood movies such as *The Patriot*, *Glory*, and most recently *The New World* in my classes. Obviously none of these films is history the way we would want our students to learn it. But they are powerful texts for critical thinking exercises. Using *The Patriot*, for example, we can ask "What is wrong with Hollywood's portrayal of slaves in South Carolina during the American Revolution?" At a more basic level, these kinds of films teach fundamental lessons about how history is used in mainstream society. Politicians, advertising agencies, and Hollywood all manipulate American history constantly and students can and need to be taught to recognize that.¹⁰

I also like to use films to break up the routine of devoting class solely to lecture and discussion. One favorite tactic is to cancel class during the day and screen the movie at night, allowing students to view the movie in its entirety and with the whole class. Although this means that students are technically in class for a longer period of time, they feel better about it because they did not have their regular class session. Viewing films as a class at night becomes a social experience, with the audience laughing, grasping, and learning together.

Within the normal class session, documentaries and PBS "reality" shows, such as *Frontier House* and *Colonial House*, can be useful, both for providing visuals and for inviting outside experts to weigh in on history. In an even shorter form, *Schoolhouse Rock* episodes, those three-minute lessons that appeared after a Saturday morning spent watching cartoons, offer a fun and entertaining account of some historical events. These visuals all must be used critically. *Schoolhouse Rock* in particular seems like a dated 1970s version of the consensus school of American history, but it has the benefits of holding student interest and provoking discussion on history and its uses.¹¹

It is also useful to incorporate popular culture into the history curriculum. Chevrolet's "An American Revolution" and "This is my country" campaigns and Nike's "Don't Tread on Me" ads promoting the U.S. men's soccer team for the 2006 World Cup were useful for applying American history to popular culture. This is an easy example of how history is relevant, of how perception and popular knowledge about a certain subject is manipulated to construct an image in the public mind. These ad campaigns were designed to tap into our prior knowledge about a topic with a

¹⁰Ryan Sprau, "I Saw It in the Movies: Suggestions for Incorporating Film and Experiential Learning in the College History Survey Course," *College Student Journal*, 35 (March 2001), 1.

¹¹John E. O'Connor, "Reading, Writing and Critical Viewing: Coordination Skill Development in History Learning," *The History Teacher*, 34 (February 2001), 183-192.

positive connotation. After all, don't we all embrace the American Revolution every July 4, as the nation's birthday and the dawn of freedom and liberty? What better way to express that freedom than purchasing a new Chevy or a pair of Nikes?

If people, our students included, were not interested in history, then big-budget movies such as *Gladiator* and *Pearl Harbor* would not get made. There would not be a television channel devoted to history, which now has several variations on digital cable and DirecTV, if America were not tuning in to history. We cannot be afraid to use this popular interest for history in our classes. Yes, the student who watches the History Channel uncritically and who is only interested in military history has much to "unlearn" in the American history survey as it is frequently taught. But a large part of that responsibility falls on us, the classroom instructor, to harness that interest in history and turn it to productive purposes.

All of this is not to say that I do not enjoy upper-level and graduate courses in my areas of specialty. I do. I have found, however, that these courses always help inform my survey as well. Reading new monographs or simply discussing shopworn topics with a new group of students provides additional insights into survey subjects. Information for specialized classes is converted easily into materials for the survey. This has the added benefit of keeping things fresh for both me and my students. Instead of just "pressing play," I'm adding new scholarship and anecdotes to the survey course.

Similarly, that is why I take the opportunity to teach the second-half of the survey (American history since 1865). Although outside of my primary research interests, this course offers an opportunity to cover topics and themes of interest to me but outside of areas I normally teach. I will not be publishing on the 1960s, but it is still enjoyable to teach about the civil rights movement or apply lessons of the Vietnam War to contemporary American society. If anything, incorporating movies, music, and popular culture is easier in the second half of the American history survey than it is in the course ending with the Civil War.

This is just a small sampling of ideas that I have used to reinvigorate my history teaching.¹² Although many of them have been discussed and dissected before, my point is to show how easily they can become a part of classroom routine. We would not be in the profession if we did not love it. Almost all of us, I suspect, consider ourselves lucky to have a career in which we get paid to do something we love. In addition, we have the opportunity to make a difference. We can turn our students on to history, even if they had previously despised the subject. We can show them that history is relevant to the primary questions and issues facing the United States today as well as to the central mission of higher education. As a profession, there is simply no excuse for not embracing this challenge. There is no reason not to experiment with new teaching

¹²For a survey of recent articles on improving content and interest in history classes, see Allen E. Yarema, "A Decade of Debate: Improving Content and Interest in History Education," *The History Teacher*, 35 (May 2002), 389-398.

methods or to use all of the facets of modern society to apply the skills of the historian's craft. We can and should be doing more to use new technologies, to appeal to different learning styles, and to reach as broad an audience as possible. We must not let the survey become a chore. Instead, we should seize it as an opportunity to take risks in our teaching to attract others to a field we love.

APPENDIX A: Peer Grading Rubric—Writing Exercises

Paper Title _____

Your Name _____ Paper's Last Initial _____ ID# _____

Instructions: Evaluate the paper based on the criteria listed below. Please do not write on the paper itself, but feel free to make additional written comments on the bottom and reverse of this page.

Content (30 points) _____

Does the paper answer the question in a comprehensive manner?

Does the author present his/her opinions instead of just summarizing the readings?

Does the author have a clear thesis?

Does the author demonstrate s/he has read and understood all of the readings?

Sources and Evidence (20 points) _____

Does the author make sufficient use of evidence from the readings, including quotes?

Are sources properly cited?

Organization (20 points) _____

Does the paper flow logically from the beginning to end, sustaining and proving the thesis?

Does the first paragraph introduce the author's argument clearly and concisely?

Does the author summarize the main ideas in the conclusion?

Style/Grammar (20 points) _____

Is the paper easy to read and understand?

Does the author make proper use of grammar (no run-ons, fragments, etc.), punctuation, and vocabulary?

Does the author vary phrasings and sentence structure?

Overall Assessment (10 points) _____

What is your overall analysis of this paper? _____

Total Points _____

Make any additional comments here and on the back.

**APPENDIX B: Peer Grading Rubric—
Constitutional Convention Activity**

Name _____

Group _____

At the bottom, please write the name of every member of your group, including yourself, then assess the degree to which each member of the team fulfilled his/her responsibilities to the group. Assessments are as follows:

- Excellent** Consistently went above and beyond. Aided teammates, carried more of the load than his/her share.
- Very Good** Consistently did what she/he was supposed to do. Active participant in the group's activities. Well prepared and cooperative.
- Satisfactory** Usually did what he/she was supposed to. Adequately prepared.
- Ordinary** Did some of what he/she was supposed to. Minimally prepared.
- Marginal** Did not fully participate, few contributions. Rarely prepared.
- Deficient** Rarely participated in the group. Unprepared.
- Unsatisfactory** Consistently failed to complete assignments and responsibilities.

Name

Assessment

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Your Signature _____

You may use the back or another sheet to add additional comments/justifications for each assessment. You must provide a paragraph stating your contribution in greater detail.