

FROM CONTENT TO PROCESS: A WORLD CIVILIZATIONS TEACHING EXPERIMENT

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As a historian-teacher, I relied on my own experiences as a student to shape and structure my own teaching. The instructional method preferred by my mentors, colleagues, and even students has always been lecture, with minimal student participation, and I adopted that approach for myself. Lectures often included a smattering of visual arts, music, and video. We told students what to look at, what they were seeing, and how to interpret it. We relied on the benign ignorance of students as we faced the demands of academia: content limited by time, space, exams, cramped schedules, and a heavy teaching load. The students, particularly in survey and general education classes, simply did not know what they were not getting. Semester after semester I fought to get students involved in their own learning. More by instinct than by training, I insisted on student participation in the classroom.

Like most professors teaching World Civilizations, I feel challenged to cover the world in fifteen weeks.¹ During most terms the schedule dictates pace and coverage. Table 1 provides a brief overview of how I traditionally organized the course and materials I covered.

Unfortunately, nothing got covered satisfactorily. The students felt overwhelmed and I often felt pressured to focus on large thematic approaches (frequently frustrating myself and the students) or to pick and chose from the text's coverage rather than lead a real context-rich exploration of the material. Rarely is the learning process itself addressed; assessment is based on a student's mastery of "factoids" and the ability to choose the right answer (in multiple choice exams) or somehow to articulate a coherent recounting of five or more class weeks of information in a rushed essay exam.

A recent faculty development experience opened my eyes to new research on learning and teaching and transformed the way I approach all my classes. This article addresses how I shifted my World Civilizations 1500 course to a learner-centered, process-focused class.

¹At Oklahoma City University we offer two World Civilizations surveys sequentially, but students rarely take them back to back. Frequently, students take the classes out of order and with several semesters between them.

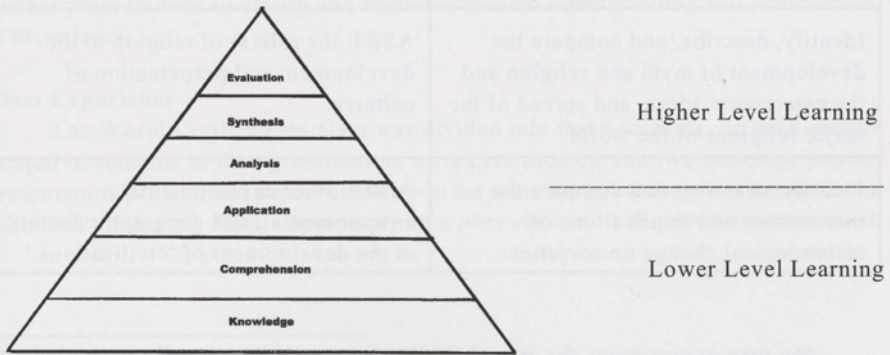
Table 1: Content and Schedule of World Civilizations Classes

	World Civ to 1500	Since 1500
Weeks 1-4	Introduction to history and to periodization and its problems (why end at 1500); Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China, paganism, Zoroastrianism, social hierarchies, political developments, artistic and literary conventions, and changes in technology	Introduction to history and to periodization and its problems (why start at 1500), Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas pre and post-Columbus, Christianity, the Renaissance in Europe, philosophical developments, social hierarchies, political developments, artistic and literary conventions, and changes in technology
Week 5	Review and Exam 1	Review and Exam 1
Weeks 6-10	Classical Greece, Classical Rome, India, China, Africa, nomadic societies, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Daoism, Confucianism, animism, social hierarchies, political developments, artistic and literary conventions, and changes in technology	European exploration and colonialism, internal and external responses, the Reformation, Asia, Africa, Japan, industrialization, social hierarchies, political developments, artistic and literary conventions, and changes in technology
Week 11	Review and Exam 2	Review and Exam 2
Weeks 12-15	Fall of Rome, Europe, Christianity, the Crusades, Islam in Africa and Asia, China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, the Americas, the Renaissance in Europe, social hierarchies, political developments, artistic and literary conventions, and changes in technology	Focus on 20 th century: World Wars, industrialization and development, imperialism and anti-imperialism, decolonization, dependency theory and its challengers, modernization, political theory and philosophy as seen in the streets around the world, social hierarchies, political developments, artistic and literary conventions, and changes in technology
Week 16	Review and Final Exam	Review and Final Exam

World Civilizations to 1500 Reconsidered²

Over a summer, after reading the work of Benjamin Bloom and other writers on teaching and learning, and discovering what that research indicated (and my own experience validated) on rates for retention of knowledge, I realized that in good conscience I could no longer present a straight lecture-based course. Research suggests that students retain only about ten percent of what they read, twenty percent of what they hear in lectures, thirty percent of what they see (graphics, charts, and so forth), fifty percent of what they hear and see (for example, videos), seventy percent of what they say or write, and, at the top end, ninety percent of the information when they say and do an activity.³ This research challenged my understanding of effective pedagogical method and prompted me to refashion my World Civilizations class for the next fall term and to incorporate student learning into the objectives. This required a frank appraisal and reworking of my syllabus and an acknowledgment that for years I simply had done what many history professors do: I had listed my objectives for *teaching* rather than focus on objectives for student *learning*.

Figure 1: Bloom's Taxonomy⁴



²See <http://web.mac.com/critterdom/iWeb/Hooper%27s%20Study%20Pages/Welcome.html> for the class syllabus, blog, rubrics, and all associated materials.

³The Learning Pyramid on retention of knowledge had been attributed erroneously to a study by Jerome Bruner. My own research indicates that that attribution was not only false, but that the data itself is suspect. I include it here because the pyramid acted as a significant portion of the rationale that I used to restructure my courses. Based on what I had been given, I presented it to my students as a result of a study by Bruner. To see the Learning Pyramid, go to <http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/polovina/learnpyramid/about.htm>.

⁴The graphic on Bloom's Taxonomy is adapted from Benjamin S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Education Goals* (New York: Longman Green, 1956). Also see http://www.pnl.gov/cogInformatics/learning_thrusts.stm.

Based on my new understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), I reworked the objectives for Western Civilization to 1500, changing them significantly from those I had used for the same course in the previous year. The biggest change was the shift from a focus on content to a focus on the learning process.

Table 2: Course Objectives

Original Course Objectives	New Course Objectives
Identify, describe, and compare the major achievements, events, and ideas of the period and the development of political and social institutions.	Analyze, synthesize, and evaluate (AS&E) social, cultural, and political developments that led to the emergence of civilizations across the world.
Identify, describe, and compare the interactions and implications of technological change on societies.	AS&E the impact of nomadic peoples on those societies.
Identify, describe, and compare the development of myth and religion and the emergence, ideas, and spread of the major religions of the world.	AS&E the role(s) of religion in the development and perpetuation of cultures.
Identify, describe, and compare the interactions and implications of technological change on societies.	AS&E other developmental, environmental, and geographic factors in the development of 'civilizations.'

My own expectations for World Civilizations students actually expanded. As Table 2 shows, the new objectives shifted from lower-level learning to higher-level learning. Rather than expect students to simply know the facts and processes of history (information that they had always argued was of little use in the "real world"), I now expected them to demonstrate their abilities to *analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and communicate* those processes, events, or issues. To accomplish any higher-level learning, students still had to learn and incorporate the lower-level "factoids."

I expected that, with new objectives in place, the issue of relevance of the material and the course would diminish and students would more readily accept that the *skills* developed in this approach were indeed relevant to their futures. Each student received handouts explaining the taxonomy and the learning pyramid. In class, I explained Bloom's Taxonomy, and as a group we went through Bloom's various levels using everyday examples of identification, understanding, application, etc. We

identified the lowest three levels as LLL: Lower Level Learning. HLL referred to higher levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. I explained to students that to achieve a "C" grade in the class, they had to demonstrate their abilities to the synthesis level, while a "B" required evaluation. They could only earn an "A" grade by demonstrating an ability to discuss the ramifications and implications of their evaluation, what we called Hooper's Historical corollaries (HHC).⁵ At multiple points throughout the term, I (re)explained and (re)modeled all three levels and debriefed students' work to reinforce and clarify objectives and expectations.

In all three of my classes, student buy-in was immediate and universal.⁶ They agreed that lecture was largely ineffective in their own learning, even as some continued to argue that lecturing equaled teaching. Most acknowledged that a lecture-based class was easier for students than classes taught by other instructional methods. A good portion of the class noted that they learned little from reading texts, as reading was something they rarely did except for classes. More than one admitted to being an unskilled reader.⁷ Few were eager to participate fully in class presentations, although the prospect of creative projects and no exams proved popular. Virtually all of the students were unsure they could differentiate between Bloom's levels of learning. Thus, we spent considerable time throughout the semester reviewing and debriefing student presentations to clarify and reinforce student understanding and achievement of these levels.

Class Experience

The World Civilizations class was divided into three sections. In each section I required students to do a presentation, a creative project, and two two-page papers. Presentation, project, and papers could be on the same topic, but they required different skills and products.⁸ Each paper required a peer review. I distributed rubrics to all

⁵The HHC were intended to get students to look beyond the immediate context and discover what some of the implications and ramifications of a process or development might be. For example, an HHC for Roman economic dependence on slavery could be how that dependency influenced contemporary Roman society and their neighbors or rivals, how those groups viewed future social and political developments, or how slavery influenced the way the Romans lived.

⁶The other classes were both second-year level: Ancient Egypt and Women's Studies: Nineteenth-Century European Women. The discussion that follows is based on term-long conversations and debriefings conducted in all three classes.

⁷In fact, 24 of the 29 students surveyed considered themselves unskilled readers, unsure of their own reading comprehension.

⁸The syllabus for the class is on the web link cited above.

students for all required work and made them available through the class website.⁹ We went over the rubrics for each kind of assignment to ensure that students were familiar with the expectations and criteria for each project.

In Section One, student performance was marginal to good. Too often the presentations were simple restatements of text materials (LLL) and only occasionally challenged students to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate (HLL) the materials in light of the class objectives. The presentations ran long as well, making the first section nearly half again as long as expected and scheduled. The creative projects were little better, as students spent more time on product than content or process. For example, one student built a model of a pyramid but could not answer basic synthesis questions raised by such monumental structures. Most posters—a favorite creative project—were ill-considered and poorly designed, demonstrating clearly that students did not consult or consider the poster rubrics. The papers suffered the same fate. Many were extremely poor, and almost one third of the class submitted failing papers (eight of 27). Peer reviews were required, but they were little more than afterthoughts for nearly all students. Again, few students bothered to follow the instructions or take the peer review seriously. Even the most cursory reading of the poor papers made it clear that students were not reading the text unless it was for their own presentation. In class, they readily admitted that they had not read the required texts and had not done so because “there’s no test.”

The end of the section provided an excellent opportunity to review the problems, enhance the quality of student work, and re-emphasize the importance of higher-level learning. In one of the most rewarding conversations I have ever had with a class, the students and I walked through the Learning Pyramid and Bloom’s Taxonomy again, and I shared with them what employers often tell academics: Employers need, value, and hire people who can read, understand, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from a variety of sources and then communicate that information clearly to various audiences. The students then speculated on how those skills were manifest in various jobs and careers. More importantly, several students shared with their peers their own growing awareness of how they used and developed these same skills in their other classes. Students became fully engaged in revising the remainder of the term’s assignments. We decided to drop the presentations and creative projects for Section Three but to keep the papers. We also changed the overall grading scheme to account for the changes.

This session was extremely fruitful, as presentations, creative projects, and papers for Section Two improved greatly. Several students consciously incorporated Bloom’s Taxonomy into their presentations, building their work around explicitly moving students from one level to the next as a part of their material. Presentations were more sophisticated and concentrated on achieving not just the higher levels of

⁹All rubrics are linked off the website cited above.

learning (HLL) but making a concentrated effort to reach the HHC. For example, one team of students created a large floor map of the continents and had the class try to position the pieces. The class was astonished at their own misconceptions of relative space and distance; they were pleased to be able to locate successfully the civilizations they had studied on the resulting map. We used the map to explore issues such as trade, nomadic movements, and the spread of diseases. In another presentation, students used colored yarns to illustrate trade between groups and the growing interdependency of trade groups and routes. I was given a pair of scissors, and acting as "War" literally cut connections. This prompted an excellent discussion of the social, political, and economic impacts of non-economic forces (e.g. war, disease, and climate change). The groups addressing Africa and Islam divided the larger class into culture and climate groups to generate discussions of language, cultural diffusion, and trade. They asked me to act as a slaver, and I raided one group to sell to another. This sparked more discussion of the impact of slavery on raiding, raided, and receiving cultures. These sorts of activities generated intense discussions of the implications of such processes and served as dynamic examples of HHC work.

The creative projects also improved as a result of the post-section-one review. We had fewer posters (still of poor quality despite clear rubrics) and more individual work. Some of the more intriguing projects explored the ways that cosmetics and their use illustrated the social and cultural constructs of their society. Another group brought in candy, cookies, and muffins made with sorghum and described where and how sorghum was grown and used. They had ordered sorghum off an EBay site, thus generating a lively discussion of the ways technology changes lives, and again prompted an HHC discussion. One student made ritual masks and led an animated discussion of ritual, religion, and the ways humankind has seen its place in the world. Another student made hand puppets of an Aztec family unit; her presentation required her peers to join her in the presentation as puppet masters. This pulled nearly half the class into active participation in the presentation and generated a vigorous comparison of family structures in societies we had discussed throughout the term.

Section papers showed some improvement, but students continued to ignore the rubrics intended to clarify expectations and requirements. Peer reviews continued to be cursory and ineffective. The number of failing papers dropped from eight to four. In all, four students' grades were lower than on their first efforts, but twelve students showed significant improvement.¹⁰ Several things were noteworthy: The number of students seeking individual guidance and help increased, the types of problems within papers changed, and the occurrence of HLL rose significantly across all papers. Many students were unable to achieve the HHC, although nearly all tried to do so.

¹⁰Here, I define significant as a full grade increase/decrease. See Attachment A for the term grades. One student quit coming to class or submitting assignments (medical problems). That failing grade is included in the numbers shown.

Section Three work largely repeated the kind of performance and problems exhibited in Section Two papers.¹¹ This was due, I suspect, to the short period between the two assignments (less than two weeks).

Assessment

I used three kinds of assessment to evaluate this experiment. The first was a class debriefing during the period allotted for the final exam. The second was the grades that students earned. The third, and most useful for me, was the on-going personal assessment of teaching methods, inputs, and outcomes.

In the final in-class debriefing, students were open in their responses to my questions, something that I had encouraged by open and frank discussions we had had throughout the term. Many students liked the creative projects; nearly all liked the no-exam format. Few liked the papers, and virtually all students noted that they did not like writing any paper in any class. More than 20 of the 26 students who completed the class agreed that they had learned more by teaching the materials themselves than they had ever learned through an instructor's lecture. They did note that they had rarely read or done any significant preparation prior to class for material they themselves were not presenting. Students agreed that their preparation did increase after the first section for a variety of reasons, including my threat of a pop quiz if non-presenting students appeared unprepared (none were ever given). Students also learned that having more factual information enabled them to contribute more effectively in class discussions. For some that was enough to get them to prepare for all classes. Others still came to class unprepared. Many supported the suggestion that each week include a mini-lecture that covered text materials. This precipitated another discussion of students' reading problems and habits. Those who routinely read outside of class requirements expressed mild astonishment in their peers' admissions of reading comprehension problems. Perhaps half of the students declared themselves in favor of the overall learner-centered approach, but nearly all admitted that they still would rather have a lecture class as it was easier for them (i.e. they did not have to engage actively with the material).

The grades were more problematic, in that, even with the rubrics, the traditional measures of achievement did not seem flexible or telling.¹² The rubrics continued to evolve to provide increased feedback to the students, but the overall grading structures seemed to be problematic. Excellent HHC work in my class resulted in an A; the same letter grade in another class rewarded less intense lower level learning, skills, and achievements. As a class, we struggled to find ways to measure the different kinds of creative thinking that were apparent in the class work, but we were increasingly aware that institutional parameters offered little appreciation for the different kinds of learning

¹¹We had eliminated presentations and projects in the reworking of Section Three.

¹²Final grades for the course are provided in Attachment A.

demanding by different classes, disciplines, and approaches. In the final recording, the letter grades for classes that demand extensive preparation, higher participation, and more creative approaches to learning are comparable to those that demand little more than rote memory and minimal attendance. A student record or transcript does not reflect the qualitative differences between such experimental approaches and more traditional lecture-and-exam classes. In a system in which GPA fluctuations might well mean the loss of a scholarship or even dismissal from the university, my students declared themselves reluctant to risk changes in approaches to learning or different assessment techniques.

The most meaningful assessment is my own continuing review of the process, inputs, outcomes, and issues illuminated by the experiment. During the term, I did a weekly assessment that appeared in the class blog. That was enormously helpful in processing the immediate problems and issues. I announced the blog on H-Teach and received several early responses from interested faculty around the country. I also announced it to the university provost, within the College of Arts and Sciences at the university, my own department, and the faculty learning community with whom I had worked on faculty development. Unfortunately, the peer feedback from other faculty from those forums was minimal despite repeated and public pleas for more. The blog was also open to students: A few read the posts, but no one commented on the blog itself. Several students mentioned that they really enjoyed my posts and thoughts, but declined to share their own. I shared progress and problems with my on-campus faculty development group periodically and those conversations proved helpful in finding new approaches to problem solving and in affirming my commitment to stay on track despite obstacles. Since the end of that fall term, I have continued to assess the experiment in an effort to build another course.

Essential Lessons Learned

Clear and focused learning objectives: I am determined to continue to focus on process rather than content and to couch the objectives in terms that students can readily understand, accept, and achieve. The objectives need to be revisited periodically during the class itself to verify understanding and acceptance.

Constant and consistent feedback: The students benefitted and learned from immediate feedback and so did I. Timely interjections, clearly identifying successful HLL and HHC components of student presentations and projects, clarified to students what worked and what did not. Those presenting students who had achieved the HLL and HHC knew they had hit the mark. Those in the audience recognized different levels and knew what they needed to do to achieve similar success. It also kept the class lively and engaged as we moved from cognitive to meta-cognitive work and back.

Clear and evolving rubrics: Students are unaccustomed to using rubrics when creating their work, be that work written or oral. I based my rubrics on models I found online; they continue to evolve. Students did not use the rubrics routinely or effectively. I will direct more in-class attention to the utility and use of rubrics. My

goal is that students will use rubrics as they create and prepare every assignment. I will also make the rubrics available online to all students and increase their use in the classroom as I introduce and debrief each class. I will also create and post a step-by-step overview on rubrics in podcast form.

Patience and flexibility: Patience is essential. Students, as many professors have found, resist change and the kind of work I expect out of them is new for them. Flexibility and the willingness to work to meet evolving needs usually result in a student group more willing to try new things and be engaged. In this case, we agreed on various changes to the syllabus and the grading system, and the students were thus more receptive to my insistence that writing remain a fundamental component to assessment.

Institutional support for experimentation: I am fortunate to have an administration that supports such classroom experiments.¹³ The administration from the Dean to the Provost has been supportive: they monitored the blog and encouraged my innovations. Without such support, experimentation and innovation would wither in the face of student resistance, peer pressure, and the time requirements inherent in heavy teaching loads and service on university committees.

Very Important Lessons Learned

Peer support and feedback: I benefitted greatly by having weekly access to the on-campus faculty development group. Colleagues outside my department committed to teaching in non-lecture formats also helped keep me inspired. While departmental colleagues questioned my new approach, they never questioned my commitment to students. In fact, in the midst of the experiment I had to compile and submit a promotion portfolio. My colleagues praised my efforts, citing my experience as evidence of my commitment to professional development.¹⁴

Conclusion

Overall, I believe that the experiment was a successful failure. Student engagement was high, but there were only slight gains in student learning. The creative projects were a great success but only after a dismal performance on the majority of the first attempts. Students were ill-prepared for most class sessions and had great difficulty in using rubrics in meaningful ways. Students reported considerable anxiety with the unfamiliar format and expectations; many noted that their standard and

¹³The Center of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at Oklahoma City University provided guidance and support and continues to serve as an on-going resource.

¹⁴In the last two years, a new issue has emerged: The Promotion and Tenure Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences challenged the recognition of the scholarship of teaching as true scholarship. This is being appealed by CETL and the faculty development group of which I was a member.

previously successful study strategies were inadequate to the different expectations in this class. At term's end, a majority of students reported that they had worked harder for "less knowledge" within this format. When questioned, they responded that while they knew more about the materials they themselves had taught, they had not retained much from the presentations by other students.

When I compared grades for the two versions of World Civilizations—the traditional versus the new approach—there was only a light difference.¹⁵ The biggest difference is that the types of learning being assessed were radically different and were more clearly articulated in the new class. The original class demanded lower level learning skills, and the grades reflect student achievement of those more limited objectives and goals. An A grade in the first class could be earned by comparing processes, cultures, impacts, and so on. The more demanding expectations of the revised class required that a student demonstrate in multiple ways the ability to articulate the implications and ramifications of processes, cultures, impacts, etc. Thus, the final grades suggest that students in the new course learned more, learned in more engaged ways, and increased their learning skills than those in the original class. The figures themselves illustrate the grading issues I have raised, that the letter grades and the numbers do not reflect the reality of the very different kinds of learning that took place.

For future classes, I will adjust this approach in various ways. I will introduce materials and highlight the structure and overall themes in short mini-lectures and discuss the rubrics that I will use to evaluate and assess student work in each week's assignment. Adequate assessment tools must also be developed to encourage students to develop more sophisticated reading skills to help them prepare to be active learners in the classroom environment. Written work will become an even more important element in the course that the students will do as take-home exams to be completed within the parameters of writing rubrics. I will require peer evaluations (PE) and require that the reviewers do more than rubber stamp the submissions. I will grade the PE, with the peer reviewer receiving the same grade as the student author. The grading process and outcomes must be reconciled with existing institutional grading structures, a daunting prospect.

I am considering introducing a different format for the papers, one that requires students to reflect and clearly articulate which of Bloom's levels of learning the writing achieves (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, etc.). Another goal is to integrate art more systematically, by having the students analyze a particular piece of art, demonstrate their ability to synthesize their knowledge of the producing society with their analysis, and articulate their evaluation of that work's utility in illuminating the society under study. Requiring students to identify and articulate the links between the levels of

¹⁵See Attachment A for that data.