

EARLY BIRD SPECIALS: SOME THOUGHTS ON USE OF CLASS TIME BEFORE CLASS BEGINS

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Please read no further if you are a teacher who, for whatever reason, is rarely able to arrive in class early. But if, instead, you routinely appear at least five minutes before class begins—to set up materials, to be available to students with questions, to set a good example, or to demonstrate a genuine enthusiasm for your teaching—then the suggestions I offer for using those few minutes constructively might whet your creative appetite.

Recently I began my fifth decade as a full-time university professor of history. Not surprisingly, I have found that just as our discipline continues to evolve and expand, so have the topics and areas to teach in my courses, as they surely have, or will have, for most teachers. Yet class time is not part of an expanding academic universe, and the number of minutes we spend in class—each day and each term—ordinarily does not increase from year to year in order to accommodate a potentially fuller, more thorough, and inclusive course syllabus. This dilemma inevitably involves us in reevaluating what we do and cover in class and more so when we factor in changing technologies that enable us to be innovative. Most of us, I expect, add and drop some subjects and expand and contract others, but not without considerable deliberation and regret for topics we have had to abridge or even eliminate altogether.

In recent years I have been integrating significant numbers of projected images—along with a little music and occasional artifacts—into classroom presentations, which in turn has inspired—if not pushed—me to be creative in nontraditional ways.¹ Although students both enjoy and seem to profit from these visual and audio stimuli—many of which can function as documents and primary sources, as they draw students more fully and effectively into the subject at hand²—they require additional class time

¹Robert Blackey, "To Illuminate History: Making History Picture-Perfect," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 30:2 (Fall 2005), 59-71. Also see Robert Blackey, "New Wine in Old Bottles: Revitalizing the Traditional History Lecture," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 22:1 (Spring 1997), 3-25. For more on using images see Anna Pegler-Gordon, "See Images in History," *Perspectives*, 44:2 (February 2006), 28-31 and Joseph Coohill, "Images and the History Lecture: Teaching the History Channel Generation," *The History Teacher*, 39:4 (August 2006), 455-65.

²For example, in describing the changes that took place in written English, from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, I project samples of handwritten letters from early, middle, and late parts of those centuries (some of which, not incidentally, come from my own research) and, in each case, then have students take turns trying to read them aloud. Whether it is in the use of words, phrases, or the actual physical form the letters of the alphabet take, this lesson in paleography—and working with documents—has never failed to capture students' attention. Paintings, too, become primary sources when they are used to augment aspects of social history, as I do, for example, with seventeenth-century

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to show and discuss. As a result, I have chosen to marginalize rather than cut some of this visual material by showing and describing it during the three-to-five minutes before the official start of a class session.³ None of this pre-class material appears on course examinations, so students who merely arrive on time are not penalized, but by giving a few extra minutes of my time I am able to give much more to my students, who now, not incidentally, have an incentive to arrive early as well. As students have noted in their course evaluations, "The way you taught the class enhanced my learning experience and made me want to get to class earlier because I did not want to miss any of the pictures;" or "I always looked forward to coming to class early because the images served as a way to transition from class to class, to focus on the subject at hand, and to 'travel' the world;" and "One of the things I appreciated ... was the five or so minutes leading into the class. He set the tone by projecting images of different locations that I never would have known about if it were not for his class. These images ... inspired me to think outside the normal curriculum. It was truly a benefit to my learning experience."

The genesis of this practice is to be found in my lower-division large-lecture World Civilizations course where I launch each class session with music from a different part of the globe.⁴ In doing so, I highlight the important role played by music in civilizations past and present. Not incidentally, students generally respond well to music, but the realization that it plays an historical role is something of a revelation to many. For this course, in addition to integrating music selections and excerpts into the overall narrative, I arrive in class ten minutes prior to its start and play music that is usually linked to the content, continent, or thematic subject of that day's lecture. For example, I plan Antonin Dvorak's *New World Symphony* when I introduce the unit "Global Expansion and Encounter, 1450-1750," which is appropriate, because Dvorak composed the symphony in order to capture some of the spirit of America; ceremonial music from Dahomey precedes a lecture on the African slave trade and thus calls attention to the cultural side of one African people; music from the Balkans provides sounds from that explosive part of the world in the early twentieth century and thus provides background for a presentation on World War I. To accompany the pre-class

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Dutch art.

³To anticipate those who might ask why useful visual and audio material is seemingly being exiled to pre-class time instead of incorporated into regular class sessions, I would note that I do so in order to be able to include *additional* material for which I literally do not have time otherwise and because the pre-class material serves the dual positive function of helping to set the mood for the subject of the day's sessions as well as providing an opportunity for students to engage the subject when they arrive a few minutes early.

⁴I am especially grateful for inspiration from Alex Zukas, "Different Drummers: Using Music to Teach History," *Perspectives*, 34:6 (September 1996), 27-33.

music, I project one or more complementary images, all of which I elaborate on as the actual session is about to begin. For example, when the subject is Asian history, at the start of one class session, I play Cambodian music recorded at Angkor Wat, which I complement with projected images of this well-preserved temple as well as others from around the Angkor complex, and of the ubiquitous, ever-encroaching jungle, along with a little background history. When imperialism in Africa is the subject, I play a recording of music of the BaBenzéle Pygmies while projecting photographs of pygmy people at work in their village. Before a class session on World War II, I play music and project images specific to that global conflict, just as for the preceding class session on the Great Depression era, I play period music to the visual accompaniment of images from the 1930s. For the final class session I show scenes from the film *Koyaanisqatsi*, directed by Godfrey Reggio, while students listen to the mesmerizing score composed by Philip Glass; the Hopi Indian word *koyaanisqatsi*, meaning "life out of balance," seems an appropriate way to end the course as well as to reflect the contemporary state of world affairs.

Virtually all the music and images function as primary sources, about which I pose questions and encourage students to offer commentary. By the time the course is over students have been exposed to select and diverse samples of music and accompanying images of places and peoples from the major continents. Here is what a few students have observed: "I loved the projections and music. He really helps different styles of learners apply themselves in this course;" or "The music, especially when combined with the images, helped me hold interest not only in the class but outside of class too! I would search to find out more about a certain piece or the culture that the music was from;" and "I found that it was enjoyable to listen to world music that would otherwise be lost to me. If I did not particularly care for the style of music, I would try to picture what kind of people sat around listening to the music. Did they listen to phonographs, were they smoking opium and relaxing, was this music only accessible through concerts?"

This practice in my World Civilizations course has worked effectively to interest, and sometimes to inspire, students, which in turn encouraged me to think about what I might do for my other courses. For several years I had been using the few minutes before the start of each class session to encourage or spark in students an interest in words and language use and to tickle them with unusual historical facts or anecdotes. For example, in one of my English history classes, each day I project the spellings of a couple of proper names and challenge students to pronounce them correctly, such as Leicester (Lester) and St. John (Sin Jin). Doing so served, and still serves, a function comparable to that played by the people who warm up audiences that attend television programs taped before actual audiences: It helps to establish a positive atmosphere. In my case, it also helps to ease students into the subject at hand. Then, I added another pre-start-of-class activity linked to what I was already doing during class time.

As a history undergraduate and graduate student in the 1960s, my teachers never made use of images, projected or otherwise, but I appreciated their value when I came

across them during my own reading and research: portraits of historical figures, photographs and paintings of historically relevant places and documents, works of art, and even cartoons on history-themed subjects.⁵ Collectively, they helped me to visualize places and to comprehend the role they played in events, to put faces to names (especially as those faces and forms reflected personality), to add depth and character to subjects, to value the artists and paintings that were otherwise mere names and titles, and to learn that there often was insight embedded in humor. In other words, images can be used not simply as illustrations of historical experience but rather as another dimension of that same experience. When I began to teach, I circulated among students books that included such images as well as occasional cartoons for comic-history relief, and I showed slides of works of art and from my travels as well as occasional filmstrips or video clips that provided useful images to supplement course narratives. But passing books and other printed images around the room takes time for each student to examine them, and more often than not by the time a given book or image reaches the last student I have already moved on to another topic. The problem with old-fashioned slides is that they cannot be used easily for every topic. Now, however, the same technology that enables us to search the Internet for images and to make transparencies and PowerPoints has changed the way we teach, and it also adds, with mind-boggling potential, to the material that we weave into class sessions. Compelled to drop some images rather than compromise more traditional content, I came up with the idea to use pre-class time constructively.

It's all rather simple: Interested teachers can make use of the types, number, and variety of images appropriate to their subjects and students.⁶ The best way to illustrate this is with examples from several courses. But I should note first that in addition to what can be mined from the Internet and from visual records of personal travel, images for class use also can be secured from different types of books, including history textbooks that change some of their illustrations with each new edition and others in art, architecture, or photography, including "from the air" books.⁷ In addition, you can

⁵The first cartoon I ever cut out was from a mid-1960s issue of *The New Yorker*, by cartoonist James Stevenson, that showed two peasants walking away from a castle, one saying to the other: "What do you think will be next—a period of spiritual rebirth, with renewed inquiry in the sciences and a humanistic resurgence of the arts?" As a student of European history I was hooked, and I have been collecting cartoons relevant to historical events ever since.

⁶Typically, I project between two and five images during pre-class time, coupled with some description and historical information from me. I encourage students to offer comments and ask questions, which they often do, especially those who have been to the country in question or are planning on going. If all this sometimes results in our spilling over into class time, I do not mind, as it is educationally sound.

⁷For example, see Georg Gerster, *The Past From Above: Aerial Photographs of Archaeological Sites* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005); Guido Rossi & Franco Masiero, *Venice from the Air* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988); Guido Rossi & Franco Lefevre, *Rome from the Air* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989);

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draw from books that focus on travel, national heritage sites, histories of cities, and museum exhibits, as well as from illustrated encyclopedias, cultural atlases (e.g., *Facts on File*), and history-related series,⁸ and unusual books that offer nontraditional images of places.⁹ All you have to do is seek, as there is much to find.

I first experimented with projecting images before class in a course on Tudor and Stuart England. I already had been using projected images that included portraits, documents, and both paintings and photographs of historical sites and artifacts that are integrated throughout the course narrative. As an example, to discuss and analyze the trial of Charles I in 1649, which follows an examination of the Rump Parliament, I project an image of Oliver Comwell, who led army officers in pushing for the trial. I then turn attention to the king who, though strong in spirit, was looking older than his 48 years, as attested to in a portrait by Edward Bower, who observed Charles throughout the trial. The trial itself took place in Westminster Hall, which can be shown as it survives today but can also be seen as it looked from the outside in the mid-seventeenth century in an etching by Wenceslaus Hollar and on the inside during the trial itself in other contemporary engravings. The red velvet chair on which Charles sat has survived, as has the specially made reinforced hat of John Bradshaw, who presided over the trial.¹⁰ Seeing photographs of these artifacts adds authenticity to previously shown images and helps students to visualize the event in some detail. To add further dramatic verisimilitude, I play a recording of a performance of an exchange between the king and Bradshaw, based on the actual trial transcript, wherein they debate the meaning of treason and the degree to which Charles was an "ordinary" prisoner. I then lead students into exploring the arguments of the opposing sides. Other projected images include the death warrant signed by 59 judges, complete with waxed seals; a painting by Canaletto of the Banqueting House as it looked in the eighteenth century and a photograph of the way it looks today (i.e., Inigo Jones' Banqueting House is where Charles waited before stepping outside onto the scaffold erected especially for the occasion) along with photographs of its brilliant ceiling by Peter Paul Rubens,

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Annabel Walker, *England from the Air* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989); Mick Aston, *Interpreting the Landscape from the Air* (Charleston, SC: Tempus, 2003).

⁸Some useful ones are *Treasures of the World* (Chicago: Stonehenge Press, 1982-83), *Time Frame* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life books, 1987-91), and *What Life Was Like* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1997-2000).

⁹For example, those interested in British history will find some gems in Julian Calder & Alastair Bruce, *The Oldest: In Celebration of Britain's Living History* (London: Cassell Illustrated, 2005).

¹⁰For photographs of the chair and hat, see Christopher Hibbert, *Charles I* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 162-63; and D.R. Watson, *The Life and Times of Charles I* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 180.

installed in 1635 and with its center panel representing, with unintended irony given that Charles virtually passed under it, the apotheosis of his father, King James I; one of the two shirts worn by Charles at his execution, so he would not shiver on that cold January morning and perhaps convey the impression of fear; and John Weesop's painting imagining the execution and the reaction of the crowd.

Considering the extensive use of images I already employed in that course, and wanting to give students a broader impression of the British Isles, even as I lacked additional class time to do so, I had something of an epiphany when I realized that a useful way around this dilemma would be to project a few images as part of what I was doing already in the several minutes before the start of class. To augment this new approach, I keep at the ready historical maps of the British Isles and of London so as to be able to identify the location of what will be viewed each day; this has the added benefit, therefore, of enhancing students' awareness of the geography of both the British Isles and England's capital city.

I launch this course's "early bird special" with photographs of Stonehenge and a brief summary of the site's significance, plus news of nearby excavations (in 2003-06) of the remains of what probably was the village of workers who erected the monoliths on the Salisbury Plain. Other images of early Britain that I project and discuss at the start of class sessions include Hadrian's Wall, Tintagel, the ruins of the abbey church at Glastonbury, a twelfth-century bridge in Lincoln to which still-surviving houses were added in 1540, Bury St. Edmunds, the scant remains of Old Sarum (eventually an infamous rotten borough), and Salisbury Cathedral, along with photos of its Magna Carta—one of four surviving copies—and a clock mechanism from 1386 and still functioning, purportedly the oldest in Europe.

Throughout the term I also show images from around England, e.g., Dover Castle and the White Cliffs, Windsor Castle, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, Bath, Coventry Cathedral (the new one and the remains of the old destroyed during World War II), York, the Major Oak (in Sherwood Forest) and the Bowthorne Oak (among the last of the huge oak trees that are wide enough to house people in their trunks), Windsor Castle, and Leeds Castle; Scotland, e.g., the ruins of Urquhart Castle and a satellite view of Loch Ness, West Highland Cows (more commonly known as Highland Beasties), whose hides are coated with long auburn hair and are the oldest type of cattle in Britain, Edinburgh Castle, and Scone Palace and the Stone of Scone; and Ireland, e.g., a satellite view of the emerald island, Trinity College Library, Dublin along with pages from the Book of Kells, Blarney Castle, and a "beehive" house located on the Dingle Peninsula. In addition, I include images from around England that relate to Tudor and Stuart times but have not otherwise been incorporated into regular class sessions, e.g., Hever Castle, which was given to Anne Boleyn's father by Henry VIII and then later to Anne of Cleves, which in turn functions as a commentary on the politics of marriage, beheading, and divorce, St. James's Palace, Stratford-upon-Avon, the new Globe Theatre as well as a drawing of the original, the Monument to the Great Fire of London, Hatfield House, built by Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, Greenwich,

and St. Paul's Cathedral along with a model of the earlier cathedral destroyed in the Great Fire.

Thus, by the time the course ends students have seen a variety of images that add to their experiencing and understanding sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and the contemporary British Isles. Comments by students, some solicited by me and others as part of course evaluations, reinforced my expectation and in-class observations that my efforts were worthwhile and added a dimension to the course that students appreciated: "I liked his use of visuals before and during class, including pictures of historical places which allowed me to visit them without ever going to Europe (but now more than ever I want to go);" or "I hate history, but he made it fun with his pictures, music, stories, artifacts, and more, even doing some really interesting stuff before class began;" from another, "Your class turned me into an Anglophile! My hope is that one day I will travel to Britain and see the places you showed and spoke of. I will soak it all in like a sponge;" and finally "The pre-class activities helped add depth to the course material; they provided visual stimulation at the very least and also added a cultural flavor to the course in that they helped to explain some of the peculiarities that are unique to different countries or time periods. They also help you remember that there is a lot more to the making of history than just wars and important figures; it is almost like looking through kaleidoscope in that everything is made of the same material but at every turn it creates a different pattern, similar to the previous but always different."

I modify my pre-class approach in courses on the Renaissance and Reformation and on Europe in the Age of Absolutism and Enlightenment by including images, along with accompanying maps, from a number of continental European countries. Not surprisingly, for example, Italy is featured prominently in my course on the Renaissance and Reformation. But in addition to the images that are integral to an examination of the political, economic, social, and cultural history of the period, I use pre-class time to familiarize students with the rich variety of surviving sites. From Rome, for example, there is the Church of Immaculate Conception with its macabre Cemetery of Capuchin Fathers, which includes six chapels crowded with the symmetrically and artistically arranged bones of some 4,000 monks who died between 1528-1870; the Michelangelo-designed Piazza del Campidoglio along with the broken remains of what was once a rather large statue likely to have been a representation of Constantine; the Mamertino Prison, one of the oldest buildings in Rome, with its dark and forbidding subterranean stone cell and its upside-down cross, symbolic of the way St. Peter was crucified, as this prison might have been the last place of his confinement—an accompanying image of Caravaggio's "The Crucifixion of St. Peter," showing Peter on an inverted cross, creates an artistic link to the photograph of the prison cell; and the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, a marble-faced brick pyramid-tomb, built shortly before the birth of Jesus, that makes up part of a section of the Roman wall built in the third century C.E.

Like Rome and Venice, Florence is saturated with history and art. Some of the images I project include the Medici Chapel, the cloister of San Marco along with one of Fra Angelico's angelic frescoes, Brunelleschi's Pazzi Chapel, and Basilica di Santa Maria Novella with Masaccio's "Trinity" fresco (1425), the first known painting to demonstrate linear perspective. I use the occasion of this Masaccio innovation to talk about the role churches have played as repositories of art. Other images come from landmark sites in Milan, Ravenna, and Assisi. Additional images used during pre-class minutes focus on Spain, e.g., the building that once housed the University of Alcalá, founded during the reigns of Ferdinand and Isabel by Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros; the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba; the pilgrimage destination of Santiago de Compostela; and select locations in Salamanca, Toledo, Segovia, Avila, Seville, and Burgos; on Germany, e.g., Cologne, Munich, and Nuremberg; and on Belgium, e.g., Bruges and Brussels.

The end result of these pre-class activities is that whether students take one or several of my courses, they have not only been exposed to the history and scholarship of the countries and time periods we study but to a panoramic sweep of historic and cultural sites that help to reinforce and expand upon the history they are learning and, at times, the documentary sources they are reading. Naturally, it's not the same as their being there, but it does help to give their imaginations some added stimulation and direction. This, in turn, works for me as a teacher, both because it broadens what I teach and because I enjoy talking about and revisiting places I have experienced myself or have come to know through teaching and reading.

So it seems that technology—especially in the form of the Internet, scanners, and the different methods available for projecting and interjecting visual materials—presents us with both challenges and opportunities. How we take advantage of these technologies depends upon our willingness to be creative as teachers and on how we decide to use our time. In my experience, using pre-class time is time well spent. One insightful and generously expressive student effectively captured what I hope all my students will experience:

The beginnings of Robert Blackey's classes were decidedly different from any classes I'd ever taken before.... Prior to each lecture, Dr. Blackey made it a habit to project a series of images that were relevant to whatever topic or geographic region he would be covering that day.... There was no need to take notes, no pressure to awaken from your pre-class reverie if that was your choice—it was truly just an added bonus to take or leave as one saw fit.

As an early-arriving student to all my classes, my initial reaction to these pre-class visual feasts was one of simple relief: it was less time I had to spend staring at blank walls and the even blanker looks on the faces of some fellow students. In retrospect, however, my experience in the five minutes before class officially started had a richness and depth I would not

have anticipated. When I think back on the Renaissance and Reformation, my mind is instantly filled with vivid images, in much the same way a particularly pleasant vacation evokes fond memories of the sites one has visited. In some ways this is strange, because I equate the images with the lectures—as if they were being experienced simultaneously—but the lectures were characterized by fast and frantic note-taking and the clamoring sense of urgency about getting down the most important facts and perspectives in preparation for the inevitable exams. Yet my memory marries these separate events and manifests a symphony of color, architecture, landscape, time, place, perception, and information. I can recall seeing mosques, churches, palaces, statues, cottages, and fountains. In my head there is a map that connects these images to places: Cordoba, Granada, Venice, Rome, [and] Florence. It is hard to image that this *experience*—for that is what I must call it—was made possible because the teacher showed us images for five minutes before class even started, yet I know I must attribute it to this.

Additionally, there were times when I would see an image of some unknown place and feel a subtle quickening in my spirit, an intangible tug of desire, like seeing for the first time the face of a person one will later come to love. In these instances, I would find myself in a grip of a strange passion that would no longer allow Spain to be the country I never noticed, or Italy to be the place I never cared to visit. Suddenly, there was about these places something irresistible, something not-to-be-overlooked, and I would rush home after class and look online for the Spanish Steps, or every picture I could locate of Cordoba, and with this the world became both smaller and grander as well as more accessible, more familiar, and also a great deal more beautiful and wondrous.

While I cannot say that this is the effect that Dr. Blackey's unusual teaching method had on everyone, I am grateful that it had this effect on me. And though it is peculiarly egocentric to say so, I'd like to suggest that therein lies proof enough of its worth.