

SOLVING PROBLEMS BY CREATING PROBLEMS: BUILDING COHERENCE IN HISTORY THROUGH INQUIRY

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I sat across from my nine-year-old daughter at the coffee shop and listened as she told me about her history class. "It's boring. We learn about the three branches and then we answer questions like 'What is the job of the legislative branch?'" This bright, enthusiastic fourth grader is already becoming jaded about learning history in school. Her reaction stems in part from her teacher's presentation of history as a series of random facts to be memorized and repeated for a worksheet and later for a test. Though all educators struggle with this problem, history teachers face some unique challenges. Most students enter history classes having absorbed an implicit understanding of history as disconnected facts and a subtle antipathy toward classroom history. History instruction often exacerbates the problem of incoherence through teachers' emphasis on facts over conceptual understanding and through the emphasis state standards place on bulleted lists of required information and objective testing.

Influenced by cognitive psychology, much of the recent scholarship on history instruction has emphasized that knowledge is "constructed" to some degree by the learner. If students truly make meaning by conforming new knowledge to pre-existing schemata, then history teachers must explicitly impose a more coherent framework on course content. Teachers can create coherence by engaging students in a interesting year-long problem that places individual facts into a larger historical framework.

This paper offers such a model of problem-based instruction in U.S. history. It begins with a brief examination of the sources of incoherence and the effects of incoherence on student learning. Then it offers a problem-based approach to history as a way to provide coherent instruction. The majority of the paper discusses one detailed model of year-long implementation of coherent history curriculum in an Advanced Placement U.S. History course. The paper concludes with reflections on lessons learned from this type of instruction and some implications of teaching history this way.

The Sources of Incoherence

Students, unfamiliar with the organizing concepts of a particular field of knowledge, often struggle to connect isolated facts into larger patterns, as they cannot

easily separate the insignificant from the significant.¹ Coherence constitutes a fundamental challenge to student learning. Though this problem is in part a function of cognitive development, three cultural forces exacerbate the problem in history education.

First, the narrowing of Americans' interest to a past they can relate to personally leads to an eclectic assortment of facts that cannot be integrated easily into a larger non-personal framework. According to one study, most Americans are interested in the past only when it involves them or their families personally. Most respondents in a phone interview "felt most unconnected to the past when they encountered it in books, movies, or classrooms" and were especially critical of "school-based history organized around the memorization of facts and locked into a prescribed textbook curriculum."² Consequently, respondents commonly "talked about national events as disconnected incidents not linked to a larger narrative." Evidence suggests that children enter school with the same understanding of history as their parents.³

A second source of incoherence springs from history teachers' own lack of training in the discipline of history, which predisposes them to present history in the same manner as the rest of the public at large—as a series of discrete facts. Diane Ravitch points out that most secondary history teachers have neither a major nor a minor in history. It is "unlikely that teachers who are themselves unfamiliar with historical knowledge and controversies will be able to engage their students in high levels of historical thinking."⁴ With insufficient training in historical coursework, teachers lack the conceptual frameworks of history and cannot, therefore, offer them to students to make meaning.

Finally, the very standards designed to ensure appropriate teaching of history ironically contribute to the problem of incoherence. The standards divide teaching

¹M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford, eds., *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), 7.

²Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, both historians, conducted a lengthy telephone survey to gather data. See Roy Rosenzweig, "How Americans Use and Think about the Past: Implications from a National Survey for the Teaching of History" in Peter N. Stearns, et al., ed., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 264-265, quote on 276.

³Sam Wineburg, "Making (Historical) Sense in the New Millennium," in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001) suggests that parents do indeed often exert a strong and direct influence on their children's understanding of the past. See also Bruce A. VanSledright, "'I Don't Remember—The Ideas Are All Jumbled in My Head' Eighth Graders' Reconstructions of Colonial American History," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* (Summer 1995), 317-345.

⁴Diane Ravitch, "The Educational Backgrounds of History Teachers," in Stearns et al., 143.

content into statements of discrete information with little connection to each other and cover anything that an interest group lobbied successfully to include. The History–Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools, for example, enumerate 72 distinct sub-standards (each with its own list of a half-dozen or more items), and conclude with the following catchall requirement:

Explain how the federal, state, and local governments have responded to demographic and social changes such as population shifts to the suburbs, racial concentrations in the cities, Frostbelt-to-Sunbelt migration, international migration, decline of family farms, increases in out-of-wedlock births, and drug abuse.

High-stakes state tests linked to the standards make teachers fear the consequences of neglecting any of the standards. As they plod through each one in order, their attention to details militates against coherence and meaning.

These three sources of incoherence conspire to overwhelm students with disparate pieces of information presented in endless succession. As Robert B. Bain explains, “curricular objectives rarely connect outcomes to their intellectual roots, that is, to the historical problems, and questions that generated such understandings in the first place ... lists of curricular objectives do not ... provide the disciplinary connections, patterns, or relationships that enable teachers and students to construct coherent pictures of the history they study.”⁵ This problem cannot be overcome entirely, since the factors that created it do not show signs of disappearing any time soon. It can be managed, however, as teachers strategically organize instruction around meaningful problems.

Building Coherence: Teaching with Problems

Teaching through historical problems provides an antidote to the sources of incoherence. While “problems” might look similar to the “essential questions” many K-12 instructors use as the focus for a day’s instruction, the two types of questions differ conceptually. As typically employed by teachers, essential questions introduce a one-day lesson, and frequently demand a discrete factual answer. In this sense, they sometimes mirror the atomized nature of the standards. Problems, by contrast, subvert the disjunction the standards create by providing a larger-scale question that bridges many different sub-standards and allows for exploration.

Worthwhile problems arguably have three components. First, they have to be meaningful to students on some level. While teachers should not pander to students’

⁵Robert B. Bain, “‘They Thought the World War Flat?’ Applying the Principles of *How People Learn* in Teaching High School History,” in Donovan and Bransford, eds., *How Students Learn*, 182.

interests, it is necessary to take their worldviews seriously and to build a bridge between these worldviews and the content of the course. Beginning with student interest, teachers then move on to embrace larger concepts in an historically conceptualized manner. Second, problems should address authentic issues historians debate. By focusing on genuine historiographical debates, teachers can make use of many secondary works to help generate questions for classroom instruction. Third, problems need to be posed as open-ended questions. Too often, essential questions call for a recitation of factual information and often, implicitly, a correct answer. In contrast, while problems require the marshaling of factual information, they also call for evaluative responses and elude attempts to provide single correct answers. As Bain explains, "Working with such problems requires students to grapple with important historical details while extending their understanding of and skill in using key historical concepts."⁶ The use of meaningful, open-ended problems subsumes the discrete bits of information the standards require, providing coherence while facilitating sophisticated student thinking and analysis.

A Model of Problem-Based Instruction

The remainder of this paper offers a model for the implementation of a problem-based curriculum based on the three criteria in eleventh-grade United States History, focusing on a unit on the Progressive era. While this model comes from an Advanced Placement course, teachers could adapt the model to a standard eleventh-grade course. Likewise, the principles discussed here apply equally to college-level courses. Although instructors in large survey courses would probably find the elements of dialogue implied in this model difficult to implement, they still could organize their courses explicitly around problems and choose readings and assessments accordingly. In smaller classes, the problem-based approach works quite well, providing focus and dynamism for classes that often emphasize discussion and critical thinking already.

Though many of the activities I describe are staples of history classrooms at all levels—discussion, reading of texts, writing essays—a teacher's careful attention to planning and implementing these activities, along with efforts to make explicit links between lessons, can improve the overall quality of history instruction significantly. Indeed, the fact that teachers can implement these ideas by adapting existing lessons rather than creating new lessons makes this approach less daunting to implement. My discussion of this model provides a dynamic picture of thinking and planning in action, rather than a static depiction of completed instruction. Teachers at all levels would

⁶Bain, "They Thought the World Was Flat?" 183. In this chapter, Bain offers an engaging model of problem-based world history centered on the question of whether people at the time of Columbus really believed that the world was flat.

benefit from more regular access to such “think alouds” conducted by their peers that demonstrate the ways that good instruction emerges from modification of earlier ideas.

Identifying a Year-Long Problem

My own thinking in regards to coherence evolved over several years of teaching United States history. While my early teacher training encouraged me to map an entire year-long course to meet content standards in a timely manner and to use essential questions in designing lessons, it did not enable me to develop a unified framework for the entire course. During my first two years of teaching, I began to work on a year-long question using the idea of American history as a meeting ground of “red, white, and black” people and the concepts of “liberty, equality, and power.”⁷ But these early frameworks merely represented themes, not explicit, open-ended problems students could engage and debate. One of the many struggles students encounter in a history classroom is the invisibility of their teachers’ thinking.⁸ Since I did not clearly explain the logic guiding my instructional decisions, students were not able to view the coherence that was clear to me.

Collaboration between several US History teachers in Long Beach Unified School District and Robert B. Bain through a Teaching American History grant gave my thinking a considerable boost. In our work with Bain, my colleagues and I attempted to focus explicitly on a conceptual problem from the Progressive era. Our dialogue encouraged me to continue to develop my idea of a year-long problem.⁹ I ultimately settled on the problem of conflicting definitions of “freedom.” I rejected other candidates such as “freedom and equality” and my earlier attempts described above, as I became persuaded that a single framing concept seemed best suited to provide the desired coherence to the course. *The Story of Freedom* by Eric Foner and *Liberty and Freedom* by David Hackett Fischer confirmed that a course could be

⁷Gary B. Nash, *Red White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America*, fourth ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1999). John M. Murrin, et al., *Liberty, Equality, and Power: A History of the American People* (Wadsworth, 1999).

⁸Before turning to university work, Bain had a long career as a high school world history teacher where he had developed coherence for students through a year-long problem. His problem related to how historians create historical accounts, which “gave [him] material to create a robust set of problems that stimulated, organized, and guided instruction over an entire course.” See Robert B. Bain, “Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction,” in Stearns, *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, 335. Given my earlier thinking, my year-long problem looked quite different from Bain’s. Whereas his focus on historical accounts was by definition a *procedural* one, focused on historical methodology, mine was a *conceptual* one, focused on important topics and ideas in American historiography.

⁹Bain, “They Thought That the World War Flat?” 184.

organized usefully around the problem of competing notions of freedom.¹⁰ The problem of freedom generally functioned well, as Americans have historically used the idea to articulate a wide range of values, including equality, rights, opportunity, representative government, and so forth. Foner makes an eloquent case for the centrality of freedom in American history:

No idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom. The central term in our political language, freedom ... is deeply embedded in the record of our history and the language of everyday life. The Declaration of Independence lists liberty among mankind's inalienable rights; the Constitution announces its purpose as securing liberty's blessings. The United States fought the Civil War to bring about a new birth of freedom, World War II for the Four Freedoms, and the Cold War to defend the Free World. Americans' love of liberty has been represented by liberty poles, liberty caps, and statues of liberty, and acted out by burning stamps and burning draft cards, by running away from slavery, and by demonstrating the right to vote. "Every man in the street, white, black, red or yellow ... knows that this is 'the land of the free' ... the 'cradle of liberty.'"¹¹

As a year-long problem, the question of competing notions of freedom meets the three criteria I delineated previously for useful problems. First, high school students are passionate about their rights and their autonomy, so freedom is quite relevant to them. Freedom continues to be a significant theme in the larger world in which they are immersed, so they encounter discussions about it on a regular basis. Second, the question of freedom is ubiquitous, protean, and contested throughout American history, and thus clearly an open-ended concept. Third, historians debate the various meanings of freedom, whether explicitly, like Foner and Fischer, or more obliquely.¹²

¹⁰Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), and David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹¹Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). This textbook, not published until I had already crafted the structure for my course, follows Foner's earlier attempt in *The Story of American Freedom* to tell the entire narrative of American history through the theme of freedom.

¹²For example, when historians argue about the degree to which slaves had "agency," they are debating the relative freedom of enslaved people. See Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* (Fall 2003), 113-124.

Introducing the Problem of Freedom in the Classroom

As Long Beach Unified teachers worked with Bain, dialogue about the challenges history teachers face led us to pose the following questions as guides to restructuring our curriculum around a problem-based approach to instruction.

1. What is the problem in the center of these activities? How do objectives link to this problem?
2. How might you engage students in framing this problem?
3. What "stuff" will help students develop a historical case around the problem?
4. What disciplinary knowledge will students need to be able to work on the problem?
5. What evidence/sources will help students work on the problem?
6. How will students represent and support their case? What standards make one case more compelling than another?
7. What do you expect will be the biggest obstacles to your students working out a good case about the problem?
8. How will you take stock of student thinking about key concepts, skills, and obstacles?
9. What cognitive tools will you need to create to help all students do the work and make a compelling case?
10. What progression of activities will develop students' capacity to make a compelling case about the problem?
11. How can you repurpose what you are already doing to teach this unit? What do you need to get?

These questions shaped the restructuring of both individual units and the overall course. On the first day of the academic year, I displayed the Foner quote above for students and asked them to respond briefly in writing to the question, "How do you define freedom?" Because the concept of freedom initially seems intuitive and unproblematic to students, I added more questions over time in an effort to complicate students' beginning assumptions: Is there such a thing as too much freedom? Is it ever necessary to restrict freedom? Can you force someone to be free? Then I asked students to share their definitions with each other and with the class. Because "freedom" is so universal and so polyvalent in American culture, I could be confident that students' answers would vary enough to illuminate the conflicting notions of freedom in American life. If necessary, I extrapolated from students' answers to the logical, if absurd, conclusion of their definitions. By complicating their understanding of freedom while reinforcing its importance, I intended to lay the foundation for an understanding of a complex, contested notion. In addition, since presentism always

constitutes a danger with high school students as it is for many adults,¹³ revealing the contemporary complexity of notions of freedom laid a foundation for understanding its diverse and mutable definitions throughout American history. I then played a PowerPoint montage of quotes and images from the Revolution to the present, to give students a glimpse of some of the competing definitions they would encounter throughout the year.

At the beginning of each unit, I provided an overview of the content and introduced a question that provided coherence for the unit. In addition to addressing freedom, each question had to focus attention on key issues or events of that era. Examples of questions from some early units included the following:

- How did different notions of freedom shape society in each colonial region?
- To what extent was the American Revolution a war for freedom in its origins and consequences?
- To what extent did political, economic, and social changes in the antebellum era extend freedom for Americans?

To determine what issues to focus on and how to frame the question, I turned to one or more historiographical works. For example, David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* shaped the first question.¹⁴ For the second question, I made use of a handful of influential texts on the politics of the American Revolution¹⁵ and its social effects on the status of African Americans and women.¹⁶ Finally, several works on the antebellum

¹³On presentism among students, see among other studies Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, *passim*, but especially 5-7. On presentism among adults, see Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 184-189. On the ways in which adults' understanding of the past may shape their children's understanding, see Wineburg, 232-255.

¹⁴David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). While the work has been criticized by some historians, it nonetheless provides a useful framework for comparing the development of distinctive colonial regions. For criticisms, see "Forum: Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America: A Symposium," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series (April 1991), 223-308.

¹⁵Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged edition (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992); Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage, 1997); T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁶Gary Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of

era illuminated the tensions between the rhetoric of limitless possibilities expressed during the Jacksonian era and the reality of constricted opportunities that many experienced during the emergence of the market economy.¹⁷ These diverse historiographical issues could not all be fit into the question for the unit; for the question to be useful, it needed to be brief and relatively easily digested by students when it was first introduced. Then as the unit unfolded, the complexity implicit in the question could be elaborated gradually.

Freedom in the Progressive Era

Late in the fall semester the class examined the Progressive era. As with the pervious units, I spent substantial time constructing a unit question that reflected the problem of freedom in the Progressive period. Long Beach teachers working with Bain began constructing their questions based on their prior knowledge and experience, as well as by reading and discussing Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent*, a recent synthesis on progressive reform.¹⁸ The group generated the following questions:

- How do Americans come to terms with the regulation of industry when, by the turn of the century, "liberty of contract" has become a well-known articulation of the "American" understanding of government-economic relations?
- Similarly, how do advocates of government support for reform articulate a defense of this strategy in light of the American tradition of a minimalist government, a tradition that sees government as the greatest threat to freedom?
- How does long-term American tension between liberty and equality play out in this era?
- How and why do reforms produce unintended consequences?
- In what ways are the definitions of "reform" or "progress" historically contextual, producing reforms contemporary Americans wouldn't support?

¹⁶(...continued)

North Carolina Press, 1980); and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

¹⁷Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); and Ronald Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

¹⁸Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

- How do you make sense of the fact that most reformers are middle class, while most of the “recipients” of reform are either upper-class or working-class?

Based on these questions, I created the following problem for the Progressive era: “Was the progressives’ reliance on government an appropriate means to ‘restore freedom’ in the industrial era?” The phrase placed in quotations was meant to alert students to the fact that one group’s narrative of freedom lost and gained (in this case, the reformers’ narrative) was not necessarily shared by all. I did not expect the succinct statement of the problem to make all of the questions the group identified in our brainstorming immediately obvious to the students. Coherence results not from a half-dozen questions on the same subject, but rather from one deceptively simple question that gradually reveals the contentious, contested, multi-dimensional nature of the definition of freedom in the Progressive era. Through class activities and discussion I gradually led students to unpack those questions as implications of the broader problem. The larger problem allowed students to explore the tensions between, for example, liberty as defined by management and labor in the industrial era without requiring them to use those abstract categories immediately. “Liberty” and “equality” could be introduced after students had a concrete situation to which to apply them.

The hook I introduced at the beginning of the unit became a touchstone we returned to throughout the unit as students continued to wrestle with the problem. The hook identified the conflicting definitions of freedom in the Progressive era by linking that era to an analogous contemporary issue about which they were likely to have an opinion. I posed a question about consumption of soda and candy on school campuses:

Concerned about growing health problems among young people in the state, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed legislation to remove all soda and candy vending machines from K-12 school campuses ... and maybe college campuses as well. Would you support such a plan? Why or why not?

Though this hook did not explicitly address freedom, let alone the Progressive era, it became a launching pad for a discussion about the appropriate role of government in regulating the health and behavior of citizens. Inevitably, whenever anyone raises questions of government power, issues of freedom follow close behind. As with the earlier discussion about definitions of freedom, I pressed students’ answers to rather absurd extremes to help illumine criteria by which the appropriateness of government regulation could be debated. I asked those who favored removing the vending machines, “Can the government do whatever it wants on its own property? If the government is concerned with health, should officials investigate what your parents feed you at home?” Students who tended to favor limiting the reach of government were asked, “Should the government allow you to buy cigarettes or alcohol from vending machines? When does your freedom impinge on the freedom of someone

else?" Discussion eventually led to a rough consensus on criteria for determining appropriate government intervention:

- The problem represents a severe threat to "freedom."
- The government has a legitimate interest in the particular threat.
- The likelihood of success is strong.

The last criterion implicitly addressed the question of unintended consequences. I suggested to students that any evaluation of "success" had to take into consideration the possibility that a reform intended to address one issue related to freedom might create unintentionally some other problem that impinged on freedom, which in turn might be the subject of a later reform.

The actual lessons involved students investigating one or more reforms from each of the following categories: state, federal, moral, and muckraking journalism. I placed students in groups and asked them to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of one reform from each category according to the three criteria for government intervention we had determined. Students sometimes asked whose point of view I was asking about—the reformers' or their own—with respect to the criteria. That question offered an opportunity to discuss the ways that definitions, especially of elusive labels such as "progress," are historically contextual; indeed, they were contested labels even when they first appeared. Then I encouraged them to consider both how Americans of the time would have answered the questions and how they themselves might answer differently. If there was a discrepancy between the two, what accounted for it?

After allowing time for discussion, I gave each group brief excerpts from a relevant monograph for each of the four categories of reform, since textbooks "typically focus tightly on facts, events, and people, and not the kinds of questions, decisions, and heuristics historians employ in their day-to-day practice."¹⁹ I chose readings that were clearly and explicitly evaluative. While providing an assessment of a particular reform, the texts did not always explicitly indicate whether a particular reform was either appropriate or successful; so students still had to relate the author's argument to their own pre-assigned criteria. In choosing the secondary sources, I attempted to find mixed evaluations of particular reforms, some critical, some favorable, as I hoped to use these examples to confront the simplistic problem-solution paradigm that students nearly always bring to a study of reform. For example, for the muckrakers, a group that students nearly universally admire (in part because their textbook authors admire them), I provided a text that critiqued the muckrakers' "apparent lack of a sophisticated analysis of the American polity and economy," "their failure to advance solutions to the problems they exposed," and their unsophisticated "appeals to a collective public

¹⁹Richard J. Paxton, "A Deafening Silence: History Textbooks and Students Who Read Them," *Review of Educational Research* (Fall 1999), 317.

conscience as a means of effecting change.” This text quoted another historian’s assessment that muckrakers were “journalists rather than thinkers, with commonplace talents and middle-class values, incapable of serious or radical critiques. A few, at least, were opportunists.”²⁰ I also included a reading designed to help students understand the role of the Supreme Court in undermining some Progressive legislation.²¹ Though students often viewed the Court’s actions as inimical to the well-being of average citizens, I pressed students to see that the justices explained their opposition to Progressive reform as a means of protecting citizens’ liberty.

The unit culminated with an essay that asked students to evaluate the Progressives’ reliance on government as an appropriate means to “restore freedom” in the industrial era, using evidence from a range of different types of reform. Students who simply described reforms, rather than providing explicit assessments, could not earn higher than a “C,” even if they provided substantial, accurate information about reforms. In implementing the unit problem for the Progressive era, I hoped that the use of an explicitly evaluative question for both investigation and writing would prompt students to avoid the typical, simplistic narrative of problem-solution to which students’ reactions to reform seem so prone.

Reflections

Although my conclusions are by definition anecdotal, they do indicate that student learning improved substantially after implementation of the problem-based approach. Through the consistent use of an engaging problem, most students increased their conceptual understanding of the discipline of history and, consequently, built more sophisticated arguments, as evidenced in discussion and more measurably in their writing. It is important to note that while these were AP classes, our department followed an open access policy so student abilities ranged quite widely. When compared with similar students from previous years when I assigned this prompt but did not use the activities described above, I saw marked—though not total—improvement. Students at either end of the spectrum did not change dramatically. Some advanced students typically already wrote with much of the sophistication I expected, so the nuance in their writing increased but did not dramatically change. On the other end, some struggling students seemed a bit confused by the tensions in Progressive reform, unable to perceive completely what the arguments were about. In their writing they sometimes seemed simply to mimic ideas

²⁰Reproduced from Ellen F. Fitzpatrick, *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles* (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 103-106.

²¹William Wiecek, *Liberty Under Law: The Supreme Court in American Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 130-131.

they heard in class discussions without fully understanding them. According to constructivist scholarship, however, such imitation might be a preliminary step to full internalization of more sophisticated ideas. In that case, even the struggling students received support that moved them toward a more disciplinary understanding of the Progressive era.

The large middle portion of the class, however, wrote with more thoughtfulness and nuance than previously, as evidenced in three patterns. First, students recognized that, though affluent middle-class reformers might have acted out of genuine sympathy for the plight of others, their ostensibly altruistic motives also might mask more anxious, self-interested desires for social control. In previous years, few students seemed able to relate the reformers' behavior to their class standing and therefore to question their motives. Most simply assumed as a truism that when problems emerge, decent people rise up to right the wrongs. Second, many students referred to unsuccessful reform efforts (such as crusades against lynching and divorce) or to successful efforts with unintended consequences (Prohibition) to point out the mixed record of reformers. Given students' prior tendency to apply a simple problem-solution framework, this development in student thinking was especially heartening. Finally, students often recognized that concepts like "progress" and "reform" must be contextualized historically. Since students tend to treat ideas as static and to engage in presentist thinking, their recognition that "progress" did not connote the same thing throughout American history seemed a significant breakthrough.

For teachers who desire to take on this challenge, a brief review of the process Long Beach teachers followed might be helpful. First, the teacher must survey some of the historiographical issues related to the subject as guidance for the kind of student thinking the teacher hopes to achieve. Then one has to use those issues to create a meaningful problem. The next crucial step is to identify the content-specific challenges of the topic for students. Long Beach teachers, for example, identified the following student challenges regarding the Progressive era, based on our collective experience in teaching this topic:

- Students' ideas of progress and historical development (i.e., progress as linear)
- Students' ideas of government's role in people's lives (i.e., government invisible)
- Students' ideas of context of reform: urbanization and industrialization (i.e., context missing)
- Students' ideas concerning "failed" reforms or opposition to reform (i.e., only success matters)
- Student's difficulty in "seeing" the position of those opposed to reform (i.e., opposition is invisible or "evil")
- Students' difficulty in seeing unanticipated consequences of reform (i.e., reformers either got what they wanted or didn't)

Then the teacher must determine whether existing lessons can be retooled to achieve this goal and, if not, what new instruction the lessons will require. The teacher must clarify his or her own thinking about how questions and interactions with students will facilitate the discovery of the other issues subsumed within the larger problem; as the lesson will not automatically generate more sophisticated student thinking. The final step is for teachers to reflect continually on the level of success they have achieved and to create a systematic feedback loop for the improvement of future instruction.

As my students learned that reforms often have costs, it seems fitting to close by reflecting on the "problems" that my proposed reform of teaching with problems exposed. First, creating meaningful problems and unpacking them later requires a fairly substantial familiarity with the historiography of the era being examined. Many teachers lack such knowledge, at least in some subject areas. Teachers who lack preparation will have to collaborate with better prepared peers or seek training through professional development or through a self-constructed reading course. Obviously, college teachers have a distinct advantage in this regard as they consider organizing their courses by using problems. A second challenge related to teaching with problems is that, while lessons do not necessarily need to be recreated from scratch, rethinking and reorganizing teaching consumes significant time and mental energy. Such restructuring of coursework—even on the unit level—is often too major an undertaking during the school year. Just as the discipline of history centers on open-ended problems, so the teaching of history involves wrestling with ongoing instructional problems. Despite these challenges and the likelihood that implementing them will be slow and piecemeal, the payoff undeniably makes the effort worthwhile.