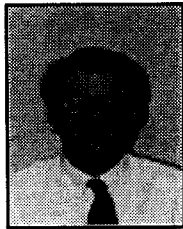


Names, Dates, and History Professors

Paul E. Teed

One of the most difficult challenges faced by university history professors is to convince our students that serious understanding of the past implies more than simply a knowledge of names and dates. Eager to succeed in our classes, most history students are good and careful note-takers who spend enormous amounts of energy transcribing lectures and organizing reading notes. As their notebooks fill up with factual historical information, however, they do not always emerge from our classes with the tools to deal with significant historical problems in a meaningful way.



Teed

The important connections between historical events and the deeply complex cause and effect relationships that preoccupy academic practitioners of history are sometimes lost as students spend so much of their time trying to master lengthy factual narratives. Focused so discreetly on committing facts to memory, students may also miss the central point of history instruction on the university level: that the past is contested ground upon which scholars struggle to establish conflicting interpretations of human experience from fragmentary evidence.

One effective solution to this problem, I believe, is a focus on analytical writing from the earliest stages of history education at the university level.

While it may come as something of a shock to those students who have been exposed only to list-based instruction, intensive writing in introductory survey courses is essential to altering misconceptions about history as a discipline and encouraging the critical thinking skills

necessary to deal with serious historical issues.

Confronted with the real difficulties of forming analytical arguments based on limited sources, students immediately confront (albeit at a lower level of intensity) the very same problems that preoccupy academic historians. In the process, they may develop a much greater understanding and respect for the discipline of history. Since many history students will go on to become teachers themselves, it is even more imperative that they acquire discipline-based writing skills and the ability to evaluate historical argumentation.

In my own teaching, I have developed several strategies to smooth my students' transition from list-based instruction to college-level historical analysis. Students in my survey classes are required to read at least two historical monographs or primary sources that force them to explore problems outside the textbook. Robert Gross's book *The Minutemen and Their World*, for example, analyzes the meaning of the American Revolution for the people of the single town of Concord, Massachusetts. While textbooks usually focus on traditional political and military narratives, a book like this forces students to examine the social and cultural fabric of early America in closer view. In class, the students are asked assess this kind of writing in ways that go well beyond its factual narrative.

First, I require short, low-risk exploratory writing assignments that encourage students to sketch out the larger argument being made in the book. Second, we spend time developing the meaning and implications of the book's argument and comparing it to other possible interpretations of the same event or problem. Finally, students are encouraged to compare the

argument or interpretation to the necessarily more superficial account in their textbook. The result is the realization, at least for some students, that historical truth is always subject to revision and at times even indeterminate.

In my upper division courses, students are required to prepare more extended historiographical essays in which they analyze several short essays that represent conflicting interpretations of the same event. Reading three very different analyses of Abraham Lincoln's racial views, for instance, my Civil War students are confronted with recognized scholars who draw opposite conclusions from almost identical sources. Here it becomes impossible to use a simple, factual narrative to solve the problem. Students must examine sources and critique the argumentation and methodology of conflicting scholarly analyses. I have found that this sort of assignment is very exciting for students. They work hard to clarify their own views in writing, and usually feel strongly enough to defend them in class discussions. (See Appendix 1)

On their in-class, written exams, my students are required to apply the analytical thinking and writing they have done in class to specific issues raised by readings and lectures. Sometimes they are asked to respond to a quotation drawn from the reading that deals specifically with the larger theme of the book. In other cases, I establish a problem or context that requires them to use their knowledge in a creative or imaginative way. In either case, students must always use factual information in service to a larger problem of historical interpretation that goes beyond a traditional

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A Life of the Mind

Diane Boehm

"Students aren't reading the required assignments!"
(Faculty Member)

"Many students never even buy the required textbooks!"
(Bookstore)

"Some students don't care whether they can write or not, and don't bother to keep their appointments to work with me."
(Writing Associate)

"Explanations of course topics (all of them) would have been nice instead of being told 'it's in the book'--well duh. But I pay \$10.80 a class." (Student comment on faculty evaluation in upper level psychology course)

If you regularly hear statements like this, as I do, you may wonder whether this generation of college students really is a different breed. According to former journalist-turned-college-teacher Peter Sacks in *Generation X Goes to College*, it is indeed.

Sacks argues that this change in students reflects a dramatic change in American culture over the last decade, away from reason and thoughtfulness and "a belief system whose claims to truth are based on what is provable" (135), to a cultural populism in which all theories and views are equally valid, a relativistic, anti-rational era in which "responsibility for one's actions and obligation to the public good" (161) can no longer be counted upon.

When Sacks became a college teacher, he was shocked by the total disengagement and lack of seriousness of many of his students, students who defined "excellent teaching" as courses which were entertaining, whose mantra was "it's not cool to want to learn," who believed, like the calculating student above, that they bore no responsibility to come to class

having read the assignments--but who believed they were entitled to a good grade if they showed up and met minimum standards.

The implications troubled him even more: the good students were being cheated by the hand-holding and attention being paid to bored, unmotivated students, with the consequence that education was being cheapened for



Boehm

everyone.

Sacks' analysis of the "postmodern" cultural changes which generated this "hyperconsumer entitlement" mentality is supported by Harvard sociologist David Reisman, who had noted this transition some years earlier:

This shift from academic merit to student consumerism is one of the two greatest reversals of direction in all the history of American higher education, the other being the replacement of the classical college by the modern university a century ago (162).

How should professional educators respond to students who have grown up in a

culture of accommodation and entitlement? Bemoaning change, while it allows us to vent our frustrations, does little to address the challenges we may face in the classroom. Are students at fault? In many cases, yes. Are high schools and elementary schools to blame? Of course; students bring with them the attitudes toward learning which were inculcated there. Are we likewise responsible? Sacks believes we are: "we overly nurturing adults have let [students] get away with it." Knowing how exhausting it can become to truly foster excellence, we have often settled for mediocrity or defensive

teaching. Perhaps we have also failed to help students see the value of what my counterpart in another state believes is our most important commitment as educators: to help students create "a life of the mind."

Fostering a life of the mind obligates professional educators to become mediators between students who are expecting less of themselves and an adult life which is demanding more. It compels us to model both the vitality and the rewards of such a life, demonstrating its value for students who habitually "visit" a subject, but never truly live there, never making their learning a part of their thinking or their approach to life. As philosopher Martin Heidegger observes, "Thinking is not a means to gain knowledge. Thinking cuts furrows into the soil of Being."

Cutting furrows--nurturing a life of the mind--motivating students to become lifelong learners: these can only be accomplished through a shared commitment from each of us within this community of educators. Whether we teach computer programming, or methods of accounting, or

therapeutic interventions, students in our courses must learn how to learn, not merely how to fill in the blanks on

"Nurturing a life of the mind . . . can only be accomplished through a shared commitment from each of us"

an answer sheet.

They must also learn how to communicate what they know--whether the language be that of spreadsheets or balance sheets or patient care logs. Careful reasoning and clear communication are honed only with intensive practice and conscientious feedback. As one colleague in the psychology department informs students in many of his course assignments, "A failure by me to require regular, continuing writing exercises would, therefore, be little less than professorial malpractice."

When I tell my children that my

See Life, Page 4



Cretin Jobs

Molleen Zanger

This time I'm ready.

I know it's coming; I just don't know when.

But when it does I'll be ready.

Sooner or later a student will ask, "What difference does it make? Why does this little, piddly stuff matter?"

This is response to the purple ink on his or her paper calling attention to some trifling spelling error.

I am always surprised by the question, but I shouldn't be by now.

Believe me, I know that it isn't just students who think spelling errors are of little significance in the larger scheme of things. I do know that they fall in the category of "Lower concerns" on the hierarchy of composition concerns along with punctuation and capitalization. The Higher concerns are focus, organization and development. The theory of higher and lower concerns interested me enough to find out what the middle concerns are: style, tone, word choice. All of which are, I agree, important. It's just the hierarchy I question.

To me, everything counts. It is all important. To me, disregarding the "piddly" stuff is like caring more about one's clothes and hair and makeup than about the big ol' chunk of spinach between the front teeth. It's distracting. And, like keeping the outside of a vehicle washed and waxed, but neglecting to have the oil changed, it is dangerous.

The danger lies in confusing the reader, in sending the wrong message, or sending none at all.

One student was particularly annoyed with me when I questioned him on his sentence "Cretin jobs are for cretin people." Did he mean to say that, in Crete, only natives of Crete should be allowed to hold jobs? Or did he mean that people of limited mental capacity should limit their employment to positions of limited requirements? When I asked him to tell me the meaning of the word "cretin," he said he didn't know. So I asked him why he chose it. He told me that he didn't; "Spell checker told me to use it." Then I asked him why

he used it if he didn't know what it meant. He said, "What difference does it make? You know what I mean." But I didn't. Suddenly it occurred to me that he might have meant "certain," that he meant to write "certain jobs are for certain people." So I asked him. "Yeah," he said, "See, you did know what I meant."

That the reader is not the one that is supposed to have to do that kind of decoding escaped him.

After this event, I began to jot down similar errors, and to wonder how and why they occurred. Some seemed obviously born of hurry and inattention to detail: sing for sign, for example, as in "I had forms to sing," (songs to sign?) and not able for notable in "He is a not able person in politics." And in tact for intact: "Somehow our relationship remained in tact." How about sacred for scared? "At first I was sacred about college." Or barley for barely? "I barley knew my grandfather" (Anyone for beef barely soup?)

"An error is the more dangerous the more truth it contains" Amiel

Others seemed almost frighteningly Freudian. "With my best friend I can share my deepest darkest secretes" and "I defiantly like sex," for example. Are they saying exactly what they mean, but did not mean to say? I especially enjoy one contributed to my collection by a colleague: "Now I know the meaning of the saying 'Partying is such sweet sorrow.'"

"... [there is] very generally a soul of truth in things erroneous."

Spencer

Sometimes I share with a class my own struggles with a kind of typographical impairment which took decades to overcome. I flunked typing three times. The first time was in junior high, and my typing teacher was my civics teacher. I was also flunking civics. This progressive and creative teacher suggested a solution:

If I would, on my own time, type up Michigan's about-to-be ratified new constitution, he would pass me in both subjects. He just said "pass," understand, with no mention of a grade. But he wanted it letter, comma, paragraph perfect.

It seemed like a good deal to me, so I took him up on it. On my father's old black Underwood, sans spell-check, grammar check, or the capacity to delete, insert, or typeover, I struggled. Night after night; weekend after weekend, I plunked away, wasting more paper than I would turn in. It looked good to me as I handed it over, but he got an odd expression on his face which began to turn an interesting shade of green that I had never seen outside a salad bowl. He did not meet my eyes as he gave it back to me muttering something that sounded like, "That will do." And it wasn't until my father examined it that night that I learned I'd carefully, painstakingly, erroneously substituted the

prefix "pro" each time I typed "constitution."

So it isn't that I don't make mistakes. It isn't that errors should not happen. It isn't that we must never make errors. It is that we should put as much effort into finding and correcting them as we do in trying to excuse them.

It is the writer's job to make the message, and the meaning, as clear as possible.

The next time a student asks what difference it makes, I'm going to remember another former student. For some reason, I remembered that he'd said he had a gun collection, so when he posed the dreaded question, I asked him if it made any difference what kind of ammunition I shoved into his favorite gun. "I mean," I said, "one bullet is pretty much like the next, right?"

His face registered confusion, then shock, then horror.

I imagine that's pretty much how I looked when I read, "Cretin jobs are for cretin people."



Zanger



Media Literacy Across Disciplines

Charlene Melcher

Being literate means students can do more than just read. It means they can interpret a character's motives, understand differences in literary genres, or grasp the subtle meaning of one of Shakespeare's knottier metaphors.

While most students can easily engage in this traditional kind of literacy, many have a more difficult time with the concept of media literacy.

In fact, they often think that taking a course focused on media literacy means that they'll have to stop watching "Walker: Texas Ranger" and tune into obscure period dramas on PBS instead. Even worse, they dread being challenged to cut back on their media use.

However, they soon learn that being media literate means doing more than just watching TV, reading magazines, or surfing the Net. To be media literate they must understand and interpret character's motives as well as grasp the knottier aspects of media economics and

ownership, and develop a sense of media forms, storytelling patterns, and genres.

In fact, they soon find that instead of cutting back on their media use, the media literacy perspective actually encourages them to consume a greater variety of media forms and messages.

That might seem surprising considering that the typical American is exposed to 7-10 hours of media each day. However, much of that use is relatively mindless. Media literacy provides a rich opportunity to examine the unexamined.

To do that I have students in my Communication 270 class complete several media literacy exercises. Each assignment follows a standard format:

they collect data of some kind and then write an essay about what their data reveals.

One assignment asks them to keep a media diary and track all of their media consumption--TV watched, radio sung to, billboards read,

magazines flipped through, etc.--for five days. Many are surprised to find how much they do and don't use certain media forms.

To provide exposure to new media, one assignment asks students to surf the Net and figure out who the audience a particular website is trying to reach. This can provide an insight into how marketers

reconfigure the population into potential buyers. In another assignment, they keep a product use diary and track their use of consumer products for a 24 hour period.

This includes everything from the sheets on their bed first thing in the morning to their toothpaste at night. This helps provide a perspective on the influence advertising has on their

lives, and their personal patterns of consumption.

Media literacy isn't a topic just for courses in human communication, however. For example, the media consumption diary could easily form

the basis for math classes to discuss frequencies and averages. The Net surfing could be adapted to an English class discussing writing for certain audiences.

A sociology class could easily use the product diary to discuss social norms and trends. As you can see, the possibilities for media literacy exercises are numerous and they can be adapted to courses in a number of disciplines.

Best of all, in the end your students might be secretly thrilled to receive a class assignment that starts off with "Watch at least three hours of television . . ."



Melcher

"Media literacy provides a rich opportunity to examine the unexamined"

Life

Continued from Page 2

accuracy and speed with a slide rule were unsurpassed in my college math and science courses, they can't keep from laughing. These skills long ago became irrelevant. But the processes of reasoning, of problem-solving, of being able to express what I have learned and articulate my processes to others--these are used every day of my life.

We who are educators are the last, best--and perhaps only--hope for an educated populace, for creating the kind of culture in which we wish to live. At this university, where one third of our student population is or will become teachers, the seeds we sow today will be multiplied in ways we may never be able to calculate--even with a slide rule.

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History

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narrative or factual account.

Since this kind of writing is often new to those in introductory level courses, I use study guides that allow students to practice historical essay construction before taking the examination. (See Appendix 2) My office hours are usually quite busy during the week before the test, but students come with exactly the kinds of questions that I hope they will ask. Rather than simple factual questions, they ask: "Will this argument work?" or "do I have enough evidence to support my view?" In grading these exams, I insist that factual assertions and chronologies be accurate, but students who make a plausible case for their understanding of historical issues do better than those who simply fill their blue books with names and dates.

While these sorts of techniques do not work with all students, they can be extremely valuable tools in reshaping students' understanding of history. Few students will go on to become professional historians, but most can be taught to think and write in meaningful historical terms.

Appendix 1 Paper Assignments for History 314: Civil War and Reconstruction

Students must choose one of the three questions listed below for their final paper. Each question deals with a major problem in the historical literature of the period we are studying.

Your task is to develop an informed interpretation of the issue. You should assume that the audience the audience for your paper is educated, but knows little or nothing about the specific issues you are dealing with. Below each of the three questions are readings that you must use in formulating your own view. Other sources can be used, but are not required.

The paper should be 5-7 typed, double spaced pages in length. Footnotes/endnotes should be used to credit any quotations or ideas taken from the sources. The essay should have the following in its overall structure.

1) An introductory paragraph in which you state your overall view of the issue. The reader should know immediately why the issue is important and what you intend to argue.

2) A review of the literature that you have used in developing your interpretation. Each document, article or selection you have read should be discussed in this section. What have historians said about this issue? How do they differ from one another? What sources have they used in their work? Are there any serious weaknesses in their sources, methods, or assumptions? You can and should use brief quotations from your sources to illustrate these points.

3) A section in which you assert your own view. You can agree with the interpretation of one or more of your sources, but you need to be clear about your reasons for agreeing.

PAPER TOPICS

All readings on reserve in the library.

1. Did Abraham Lincoln believe in racial equality?

READ: Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Only His Stepchildren: Lincoln and the Negro," *Civil War History* 20 (1974): 293-310; George M. Frederickson, "A man But Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (1975): 39-58; and David Lightner, "Abraham Lincoln and the Ideal of Equality," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 75 (1982): 289-308.

2. How should history judge George McClellan as a military commander?

READ: T. Harry Williams, "George B. McClellan," in McClellan, *Sherman and Grant* ed. T. Harry Williams, (Chicago, 1962); Stephen Sears, "McClellan v. Lee: The Seven Day Trial," *Quarterly Journal of Military History* 1 (1988): 10-17; and Brian H. Reed, "General McClellan and the Politicians," *Parameters* 17 (1987): 101-112

3. Who were the Carpetbaggers?

READ: Primary documents by Marshall Twitchell and Albert Morgan in *Voices From the Reconstruction Years* ed. Glenn Linden, (New York, 1999); Randolph Campbell, "Carpetbag Rule in Reconstruction Texas: An Enduring Myth," *Southwest Historical Quarterly* 97 (1994): 587-596; Richard Current, "Carpetbaggers Reconsidered," in *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings*, ed. Richard Current, (Baton Rouge, 1974); and C. Brown, "Carpetbagger Intrigues, Black Leadership and a Southern Loyalist Triumph," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 72 (1994): 275-301.

Appendix 2 Sample Examination Questions (Handed out one week before the exam)

1. Students must write on one (1) of the following: These questions must be based on your reading and our discussion of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*.

A. It is August, 1841 and you have just left the anti-slavery convention at Nantucket where Frederick Douglass dramatically related the narrative of his life as a slave. You came to the meeting out of curiosity and were initially unsure about your views of the slavery issue. Write a letter to a friend or relative describing how Douglass's account convinced you that slavery should be ended in the United States. (Please use specific examples and quotations from the book).

B. Evaluate the following quotation. "Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* reveals that the slave system in Maryland was becoming more and more difficult to maintain. Maryland slave owners faced serious challenges to their power over slaves that deep south masters did not."

2. Students must write on one (1) of the following: These questions must be based on your reading and our discussion of Peter Cartwright, *The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*.

A. Ken Burns has decided to make a new documentary on the Methodist circuit rider as a symbol of the changing cultural life of the frontier during the first half of the nineteenth century. He has invited you to appear on the program as an expert on Peter Cartwright. In a 3-4 page letter, discuss three episodes in Cartwright's life that fit the theme of Burns' documentary.

B. Evaluate the following quotation. "Like many antebellum Americans, Peter Cartwright was torn between his dislike of the institution of slavery and his fear that any agitation of the question would destroy an institution he valued. In the end, however, he was forced to choose sides."

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