TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

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The creation of a new Core curriculum at Kennesaw State College provided an opportunity to rethink questions of purpose and methodology in the teaching of survey history courses. In trying to comprehend the perspective of students, I thought back to my own freshman/sophomore experience, some three decades ago. I remember a few stimulating novels and monographs to which I was exposed and a few inspired moments in the classroom when an idea was presented that changed my way of thinking. I still know the topic of my freshman English term paper. I do not recall ever being excited by anything I read in a textbook. I possess my much underlined copies of the two-volume Hicks, Mowry, and Burke used in introductory U.S. history classes. I am sure I learned all the details expected of me, but the main thing I still remember vividly was that I paid $15.00 to buy the two volumes -- a considerable sum at the time. I am sure I was unaware that the books had a point of view.

If the texts of my favorite discipline failed to arouse my imagination, the thick, introductory volumes of other Core courses were even less moving. I wonder how many readers of this publication could justify the time and effort they once put into their chemistry or mathematics classes, learning every formula and every table necessary to do well on tests. Was it really necessary to learn so much that we would never use in order to gain an appreciation for science and an understanding of its relevance to our daily lives? Could any of us pass a chemistry test today? The non-history major taking required history classes must be equally uncertain about the importance of knowing in detail what happened at Saratoga or Yalta. Expecting to forget it all as soon as the course ends, they learn in silent protest whatever is expected to attain a good grade.

It seems clear to me that much of what we require of students cannot be justified by any sound educational principles. By passively absorbing the details a faculty member considers important, students often become bored and fail to discover what history really is. Despite the presence of many excellent teachers in the public schools, most students come to college knowing little history. I doubt that non-majors leave college with much more history knowledge than they had at the beginning. Thinking that history

is just facts and dates, they have to be persuaded that something really important might happen in the classroom. They have no conception of history as an exciting intellectual experience, where scholars grapple with important issues that might hold keys to understanding human behavior.

When Kennesaw State changed the history Core, we abandoned five-hour classes for three. This reduction in hours sent out a strong message, in my opinion, that history courses can be taught well with 40 percent less content. The emphasis seemed to shift from detail to the critical analysis of a few key events. Taking advantage of this change, I decided to eliminate use of a textbook and experiment instead with a documents reader. It seems apparent to me that students as well as professional historians need to be exposed to primary sources if they are to have opinions they can call their own.

The book I chose was *A More Perfect Union: Documents in U.S. History* by Paul F. Boller, Jr. and Ronald Story. There are other good books emphasizing primary sources. *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence* by Bruce Wheeler and Susan Becker. At least one of my colleagues is using both.

I require one or two documents per class period. Students are expected to come prepared to discuss the selected readings and perhaps take a pop quiz either on today's readings assignment or on the documents we discussed the previous day. During the quarter I give eight pop quizzes, of which two can be dropped. Collectively, the quizzes make up 60 percent of the final grade for the course.

Each document is designed to fit a major theme discussed in class. For example, one of the first documents I assign in Hist. 151 is Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which introduces the students to Puritanism. In class I spend part of the time giving students background information on the Puritans; then we discuss the sermon as an example of Calvinist theology. Toward the end of the quarter students read documents such as the Republican Party platform of 1860, the 1861 Mississippi ordinance of secession, and Lincoln's Gettysburg and second inaugural addresses. The pop quizzes are an extension of class discussions. All quizzes require students to take a position on a controversial topic and use the knowledge that they have acquired to defend their viewpoint. If students are asked to give their opinion on why the South seceded, they are expected to do so based on the documents they have read.

I also require everyone to visit two historical

sites related to the time period covered in the class. Indian mounds, battlefields, and old houses are also primary sources. After each visit the students are expected to write a critical paper, evaluating how well the site has been preserved and how effectively the professionals at the site interpret it for the public. Each of these papers are 10 percent of the final grade. The remaining 20 percent comes from a comprehensive final.

I am not completely happy with my system. I would like students to do more independent research and writing. But the documents approach seems to work reasonably well with the large classes (usually 50 per section) that we have to teach. The students have responded well. Class discussions are often lively. The last time I taught Hist. 151 I started with 48 students. None dropped; only one failed; and the rest did work of sufficient quality to earn a "C" or better. A few complained on the student evaluations of the lack of multiple choice testing, but I never had grades so high when I employed multiple choice exams. The student evaluations gave high ratings on the quality of instruction and on the value of the course in stimulating thinking. From my perspective, the best proof that the system worked was that even average students on the final exam demonstrated a gratifying retention of concepts discussed early in the course.

I hope each time I teach a survey class I can innovate based on my experiences the previous quarter. Nonetheless, I expect never to depart from the following principles: 1) the study of history should focus on large issues that help to explain our fundamental values and biases; 2) it should avoid memorization of excessive details and emphasize critical thinking skills; and 3) it should be fun.