

Development of a Model for a Workshop on Teaching the Core

by

Elsa A. Nystrom
Kennesaw State College

Core (kor) n. The innermost or essential part.¹ Core classes are often regarded by students at best as a necessary evil or at worst as an expensive and time consuming annoyance. Yet for centuries, colleges and universities have believed that a certain number of basic classes must be taken by all students. Although the number of core courses vary, most institutions of higher learning require an elementary exposure to English and literature, history, science, and math, in varied amounts, while a few allow students to design their own programs. During the last decade, a number of schools have been involved in an attempt to upgrade their core classes to better meet the challenges that the modern world places on the college graduate. Kennesaw State College has been part of this process since 1985. At the present time many Georgia colleges and universities are either contemplating or in the process of changing their own core classes, therefore the workshop strategy and the ideas it generated should be of interest to those involved in teaching core classes.

In 1992, in order to facilitate better teaching of the new core courses and acquaint the college faculty and staff with the new program, the Core Curriculum Committee instituted a series of Core Curriculum Workshops. Under the new core, the history department assumed responsibility for teaching four core classes, History 151-152 (American History sequence) and History 205-206 (World History sequence). Because of its increased involvement teaching the core, the Core Curriculum Committee also gave the history department the responsibility for setting up the first Core Curriculum Workshop. The department was to develop a model that would be used for a series of Core Workshops for other disciplines across the curriculum.

Before detailing the development of the model workshop, a brief overview of Kennesaw State's concerns regarding the core program is necessary. The decision to change the core and develop the workshop program was not taken lightly, but was the end result of almost a decade of study and debate.

When Kennesaw State College became a four-year institution in 1977, it embarked on a period of rapid growth and change that has continued with little abatement into 1993. Unfortunately, the very rapidity of these changes allowed relatively little time for introspection on the part of the college administration. Decisions concerning the curriculum had to be made fairly quickly, always with the knowledge that it would eventually become necessary to critically evaluate the components of the baccalaureate degree at Kennesaw.

During the 1980's partly coinciding with this period of rapid growth and change, several major academic organizations published critical reviews of undergraduate studies in the United States. The National Institute of Education, the Association of American

Colleges, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the National Endowment for the Humanities published reports on the status of undergraduate education. Comment from the conclusions reached in these reports ranged from ". . . there are gaps between the ideal and the actual, regarding the realities of student learning, lack of curricular coherence . . . along with a lowered faculty morale and academic standards . . .", to ". . . there is a crisis in American education . . . revealed in the decay of the college course of study".²

These powerful external forces combined with an internal argument between Kennesaw's business school and the Arts and Science faculty caused President Betty Siegel to establish the Steering Committee for the Study of the Baccalaureate (1986-1987) in Winter Quarter, 1985.³ President Siegel proposed that this study involve the entire college faculty; consequently, the committee contained representatives from each of the four schools as well as the Vice-President for Academic Affairs. This initial charge led to a series of meetings over a seven-year period that brought major changes to the core curriculum at Kennesaw State.

The Steering Committee recognized, in particular, a general need to strengthen the parts of the baccalaureate program which all colleges hold in common, the core curriculum. This led to the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Core Curriculum (1988-1989). After a year of study and discussion, the Ad Hoc Committee came up with the basic structure and philosophy which the entire faculty eventually accepted as the foundation for a revised core curriculum. Obviously this was a sometimes painful process which involved much discussion and soul-searching in small group meetings, department meetings, and all-campus faculty meetings.

The gist of the Ad Hoc Committee's report detailed the structure of the revised core. The new core was to provide a learning experience that was both more demanding and more relevant to all disciplines. There would also be an emphasis on the inter-connectedness of the various disciplines. In addition, more non-western material would be added to the general curriculum. Finally, a permanent Core Curriculum Committee was established to act as both overseer and advocate for the core curriculum at Kennesaw State. The Committee took over responsibility for the implementation of the new core, including the problems of advisement and credit transfer that accompanied it. In addition, it was responsible for a series of faculty workshops that would demonstrate teaching methods as well as connections between the new courses. First year workshops included history (both American and world) November, 1992, English (composition and literature) February, 1993, philosophy, March, 1993, and arts (art, music and theater) April, 1993.

The history core classes were among the first selected to be revised under the new curriculum. Before the new core courses became mandatory, Kennesaw students had to take five hours of American history and five hours of world history. They could choose either 251 (from colonization to the Civil War) or 252 (Civil War to the present) and either 111 (World Civilization to 1500) or 112 (World Civilization from 1500 to the present). As might be expected, most students took their two history classes and got on to more important things. They rarely took more history or related courses such as philosophy and ethics, religion, geography, or foreign language. Thus there was a very real concern among the administration and faculty that many students graduated with little knowledge

of the modern world.

All this was to change with the implementation of the new core. Although the number of hours required only increased from ten to twelve, all students who entered for the first time in Fall, 1991, now had to take four history classes, History 151, 152, and History 205, 206. Now they would get the *big* picture but in a three hour format. In addition, they would have to take Philosophy 100 (Critical Thinking), economics, two three-hour literature classes and one three-hour arts elective.

Needless to say, not all the students were as excited about this program as the administration and faculty. However, those enrolled before Fall, 1991 were allowed to take the old core classes until they were phased out in Summer quarter, 1993. Unfortunately, this caused considerable confusion during registration as students signed up for the wrong classes and had to be switched quite often.

There was also some grumbling among the history faculty about the implementation of the new core classes. Of course, one has never enough class time to cover *everything*, and ideally the historians would have preferred twenty hours of history in the core as opposed to twelve. There had always been complaints that it was impossible to do a good job in a five hour class on the quarter system, particularly in world history; now the same material would have to be covered in a three hour class. How could this be accomplished? Eventually, most of the history faculty (some with reservations) agreed that the benefits of teaching both halves of world and American history to all students even in an abbreviated format, was better than requiring only one half of each.

These problems were hammered out in a series of department meetings, and slowly the new courses began to take shape. Initially, several faculty members taught pilot courses in both world and American history. Students were encouraged to sign up for them by offering those eligible for the old core, five hours credit for a three-hour class . . . for a short time only! As a result of this generous offer, the new courses did fill.

Teaching the pilot courses brought to light several problems that lurked in the conversion to the three-hour system. The main problem, as one might expect, was that although the three-hour format forced reduction in the material covered, it was difficult to decide what to leave out. At this point, everyone was used to the five-hour format and was reluctant to leave out a long cherished concept. Another problem was finding the *ideal* textbook. In addition, each new core course increased emphasis on writing and critical thinking, and non-Western culture and geography. Certainly there was no time to insert all of these elements in a three-hour course.

Faced with the reality that all these things must indeed be accomplished in the new core format, the history faculty spent considerable time on reviewing available texts and the restructuring of course notes. There was much syllabus swapping and discussion of methods among those who had already taught and those who were about to teach the new core. Looming over our heads was the knowledge that we would soon have to go public as the first to give a workshop for the whole college on teaching the new core. The workshop, if we were successful, would provide a model for others to follow, and show everyone what not to do, if we failed.

As the date for the workshop rapidly approached, the history faculty gathered for

a day long "retreat" to discuss the essential elements of the core courses and how they could be explained in the workshop. Everyone was also asked to bring an individual statement of the main themes of the core classes they taught, whether world or American.

This self-identification of major themes was a valuable experience in itself. It forced all of the historians to think about the essential elements of the core classes they taught. No coercion was required for this final list, because we found there was considerable consensus regarding essential elements.

During the day, the historians spent most of their time in two groups, since the world and American specialists faced slightly different problems. The world historians were much more involved with including non-Western cultures and their teaching methods and special areas were much more varied.

We had received some initial instructions regarding the format of the workshop from the Core Curriculum Committee. The morning was to be a discussion of teaching philosophy and then methodology. Then two members from different disciplines, Dr. Robert Paul from biology and Mr. Kurt Daw from theater, would respond to our presentation. After a brief lunch break, the final session would provide an opportunity for questions and suggestions from the audience. Finally, the date for the first workshop was set for November 19, 1992.

In October, two weeks before the workshop, the historians gathered for their final strategy session. It was decided almost at once that because there were so many differences between teaching world and American history, the portion of the workshop devoted to the teaching of history must be divided into two sections. Each would then develop their own portion of the program.

The history faculty quickly split into two groups and hammered out the basis for the world and American approaches. At the end of the session, when they came together again, the Americanists had decided to make methodology the focus of their section, while the world historians agreed to center on the philosophy of teaching history. Organizationally, this worked well and was quickly accepted by both groups. The difference in focus resulted not only from difference in teaching style, chemistry and personality but because the Americanists generally agreed to abandon the traditional text and work from documents. The world historians, given their much larger time frame, chose a brief standard text.

The two groups then held separate planning sessions to fine tune their program. The sessions for both groups went smoothly and most of the historians involved in the workshop felt fairly confident that their presentation would work.⁴ However, there was a certain amount of anxiety involved. After all, this was the first workshop. We were not sure how many people would attend or how the program would be accepted. Even some of the department members were skeptical and thought it was just more busy work that would not generate anything worthwhile.

A series of fliers was sent through campus mail in the week immediately preceding the workshop. Unfortunately, we did not require anyone to reserve a place so we had no idea how many would attend. If anyone is contemplating a workshop, this might be a good idea. Extensive publicity is also very important.

A large double conference room that would hold as many as fifty people was

reserved for the workshop. At this point, we hoped that at least thirty would attend. All members of the Core Curriculum Committee had to attend so we knew that there would be some people there. As it turned out, more than forty people attended, although not all were able to stay for the whole program,

The Workshop started at 9:15 after a brief introduction and overview of the workshop program. The world historians presided over a panel on the problems of teaching history in today's world, loosely based on Dr. Tom Keene's title "Groping towards a Global View of History."⁶ The (sic) world historians on the panel spoke eloquently about some of the problems inherent in teaching world history in the United States. They pointed out that most of the facts of past history have not changed, but the interpretations of these facts certainly have. Each generation now writes its own history. This becomes very obvious when you look at a textbook that is more than twenty years old.

Today's society demands increasing emphasis on the history of the "little people" rather than the "movers and shakers" of the world. More space must be given to issues of race, class and gender. There is also an increasing emphasis on the contributions of non-Western societies to world civilization. The standard interpretation of the changes after 1500 had formerly been based on Westernization, while the current emphasis is on Modernization.

The world historians noted that they have tried to break away from the historical traditions of the past. One way has been to show that the West's dominance should not be seen as inevitable. A useful example is, of course, the remarkable modernization that occurred during the Sung dynasty in China (960-1279). China at this point seemed on the verge of industrialization, although they *failed* to realize that accomplishment. Was this due mainly to cultural differences between West and East or the force of circumstances like the Mongol invasion that ravaged China at the end of this period? Conversely was the rise of the West mainly due to chance? Questions like these encourage the students to actually think about the events of the past.

Another problem mentioned by the world historians that relates directly to the three-hour format is finding a readable text with a truly global view. A concise, well-written text is crucial to the success of History 205-206, since most of the students do not have any background in world history. Consequently, it is almost impossible to use a document reader for the main text. Fortunately, the publishers seem to be working on this problem as the department has received a number of new brief texts in the last year. Questions generated by the first session were held for the afternoon and after a brief intermission, the American historians started off their part of the program titled "Diversity of Method, Consensus of Content."⁶ [See Appendix A]

The main portion of this part of the program was devoted to a panel discussion of pedagogical method in four specific areas: documents and their use, writing and critical thinking, geography and testing. Historians teaching the new core explained in some detail how they integrated documents, developed assignments to increase skills in critical thinking, utilized geography in the study of history and tested the students. This was a particularly worthwhile session because it provided the audience with a variety of teaching strategies that could be used to attain the same goals in other disciplines.

At the end of the session, a brief period was devoted to a discussion of problems generated by the new core. This was also useful, because despite all the advantages of the new program, it is not entirely problem free. The first was a concern that the classes remain or become true three-hour classes and not five-hour classes in disguise. Class size also remains a problem. Many of the 151-152 and 205-206 sections are taught in double sections of 80 students or single classes of 40. This makes discussion difficult and increases the workload, because of the emphasis of writing and critical thinking. Additionally, many of the history faculty feel frustrated or burned-out because the effort involved in teaching such large numbers precludes much time for research and writing, institutional activity or community involvement. Finally there is also a concern that the history faculty will be forced to become mainly a teaching faculty. The department's heavy involvement with core classes has caused it to focus much of its energy on course development and classroom activity and will continue to do so.

At the end of the morning program, the respondents took the floor for a thirty-minute reaction to the workshop. Their overall response was extremely positive. However, Dr. Paul, from biology, shared the concerns of the historians regarding class size and the work involved with grading writing assignments. Mr. Daw, from the theater department, commented that the workshop was a glimpse into someone else's classroom. He felt that it was extremely useful to learn what other departments were teaching and reminded the historians not to forget the arts and culture in their lectures.

After lunch, the workshop reconvened for a question & answer session. A noteworthy guest was Ms. Sharon Hunt, the Social Studies Coordinator for Cobb County High Schools. She was extremely interested in our Core Workshop Program and suggested the Cobb County system might move world history to the 12th grade, which would help continuity with our core. The program generated a variety of questions about methods and philosophy. Many of the faculty members from other disciplines had suggestions on how we could implement the connections between core classes and develop materials particularly suited for the core.

Several recommendations included obtaining a common set of wall hangings for all classrooms (since the traditional roll-up maps are so fragile) and the development of a handbook for new and part-time teachers. Another idea concerned the creation of a humanities reader that would contain document sets from all the humanities core courses. The teacher handbook would include minimal concepts and ideas for each core course, along with common connecting themes, sample syllabi, teaching aids and resources, a bibliography and a reading list. It might also include an overview of how the discipline had developed chronologically, particularly for the benefit of other disciplines.⁷

One essential element of a successful workshop is a critical evaluation at its conclusion. Evaluation forms were sent to those who attended and the response has been generally quite favorable. Undoubtedly evaluations done immediately after the end of the program would have been more useful.⁸

Overall, the History Core Workshop was both informative for its audience and

⁷This is still a concern and has yet to be fully addressed by the administration.

satisfying to the participants. Initially it provided an opportunity for historians to look critically at the method and content of their core classes and share ideas with their colleagues. The workshop, itself, gave faculty and staff from all disciplines a chance to learn what historians do, and how to relate this process to their own classes. Finally, the History Core Workshop did indeed provide a successful working model for the series of workshops across the core that followed it.

The new history core has been in place for a year now. Although a true evaluation of the program is difficult because of all the human variables involved, students have accepted and seem to like the new classes. Many actually enjoy reading documents. They also appreciate the connection with art history and world literature.

All of the history faculty will be teaching the new core classes in Fall of 1993. After some initial resistance, most have adjusted well to the new program. The opportunity to keep students in our discipline longer with more exposure to history classes and has increased their appreciation of the relevance of history for modern Americans and stimulated their interest in history as a major. Students often take the core classes back to back and this allows us to get to know them better. The three-hour format has also stimulated the development of new teaching strategies by the history faculty. Although the problems of increased class sizes and heavy teaching loads have yet to be resolved, the overall effect of the new core has been a very positive one on both students and faculty.

Appendix A

Diversity of Method, Consensus of Content

Initially we would like to begin our part of the program with a statement that defines both the purpose and the method of teaching these new core courses as well as why history is a unique discipline.

Statement of Purpose

In History 151 & 152, we American historians integrate narrative content with thematic concepts of United States history utilizing an understanding of primary sources and conflicting interpretations as well as a connection with physical geographic locations.

Sounds rather dense and Byzantine but what we mean is, of course, that we use traditional lecture to develop major themes that come out of the documents book that we use as our major text. A list of the documents is included in your packets...and we also connect both themes and documents with their geographic locations. In addition, we advise the students of conflicting views on major historic themes such as the interpretation of the Constitution and the causes of the Civil War.

We all agree that history is different as a discipline because conflicting views are always present and discussed, which encourages critical thinking on the part of the students so in this case, conflicting opinions in history are generally positive rather than negative.

Lectures in the new core classes also include bare bones narrative content that presumes some knowledge of the subject. There is sometimes a problem with the assumption that it is non-existent, however we all list a one volume brief history as either required or optional for these classes. Obviously the non-traditional students who have been out of school for many years and have little interest in history will often not have this basic knowledge. But we find it lacking in traditional students as well and suggest some contact with feeder high school history departments although this is no help with non-traditional students.

We now have the same students for a much long time...often students will take the same teacher for both halves of the core although it certainly doesn't matter if they do...regular attendance in a core class is more important for them because they won't get the material anywhere else. Also there are no longer any complaints that the teacher is merely rehashing the text. In addition, most of their work now takes places outside of class because class time is so brief. That doesn't mean they are over worked out of the classroom, they probably weren't doing enough work outside the classroom in a 5 hour class.

In our program today we would like to show you both our pedagogical method as well as some of the content of our core classes in four specific areas:

- Documents and their use
- Writing and Critical Thinking
- Geography
- Testing

Because we use a variety of approaches in all these areas, we decided to use a panel format to give you a sense of the different techniques used in the classroom to cover the same thematic material.

The first area is use of documents

Documents are extremely important in teaching history because they give the student the chance to read the original text relating to the historical event rather than another's unavoidably subjective interpretation of the same event. We all use document for the list enclosed but in rather different ways. At this point, Tom Scott, Linda Papageorge and Kay Reeve will share their rationale for using documents as well as the way they incorporate them into their teaching.

Thanks

Next is the area of writing and critical thinking. Again, we are all in agreement that student writing

needs to be part of these core courses. We also feel that is very important to return the students work with critical comments provided. We all accomplish this in different ways but agree that students should be graded on the clarity of their writing and their ability to evaluate material. Some of us also correct grammatical errors but others do not. Again, Florrie Corley, Ann Ellis, Elsa Nystrom, and Fred Roach will provide some insights into how they incorporate writing and critical thinking into their classes.

Thanks

Although we all teach geography in History 151-152, we were divided on how to include it. It was noted that when you teach history, you cannot avoid mentioning geography, particularly when lecturing on topics such as the early settlements, the Northwest Ordinance, the Missouri Compromise and the Civil War. The main question is still whether we should give a specific geography text, with standardized terms for all classes or to allow individual instructors in their own way. A decision was made to develop a list of geographic places and terms and choose a reasonable number of basic items and include them in a test or tests, so that students will be somewhat geographically literate. Have included a sample in your packet. At this point, Jeff Breshears, Florrie Corley and Fred Roach will explain how they have incorporated geography into their classes.

Thanks

Finally, we thought we should briefly mention how we deal with testing in these core classes. Again the methods are all different but the end is the same...the students know they have been tested...

Linda Papageorge, Kay Reeve and Tom Scott will talk briefly about the testing methods they use in 151-152.

Thanks

Final Comments relate to three areas

Problems, Intersection and Production of resource file and handbook

There is a concern that we structure the core classes so that they are true 3 hour classes not 5 hour classes in sheep's clothing but given the nature of these courses, the students are now responsible for doing a considerable amount of learning outside the classroom as mentioned earlier.

Class size is also a problem. The double sections of 80 students make discussion difficult but it also difficult in a large single section of 45-50. Considering the type of materials used, grading is particularly time consuming. There is also a sense of frustration and burnout because the effort involved in teaching large numbers of students precludes much original research and scholarly writing, institutional activity and community involvement. The trend seems to be moving towards making the History faculty mainly a teaching faculty because the department's heavy involvement with teaching core classes has forced us to focus much of our energy on course development and classroom activity and will continue to require this, particularly for those who teach core only.

Intersection-It is obvious that we do connect with World History and Political Science 201, probably with the Art survey and literature to some extent although this is more likely in world history. Certainly our writing section relates to English and teaching the scientific methods connects to Science. Again since we are the first in a series, it is likely that as other disciplines have their core programs, and develop their handbooks we should be able to save classroom time and repetition by shared focus on inter-related topics.

We also discussed the production of a handbook, but this will done later using coordination and editing of the information gathered for this program as a starting point. Part of the handbook will include a list of resources available in the department and elsewhere, as well as critique and book review guides and writing guidelines. We do have numerous films and videos as well as transparencies that need to be cataloged and an American History slide collection of 2000 slides.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate that the Historians began this series since in our humble opinion, History is the mother discipline.....

NOTES

¹ Albert and Loy Morehead, eds. The New American Webster Handy Collegiate Dictionary (Signet: New York, 1981) p. 124.

² Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education. Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (National Institute of Education, Washington, D. C., 1984), p. 8. Integrity in the College Curriculum, Select Committee, Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees (Association of American Colleges, Washington, D. C., 1985), p. 1. The author expresses her appreciation to Ann Ellis and Tom Keene, who were at KSC when this movement began and provided much needed information on the formative period.

³ The business school had developed a series of "applied" courses to replace the traditional Arts and Science core classes. The Arts and Science faculty felt that these were a watered down version of the standard core classes while the business school retorted that the traditionalists just wanted to hold on to the students to justify their existence. This potentially destructive argument was defused by the creation of the committee, which led to the creation of a standard core for the entire school.

⁴ The Board of Regents gave their approval to the new core classes.

⁵ The workshop involved everyone in the department who taught the new core classes, which at this point, included everyone but the part-time faculty. Now all teach the three-hour classes.

⁶ The panel itself had a global feel, partly because it included two members from Africa and one from the Netherlands.

⁷ For further insights regarding the Kennesaw State Core, see Proceedings and Papers of the Georgia Association of Historians, 1992.

⁸ Unfortunately, we didn't think of evaluating the Workshop until later, and the forms were handed out some time after the Workshop.