

Preventing “Back-atcha”: Improving Secondary School Instruction by Introducing Prospective Teachers to Historiography

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A COLLEAGUE SHARED WITH ME a student comment about her course and teaching approach: “I prefer a more lecture based [*sic*] class. I feel like she spent time trying to make us think about higher historical questions and ideas. My goals as a [future] teacher would be more satisfied by a lecture, fact based [*sic*] course than by a discussion ‘idea’ course.” My colleague knew this comment would interest me because I am always looking for material to use in my campaign to end the educational “back-atcha” cycle. This is a multi-generational process, wherein unsophisticated fact-centered high school instruction turns out students resilient against understanding historical discipline despite their college courses; these students then go on to become secondary school teachers who produce more students like themselves coming “back-atcha” to college classrooms.

In the state of New York, the Board of Regents decided that after February 1, 2004, secondary school teachers seeking initial certification to teach social studies must prove that they have mastered “content” in the fields of history, geography, economics, civics, and “social studies skills.”¹ Mastery is demonstrated by passing the Content Specialty Test (CST), roughly eighty percent of which consists of multiple-choice questions. While such content mastery is essential to the instruction of history, the

Social Studies CST has had the unfortunate consequence of reinforcing the perception that history is a body of objectively recorded facts about a completely knowable past.

Granted, the Regents may not have intended for this effect. For instance, for the history portion of the multiple-choice questions, the first of nine “objectives”—“understand[ing] key historical terms and concepts, the specialized fields of historical study, and *historiography* [emphasis added]”—supposedly involves testing a prospective teacher’s ability to apply “key concepts,” like causality, and to measure a teaching candidate’s ability to recognize “the existence of conflicting perspectives on historical experience.”² Nevertheless, the multiple-choice questions designed around this objective neither test the ability to apply key concepts, nor do they measure an understanding of *how* perspectives shape the “meaning” of historical experience, much less whether the candidate understands what shifting perspectives imply about the often-presumed knowability of the past.

Take, for example, the following sample multiple-choice question described by the New York State Education Department’s website as representative of questions testing the first objective:

Which of the following sources would a contemporary historian of colonial America most likely use to reconstitute the socioeconomic structure of an eighteenth-century New England town?

- A. newspapers and town petitions
- B. tax lists and probate records
- C. diaries and personal correspondence
- D. sermons and church covenants.

Correct Response: B. Tax lists provide a rough approximation of the distribution of wealth in eighteenth-century communities. The general outline furnished by tax lists can be supplemented by the detailed inventories of personal wealth found in probate records. Together, they offer a reasonably accurate picture of the socioeconomic structure of a community.³

In light of the CST’s summation of the historical method, it is no wonder my colleague’s student felt his “goals as a teacher” are not well served by courses that require thinking about “higher historical questions and ideas.” He knows what he needs to choose the best CST answer, is reassured by a CST score of his historical mastery, and plans to spend his career as a secondary school teacher demonstrating his mastery of content, which means that more students like him are coming “back-atcha.” My recommendation for breaking this cycle is to require a course that problematizes content—specifically, the course that Le Moyne College asks its history majors to take in the second semester of their sophomore year: “History

301, Methods of Historical Research.” Although the course title traditionally might have suggested a focus on arcane tactics for finding materials in libraries, in actuality, the course examines how we know what we know about the past and how historians go about constructing their narratives. It is a course in historiography and critical thinking about source materials, taking students from the contributions of Herodotus to those of Hayden White. The course attempts to destroy students’ faith in the existence of objectivity and to show them how perspectives shape the meaning drawn from the evidence that survives from the past.

When I have taught History 301, I have often used the following texts: Mark Gilderhus’s *History and Historians*, Georg Iggers’ *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, Gertrude Himmelfarb’s *The New History and the Old*, Edward Carr’s *What is History*, and Beverley Southgate’s *History: What and Why*. The books by Gilderhus, Iggers, and Southgate introduce students to the panorama of historiography. In particular, the concluding chapters of the Iggers and Southgate texts help to reassure undergraduate history majors about the future of the historical discipline after their introduction to the potential implications of postmodernism. In addition, since students are often shocked that historians sometimes disagree, I have found the Himmelfarb book fun to use for providing good illustration of just how acrimonious historical debates can become. Finally, all students of historiography should read at least one “classic” text in the field, and experience has shown me that undergraduates can manage Carr better than Collingwood’s *The Idea of History*.

Over the more than fifteen years I have taught History 301, I have experimented with a number of different assignments designed to get across the “points” of the course as described earlier. The assignment I have developed around the slave narrative of Mary Prince as published by the abolitionist Thomas Pringle is particularly effective at problematizing facts, getting students to think about how evidence from the past comes to be preserved, and demonstrating the extent to which human emotions and societal values shape that evidence and our contemporary response to it.⁴ After a week of walking through a close reading of the text accompanied by class discussion of the circumstances surrounding its creation, publication, preservation, and intended audience, the students are asked to find in the text two pieces of evidence to support *each* of three very different theses. The first thesis asserts that Mary Prince helped to free herself and her people by telling her life story; the second claims that Mary’s story was bowdlerized by Pringle so that he could use it to further abolitionism; and the third suggests that Mary was the one doing the bowdlerizing and that Pringle believed her account because of his “liberal” racial attitudes. The class then discusses for which of the three theses it was easiest to find

evidence, and therefore, how historians' cultural environments shape their use of evidence and their construction of theses.

In another assignment, I give the students an opportunity to "do" some history using only archival primary sources. With this, I have had the help of the college archivist, the Reverend William Bosch, S.J. He has supplied me with a list of topics for which Le Moyne's archives have sufficient materials for students to write a ten-page paper. These topics include Le Moyne and Viet Nam, Le Moyne and Kent State, Le Moyne and the Sexual Revolution, Le Moyne and the Civil Rights Movement, Le Moyne and the Anti-Nuclear Movement, Le Moyne's response to Title IX, Le Moyne's response to the Americans with Disabilities Act, and so on.

I assign topics to the students by lottery, with two students working on each topic. They work independently, and therefore produce very different narratives on the same topic, which always surprises them. They present their papers to one another during two weeks of classes, which operate in the fashion of panel presentations at a historical conference. During these sessions, students explore possible explanations for the diversity of the narratives.

Finally, History 301 has assignments that prepare history majors to write the required twenty-five- to thirty-page junior-year research paper. These assignments are designed to familiarize students with the historiography in a variety of fields, which change annually depending on the teaching schedules of my colleagues in the department. The fields for the 2008-2009 academic year were: Colonial America, British Imperial history, and state and faith in the Middle East. Professors who will mentor the research help me introduce the students to current debates in their fields, works of historians who have made notable contributions, and historical journals that publish articles in those fields.

There remain, however, two obvious questions: whether students who have successfully completed a course in historiography retain the knowledge they have acquired about what history is, and, more importantly, whether those going into careers as secondary school teachers ever apply it in their classrooms. I will soon have hard evidence concerning the first of these questions courtesy of my department's assessment efforts. We have developed an entrance and exit questionnaire for the History 301 course that seeks to discover whether the course successfully problematized content. But for now, I can only offer examples of anecdotal evidence for both of these questions. For instance, one young man dropped his plans to be both a history major and a secondary school teacher after he discovered that history was not "factual." In another case, a woman, after ten years of teaching, stopped by to tell me how demoralized she was because her job afforded her neither the time nor opportunity to teach history as the

301 course convinced her it should be taught. To be sure, her admission was depressing; yet nevertheless, I think that instruction in historiography can eventually break the “back-atcha” cycle.

Notes

1. New York State Teachers Certification Examinations Preparation Guide, Social Studies CST (005) (Albany, NY: National Evaluation Systems, 2006), 6, <http://www.nystce.nesinc.com/PDFs/NY_fld005_prepguide.pdf>.
2. Ibid., 7.
3. Ibid., 22.
4. *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (1831) (London, U.K.: Routledge, 1987).



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