

Uncovering History for Future History Teachers

Fritz Fischer

University of Northern Colorado

THE ART OF HISTORY TEACHING is at a crossroads. Recent scholarship focuses on the need to change the teaching of history so students can better learn history, and insists that history teachers must move beyond traditional structures and methods of teaching in order to improve their students' abilities to think with history.¹ In a recent survey of this scholarship, Robert Bain and Jeffrey Mirel argue that "history teachers must understand how historians frame historical problems, select and organize factual details, analyze and construct historical stories, and as important, how to present these 'invisible' structures to their students in meaningful ways."² Such a prescription sounds potentially exciting, but what exactly does this look like in an actual history course?

One way to think about the answer is to rethink the purpose and structure of the traditional history survey. This course is the staple of history teaching nationwide at many levels, whether at a junior high, during junior year in high school, or at a junior college and beyond. The purpose is to "cover the material," to blanket the students with the events, facts, and ideas from the past. In a sense, the "coverage" is true to its name, often hiding an understanding of history behind a deluge of trivial facts and monotonous lectures. This article presents an alternative structure in the form of a course I designed for future history teachers at the University of Northern Colorado. This course, entitled "Advanced Overview of American History," is designed to "uncover" historical questions rather

than to “cover” historical “material.” This course introduces all of our history students, but most especially those planning on teaching history, to historical “material” *and* historical thinking.

A course that focuses on historical thinking should begin with historical questions. Why structure a course around artificial benchmarks decided upon by a committee that wrote a textbook or a set of standards lacking a connection to the historical literature? Rather, the course should be structured around critical questions found in historical literature. The trick is to find the correct method to introduce these questions at a level that is comprehensible to the young student of history. Shouldn’t historians spend class time leading their students through the same exercises that they themselves employ when doing research? Shouldn’t they ask students to work through primary sources, to develop and discuss historical questions, and to do so in a self-conscious and transparent way?

Every class in this course is designed to cover a topic useful to future history teachers. This design differs from the type of in-depth but narrow history courses that serve as the staple of university curricula. History majors need to be encouraged to think broadly on topics throughout their university experience, not merely when they are in a first-year class with two hundred other students. A course I teach, “The U.S. and the Vietnam Wars,” serves to underscore the limitations of traditional upper-division college history courses. The assigned readings inspire wonder, and we examine thought-provoking questions in class, providing training in historical thinking. Hopefully, I am also developing within these students a passion for history that future teachers might transfer to their own classroom. Yet those in the course who are future teachers will be lucky if they use the content from the class for one week of their thirty-two weeks of teaching.

In “Advanced Overview of American History,” on the other hand, every one of the forty-five in-class presentations explicitly connects to ideas of historical thinking. This class does not devolve into a recitation of basic facts about a subject. Students are challenged to craft arguments about a topic. Partly because most of the students in “Advanced Overview” are future teachers, the course uses the Colorado Model Content Standards in History as an organizational structure. This serves several purposes beyond introducing students to the standards many will focus on as future teachers. Using the standards in a university course emphasizes their widespread applicability across the P-20 continuum (to use the jargon popular in the world of education today). Ideas important in fifth grade are equally important for college juniors, albeit at a fundamentally different conceptual level. Ideas such as the importance of historical empathy or the importance of complexity and confusion in understanding the past

are important no matter whether one is teaching in an elementary school or in a university.³ Using history standards in this way is only possible with state standards that are broad and supple enough to allow for use in a university classroom, which is the case for the Colorado standards.⁴ In Colorado, the first two standards outline the importance of historical inquiry and historical thinking, while the rest focus on the broad topics of political, social, intellectual, and economic history. So the course follows these main topics, jumping from topic to topic within each of these four main conceptual categories.

This structure leaves about ten class presentations to “cover” the full range of topics for each of these major categories in U.S. history. Clearly, it borders on the silly to even attempt to “cover” all of American political or social history in ten presentations. Instead, the course attempts to uncover ten topics that I know will be part of the curriculum in a high school history class. My admittedly arbitrary choices are guided by critical questions that historians have asked about topics within each of the conceptual categories. For example, when discussing social history, one of the questions we examine is: How did the role of women change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century? This is not a topic chosen completely at random. This is a question that has dominated much discussion by women’s historians over the past twenty-five years and leads to a class that takes up the subject of Republican Motherhood.

Each class also focuses on a particular pedagogical method. In a class designed in large part for future teachers, it is critical to model effective pedagogical strategies. If they do not witness for themselves such strategies in an actual history class, where else are they going to encounter them? Historians must move beyond a sole-use reliance on lecture, especially when they have future history teachers in class. Lecture needs to be a critically important tool in the arsenal of any history teacher, but not the only tool.⁵ Historians should model strategies for discussion, debate, role-playing, and the integration of technology into the classroom. In “Advanced Overview,” I model these methods as well as more innovative ideas such as jigsaws, spectrum debates, and “primary source collages.” Yet I do not use these methods just to show off clever ideas. Rather, I choose the content and the historical questions first, and then identify which method will most effectively teach a particular content item and a specific question. Such a sequence seems only logical, but it is rarely followed by either historians (who nearly always default to lecture) or educational theorists (who sometimes default to the most trendy and most clever looking strategy).⁶

Examining a specific presentation will help illustrate the focus of this course more effectively. World War II is a topic that is central to most

state standards and is a topic that all history teachers will need to examine and understand. Most textbook treatments of the war, as well as many lectures, focus on the “big picture,” the grand strategy of the war, the ebb and flow of the battlefronts in Europe and the Pacific. Yet recent trends in historiography have pointed to the need to search for empathy with the participants in order to understand why grand strategies were successful. Historians as diverse as Stephen Ambrose and Hampton Sides argue that it was the initiatives of individual American soldiers that led to the Allied victory in World War II. Not coincidentally, this literature intersects with the arguments of popular analysts such as journalist Tom Brokaw in his wildly successful *The Greatest Generation*.

Most textbook treatments of World War II are organized chronologically, battle by battle, highlighting the milestone engagements of the war. It is critical to begin every study of World War II with a discussion of the basic framework of the war. One of the consistent complaints by the creators of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam is that many American students do not know that the U.S. fought the Germans and not the Russians in World War II.⁷ Students need to be exposed to the basic geography of the war; they need to understand the differences between the island hopping of the Pacific War and the large-scale offensives of the European theater. They need to know who Stalin, Churchill, Hitler, and Tojo were.

Learning about World War II must not stop at this point. Importantly, historians do not stop at this point. Recent literature about World War II, both popular and scholarly, does not stop at this point. Authors have sought to come to grips with the men (and sometimes women) who fought and won this war. Was there something different about them, something unique about them that led them to such a crowning success? Tom Brokaw wrote *The Greatest Generation* as “an expression of admiration and gratitude for all that they had achieved.”⁸ Stephen Ambrose, one of the most widely read historians of the twentieth century, wrote a series of best-selling books about the GIs and the junior officers who fought in World War II. His description of the World War II generation is just as laudatory as Brokaw’s: “The ‘we’ generation of World War II (as in ‘We are all in this together’) was a special breed of men and women who did great things for America and the world.”⁹ The museum memorializing and celebrating the veterans of the D-Day invasion, an exhibition which Ambrose helped create, uses this understanding of World War II veterans to rally support for the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans: “Our museum portrays the great American spirit that united our people in World War II. We must exhibit that same spirit of courage, initiative, sacrifice and ingenuity that characterized our citizens in those years of national crisis.”¹⁰ The World

War II bookshelf is currently overflowing with volumes that retell the harrowing and courageous stories of the war. Ambrose was of course a dean of this genre, arguing, for example, that “the first days of the Battle of the Bulge were a triumph of democracy, marked by innumerable examples of men seizing the initiative, making decisions, leading.”¹¹

Douglass Brinkley deals directly with the connection between the ideals of patriotism and the exploits of the World War II generation in his book, *The Boys of Ponte du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion*. Soldiers displayed strength, initiative, bravery, and a seemingly unique daring in their successful D-Day battle. Brinkley quotes in its entirety a story written by Lisa Zanatta Henn, daughter of a D-Day veteran, who relates her father’s memories of D-Day: “My dad was eighteen years old ... [he had to face] life and death situations. But when my dad was eighteen, he went and fought for his country and was proud of it.”¹² Brinkley points out that Ronald Reagan used this letter in a speech honoring D-Day veterans at Ponte du Hoc in 1984, and he argues that it was this speech that led to the burst of scholarship about American “citizen soldiers.” According to Brinkley, Reagan used the experiences and exploits of these soldiers for his own ends.

Some of the central questions in current literature on World War II include: In what ways was the American soldier of World War II unique? Did these unique qualities help the United States win the War? Did these qualities make the men and women of World War II “the greatest generation”? History teachers might try to answer these questions by simply reporting to students what many historians and other adults are saying. But this seems to be an especially poor time to lecture the students. What teenager or young adult will unquestioningly believe it when told that some previous generation was unique, special, and “the greatest”? Fortunately, historians have at their disposal the tools that can help students discuss these questions on their own. This is a perfect time to craft a lesson based on primary source material. Because of the burst of interest, a plethora of primary source material from the “greatest generation” is now easily accessible to teachers and students alike. Additionally, this burst of interest has resulted in the creation of a number of artistically acclaimed and historically reliable movies based on these primary sources that can serve as excellent supplements to classroom instruction.

An excellent primary source lesson begins with the distribution to the students the aforementioned letter by Lisa Zanatta Henn, cited by historian Douglass Brinkley in *The Boys of Ponte du Hoc*.¹³ This letter includes many of the themes described above. Ask the students to evaluate the letter based on the following questions: Does the author believe that her father was part of a unique and special generation of Americans? To what

extent does the author believe that this was the “greatest” generation of Americans? Based on the information the author provides, do you agree with her assessment? How does the generation of her father compare to your generation?

After introducing the set of historical questions in this fashion, move the students toward an examination of the primary source record from the time period. Teachers might begin by presenting the students with the written transcriptions of oral interviews and the written reminiscences of veterans as quoted in historical works. One example is the story of Lt. Lyle Bouck during the early stages of the Battle of the Bulge, which Ambrose recounts in chapter seven of *Citizen Soldiers*. According to Ambrose, Bouck was “sharp, incisive, determined, a leader.” Ambrose illustrates these traits when retelling Bouck’s story, using Bouck’s own words. This story reflects the determination, initiative, and drive of the greatest generation.

Another effective technique that makes use of the historical literature is to play excerpts from the audiobooks of works such as *Citizen Soldiers* and *Ghost Soldiers*. This adds another voice to the classroom, and can lead to some fascinating discussion about “what is a primary source?” Of course, these audiobooks are secondary sources, but it is a valuable discussion to have with students still unsure about what differentiates between a secondary and a primary source.

There are also many actual primary sources available for use in the classroom in which veterans recount their war experiences orally. The D-Day Museum, for example, has collected a number of reminiscences on compact discs available for educational use. There are a number of websites where teachers can tap into audio records or even streaming video oral histories from World War II veterans. Stephen Ambrose and veteran-turned-politician Bob Dole collaborated on one of the websites, entitled “World War II Remembered,” a site that provides a series of reflections from veterans.¹⁴ The website connected to the PBS program on D-Day has a collection of forty-three oral histories as well as copies of letters sent home by veterans during the Normandy invasion.¹⁵ These examples amount to just the tip of the iceberg; all the sites containing World War II histories are too numerous to relate here, and the number is growing constantly. Students should be encouraged to engage these sources, asking questions like those above, meanwhile keeping in mind the central question: Was this the greatest generation? I have found success in concluding this set of lessons with a debate, asking the students to discuss the various sides of the question as well as the usefulness of the question itself.

The structure of “Advanced Overview of American History” and the focus of this example class are not particularly groundbreaking. The class on World War II focuses on primary sources, an activity that is

fundamental to the work of all historians. The course centers on ideas and questions familiar to all historians. There is nothing earth-shattering or truly innovative in this approach. It is what historians do. Historians merely need to make their ideas and their craft more explicit to students and they need to organize their courses and their presentations in such a way as to accomplish this.

Notes

1. See especially Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001); Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); and Wilson J. Warren and D. Antonio Cantu, eds., *History Education 101: The Past, Present, and Future of Teacher Preparation* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2008).

2. Robert Bain and Jeffrey Mirel, "Setting Up Camp at the Great Instructional Divide: Education Beginning History Teachers," *Journal of Teacher Education* 57, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 213.

3. The two ideas cited in this sentence, historical empathy and historical complexity, are drawn from the National Council for History Education's "History's Habits of the Mind," a useful general guide to important organizing principles in history. See a complete list of the "Habits of the Mind" at <www.nche.net/docs/programs/NCHEhabits.html>.

4. See the complete text of the Colorado Model Content Standards for History at <<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/documents/OSA/standards/hist.htm#full-standards>>.

5. See Fritz Fischer, "Preparation of Future History Teachers: The History Department's Role," *Perspectives on History* 44, no. 12 (December 2006): 19-20 for a broader discussion of the role of lecturing in the teaching of history.

6. See Daniel D. Trifan, "Active Learning: A Critical Examination," in *Perspectives on Teaching Innovations: Teaching to Think Historically*, ed. Susan W. Gillespie (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1999) for a detailed critique of "trendy" teaching methodology.

7. Interestingly, there is a reason for this suggested by some histories of the Cold War. In his book, for example, Thomas Paterson convincingly argues that American leaders and American culture demonized the USSR as "red fascists" throughout the late twentieth century, purposely confusing the Soviets with their Nazi predecessors. Perhaps it is this confusion that contributed to the confusion of so many history students for so many years. See Thomas Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat* (New York: Oxford, 1988).

8. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks* (New York: Delta Books, 1999), xx.

9. Stephen Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997), 472.

10. David Voelker, <www.ddaymuseum.org/about/Katrina.html>.

11. Ambrose, 209.

12. Ibid., 170.
13. Ibid., 168-176.
14. "World War II Remembered," Spring Hill Unified School District 230, <<http://www.usd230.k12.ks.us/PICTT/index.html>>.
15. "D-Day: American Experience," WGBH Boston, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dday/>>.