

Teaching as Counterinsurgency: Enhancing Pedagogical Effectiveness and Student Learning in a Culture of Distraction

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MY STUDENTS frequently use the phrase “I feel” when articulating their ideas aloud in class or in formal writing assignments. In the past, I routinely corrected them for doing so, crossing out “feel” and writing “think” in bold letters above it, which on my end dutifully transmitted the criticisms my history professors had made to their students when I was a teaching assistant. As my own experience has grown, however, especially in teaching Social Studies-Education majors (whose primary discipline is much more feelings-focused), I have come to appreciate the import of both phrases to the learning process and how, in fact, they are integrated. This was brought home to me when I began teaching U.S. military history a few years ago. To prepare myself for the task and make the course pertinent to contemporary events, I read up on the recent literature on military affairs, most notably *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* by John Nagl.¹ Nagl has recently become something of the dean of counterinsurgency, or how to “win hearts and minds,” to use the phrase with which most people are more familiar. Very briefly put, he argues that an army succeeds at counterinsurgency when it convinces the local populace on both the emotional and intellectual levels that their interests (stability in their communities and autonomy) are better met by cooperating with it, rather than with indigenous insurgents. Suc-

cess also requires that the army use the least force necessary in order to ensure that local support does not flow the other way.

Metaphorically speaking, what Nagl outlines is essentially what we seek to do as college-level history teachers. In other words, we want our students to master the critical thinking and research skills specific to our discipline and to believe that these skills are powerful tools for understanding not only the past, but any complex issue they might face. We also seek to foster their intellectual independence, with the ultimate objective being that each student will come to understand how he or she thinks and assume primary responsibility for his or her own education. To be perfectly clear, our students are not the insurgents in this analogy. Rather, like us, they simultaneously play several roles, which in their case includes members of the local population, our junior officers, and most importantly, the leaders of their own learning efforts. Together, we face a multifarious insurgency made up of such age-old temptations as plagiarism and other self-defeating shortcuts. We also confront it in the aftereffects of a standardized testing regime from which many students develop a mindset of “just tell me what I need to know,” when college is, in fact, principally about appreciating the intricate how and why of issues. What is more, even as we strive to immerse our students in the culture of historical thinking, we must concurrently vie for their attention against the allure of what psychologists call the “Culture of Distraction” that characterizes contemporary society.² Given this environment and the identified traits of the so-called “Millennial Generation,” a teacher-dominated approach is more likely to push students to stick with the familiar comfort of what they already think, rather than embrace the challenges of higher learning.³

Once adapted to the context of the classroom (broadly defined), the tenets of successful counterinsurgency offer teachers a potent intellectual framework for conceptualizing our efforts to build effective active learning communities together with our students.⁴ “Winning hearts and minds with minimum force,” in other words, underscores how learning is a multifaceted and collaborative endeavor—as opposed to top-down, coercive, or adversarial—without undercutting the authority and expertise of the professor: at times, as we well know, using legitimate “force” in some form is required of us in order, for example, to challenge student preconceptions or help reinvigorate their initiative.⁵ To clarify the analogy and the practical applications it might have to teaching history today, this study is divided into two major sections, one theoretical and one practical. The first section links counterinsurgency (which is based upon organizational learning theory) to recent theories of cognition and how individuals learn, as well as to best practices in college teaching. Here, we see that the central objective of counterinsurgency is not coercion,

but community building and rigorous self-assessment that permits a high degree of adaptability in response to unanticipated issues as they arise. As such, the counterinsurgency analogy shares essential features with the ways in which specialists conceptualize the teaching-learning dynamic as, for example, a sailing trip or a journey across a “learning landscape.” At a basic level, this section reminds us to assess our teaching effectiveness as much as student learning during the semester. It also outlines the history-specific and broader cultural impediments to learning that make up the insurgency of my metaphor. It is this attention to the stressors of the semester that distinguishes the counterinsurgency analogy from its more placid counterparts and adds a layer of complexity to conceptions of the teaching-learning dynamic. The second section draws on my experiences in teaching multiple versions of several courses (most notably “The Vietnam War,” a 200-level seminar, as well as a 300-level seminar on modern Japan) to suggest practical ways to “win hearts and minds” and mitigate the impact of the insurgency on learning within the parameters of a single course. Specific tools here include comprehensive syllabi, assessment rubrics, semester-long individual research requirements, and linked writing assignments. I also provide some examples of the adaptation process and emphasize that the effectiveness of the model relies on the maintenance of a mindset in which, regardless of contingencies, student learning is always the primary objective.

The Framework: Applying Learning Theories to History Teaching

John Nagl’s study of counterinsurgency is useful to us as teachers because he details the traits of successful learning and impediments to it during the duress of a campaign, rather than simply in retrospect. In sum, utilizing organizational learning theory, Nagl delineates the process by which institutions such as armies adapt to new situations that expose the inadequacies of their standard procedures. Once gaps in knowledge or performance are found, members vet potential alternatives, ultimately reaching consensus on the steps that best solve the exposed shortcomings. These solutions then become the army’s new “doctrine,” which provides the common language and understanding of appropriate subsequent actions. The mark of a true “learning institution” is what might be called a culture of inquiry where all participants are encouraged to appropriately challenge basic assumptions even under extreme conditions.⁶ Besides his accent on “adapting while doing,” which matches the flexibility that is equally vital to effective teaching, Nagl offers powerful historical explanations of success and failure in the field. On the one hand, the British army in Malaya set clear, attainable goals, while subordinating military

to political objectives. It also worked with local peoples to foster their eventual independence and used minimum force to do so. In contrast, the U.S. military in Vietnam maintained its old assumptions, which favored a top-down command structure, subordination of political to military goals, and total domination of the enemy. These beliefs not only kept the “us-versus-them” mindset of victorious campaigns of the past, but created a paternalistic “we can fix this better than you” approach to the new host nation that left little room for flexibility or community building. The U.S. army adhered to its traditional culture despite “dramatic evidence that it was facing a new kind of war.”⁷ It failed in the end not only to win hearts and minds, but to learn and adapt, hence suffering defeat.

The model of success laid out by Nagl conforms to the general traits of the best practices in college teaching, which promote learning that creates “a sustained and substantial influence on the way people think, act, and feel.”⁸ As Ken Bain, author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, finds, for example, those regarded as at the top of our profession also have systems in place to appraise their teaching assumptions and adjust them as actual student needs and interests grow clearer over the course of the semester.⁹ They start with student learning goals when preparing to teach, and invariably put these above what they aim to accomplish for themselves in a course. Our best and brightest, moreover, offer objectives that are both transparent, or clearly articulated to students from the beginning, and rooted in the practical, problem-solving skills required for individual autonomy in real life. Finally, they trust that their students both can and want to learn, and teach within a “natural critical learning environment” where students work with others, test their own assumptions, and “feel a sense of control over their education.”¹⁰ Besides being self-correcting, then, the most effective approach to teaching, as Gerald Graff insightfully explains, simultaneously erases the idea that “the life of the mind is a secret society for which only an elite few qualify,” while making the “culture of ideas and arguments” in which we professors operate fully accessible to students.¹¹

Equally crucial, the best college teachers realize that they cannot force wholesale their precise way of thinking into the minds of their students. In this regard, as Bain notes, they grasp at least the essentials of constructivist learning theory, which holds that people actively construct knowledge as they experience the world around them, and that everyone relies on their existing constructions of reality, or “mental models,” to make sense of new information. Contradictory input forces individuals to rethink their relevant established models, and when these are deemed inadequate, they construct new ones whose specific meanings are negotiated through cooperation and debate with others in a particular “community of prac-

tice.”¹² The uniqueness of individual mental models prohibits both the “transmission” to learners of expert knowledge in its original form for simple replication and the uniform acquisition of facts by each student at the same pace. In order to facilitate learning, teachers with this theoretical framework in mind design tasks that engage student curiosity and challenge their preconceptions within a “safe environment in which students can try, come up short, receive feedback, and try again.”¹³ While content mastery is still vital, the main goal is to help develop in students an autonomous “metacognition,” or the ability to understand and assess their own thinking across disciplines.¹⁴ According to advocates, the classroom acts as a “mini-society” of active learners, which necessarily dethrones the “autocratic knower/passive learner” hierarchy of the so-called “traditional” teaching paradigm.¹⁵

Researchers have offered analogies to help conceptualize how recent insights into human learning might be applied to pedagogy. Most underscore both the moments of epiphany when whole structures of understanding spring into focus and the vicissitudes of the learning process, with some equating the former with the sudden ability one has to ride a bicycle after expending a lot of previous effort, and others comparing the latter to the unpredictability of a sailing trip. A more thorough analogy, though, depicts the learning-teaching dynamic as a “journey across a landscape.” According to this view, teachers use the “big ideas, strategies, and models” of their disciplines to design contexts for their students to investigate, with the goal that the students will come to apply these same “landmark strategies” in their struggles to understand new experiences. While teachers have specific goals, or “horizons,” in mind, there are in fact many ways to reach them, and students routinely move about in a variety of directions as they construct their mental models, rarely progressing in a coordinated sequence. This analogy well captures the wide array of individual approaches to what its advocates rightly call the “messy business” of learning that teachers have to manage.¹⁶ But there is a key variable of the learning-teaching dynamic missing here, one that the counterinsurgency analogy more comprehensively covers.

Specifically, the counterinsurgency analogy incorporates the basic tensions inherent to the student-teacher dynamic and the “rhythms of semester,” as well as the intrusive impact that the culture in which we live can have on both.¹⁷ Though the established analogies often describe the learning process as an individual “struggle,” they tend to ignore the fact that our students do not necessarily greet us as liberators (particularly in required introductory courses), and that the landscape often hides ambushes and minefields. We are still authority figures, for example, the perceived gatekeepers to better grades and lucrative careers, and these roles innately

breed some level of resistance. Similar to us, moreover, our students have many responsibilities, such as jobs, sports, and other classes, not to mention various social networks to navigate and budding interests to pursue. Try as we might, we are all susceptible not only to the thuds of inertia that pockmark a sixteen-week semester, but to the relentless incursions into our consciousness by technological innovations and the web-driven, immediate access to information that one recent commentator fears is making us “stupid.”¹⁸ Simply put, the teaching-learning dynamic operates intrinsically under duress of one source or another, not the least of which are those diverse forces beyond the classroom that, like an insurgency, assail our efforts to build intellectual community and autonomy. It is less the landscape, therefore, than how to reconcile the varied and at times confrontational maneuvers that are acted out across it that should be the principal focus of our analogies.

History teachers need be wary, in other words, of how perpetual hindrances to historical thinking might collide with specific contemporary traits and impede student learning. We are all well familiar, for instance, with the misconceptions of just what history is that students bring to college with them. History remains for many what it likely was in secondary school: facts and dates neatly arranged in a presumably objective, chronological narrative. As problematic is how various groups (and perhaps grade schools, too) routinely spurn history in favor of “heritage,” or the unattested affirmation of collective memory, to venerate specific identities or causes. Under such conditions, history devolves into the mere servant of current concerns, and thus loses its capacity to advance what David Lowenthal terms the “awareness of difference, of change, of contingency” that is indispensable to a fuller appreciation of both past and present. Neither the factoidal nor partisan distortion outlined above, that is, possesses the essential stuff of historical thinking, which includes intellectual stamina, discernment, and “hindsight,” or the understanding “that history changes as new data, perceptions, contexts, and syntheses go on unfolding.”¹⁹ Also, we are all too familiar with how new technologies allow some students to pursue plagiarism at a much higher level of sophistication, although at least the countermeasures against that particular avoidance of learning have advanced, too.

The impediments to learning that represent our “new kind of war,” meanwhile, are the powerful effects that the cultures of distraction and hyper-practicality have on student habits and assumptions. The constant connectedness of today’s so-called “thumb tribes,” exemplified by a virtual addiction to text-messaging (even in class), disrupts the concentration, close reading, and quiet reflection that are needed for the development of historical thinking skills.²⁰ So, too, does the myth of effective multi-

tasking, which also exaggerates actual abilities and dulls the impetus to self-improvement that learning requires. More corrosive still is the impatience students typically show toward new information whose direct utility is not immediately apparent. Having been measured by grades and standardized test scores throughout their pre-collegiate years, many of our students simply expect to be told what content to memorize or what a specific instructor is “looking for,” both of which reflect the one-right-answer culture inherent to the factoidal distortion of history outlined above.²¹ In short, though the experts may convince us that knowledge cannot be transmitted, our students not only certainly think it can, but often demand just that of us.

None of this precludes teaching and learning experiences that are successful and mutually rewarding. As we will see, many qualities of the Millennial Generation can be tapped to enhance learning.²² For its part, the counterinsurgency analogy offers a comprehensive awareness of the progression of two integrated theaters of operation at the same time: teaching effectiveness and student engagement. That is, like an army in the field, we can routinely ask ourselves if we are “adapting while doing,” or more precisely, whether or not we are assessing and adjusting our established models of instruction during the semester due to actual experiences. This perpetual internal review and its requisite application are informed by both our observations and student input. On one level, our students are the junior officers in our learning organization; we want them to think historically, and so we craft detailed syllabi, select appropriate texts, and design various written and oral assignments to determine the degree to which they can construct original, compelling arguments that effectively engage the relevant sources and literature on the subject. But they are also akin to members of the host nation, since many most likely grew up in cultures of instruction and communication that diverge from our own experiences or expectations of their initial abilities, assumptions, and priorities. To get an accurate read of the landscape, then, it is essential to include pre-checks and follow-up assignments that require students to articulate to us and their peers how they think in general, as well as what they personally make of key issues and evidence, so that we can better gauge their actual development over time. The emphases here on intellectual community building and metacognition can also help combat the many distractions that lure us away from learning.

Lessons from the Field

Fighting an insurgency, T. E. Lawrence famously wrote, “is messy and slow,” a sentiment that any experienced teacher can also appreciate. As

John Nagl insightfully observes, moreover, it is one thing to grasp the proper theory behind an operation, and quite another to carry it out to a successful conclusion.²³ What follows, then, is an account of the context in which all of the above evolved and how it has played out in the classroom. This section begins with a description of key aspects of the context (i.e., university culture, student profile, class size, and the frequency of same-student enrollment in the different courses that I teach) to help determine how well the approach might be adapted elsewhere. Details of the course strategy, including the structure of the syllabus and assignment parameters, come next, followed by the reasons for my introduction of a rubric, or grading guidelines, at the start of the semester. Lastly, I consider what worked and what fell short in practice through an examination of student essays, observed engagement, and course commentaries. Though the overall pedagogy is based on my experiences in teaching over fifty courses at two different universities, I rely on my 200-level seminar, “The Vietnam War,” as a central frame of reference for its implementation, in order to offer more concrete examples and because, for a variety of reasons, this course has enjoyed the most success in terms of student learning outcomes. I also outline the application of the techniques to teaching modern Japanese history, where the terrain is decidedly more rugged.

To begin, Niagara University (NU), where I teach a broad assortment of courses on East Asian and U.S. history, is a teaching-focused, Masters I-level institution. While scholarship is essential to advancement, the standard course-load for full-time faculty members who teach undergraduate students is a 4/3, which in my case has entailed three and sometimes four different preparations per semester. The university supports professional development in teaching, offering seminars, speakers, coordinated discussion of common readings (i.e., Bain), and grants, primarily under the auspices of the Committee on College Teaching and Learning. We also have a basic template for the organization of course syllabi that stresses student learning objectives in addition to more traditional information, such as required readings and assignment due dates. The majority of our 2,600 undergraduates, meanwhile, who predominantly originate from western New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the New York City area, are first- and second-generation college students. As a Catholic university in the Vincentian tradition, Niagara carries out the mission of St. Vincent de Paul to serve the disadvantaged, and many of our students fit that description as well. My experiences anecdotally confirm what others have noted about the typical, though not exclusive, challenges of such a population, particularly in terms of work ethic, priorities, expectations, and preparation. To clarify, our students are not indolent by any stretch of the imagination. Many of them work thirty to forty hours per week

while registered as full-time students, and often take up to six courses a semester to maximize their tuition dollars. The main distraction that I have to contend with, then, is a worldview that prizes the tangible financial rewards of students' current over-commitments more than the higher, but hazier, payoff of college-developed skills.²⁴

Our General Education curriculum, moreover, requires that every undergraduate take at least one history course (a post-1945 U.S. history survey), and many students venture our way to fulfill Humanities and Cultural Diversity requirements. As such, I routinely have in my courses a blend of representatives from across the four specialized colleges that make up the university. One of the strongest initial concerns that students have, particularly in the survey, is what "added value" history brings to their education, or, in short, why it matters to, say, a future accountant, hotel manager, or even social studies teacher. I must also be mindful of the wide range of goals and preliminary skills that students carry to class. This confluence of factors—fatigue, perceived disinterest, and the initial discomfort of a different discipline, among others—often results in a subculture of reticence in the thirty- to forty-person classes I typically teach. Generally speaking, our students are convinced, regardless of my assurances, that the path to success in a course is to take down every word a professor says in class and memorize each last detail from the textbook for repetition on the subsequent exam. This attitude leaves little room for intellectual exploration at the individual level, and thus for real learning. Discussion formats can at times fall flat in this environment, and there were moments early on in my career when I thought that my students, in the monastic tradition of our Catholic university, must have taken vows of silence. It was at first—and sometimes still is—hard not to take all this personally or to react punitively.

As we know, however, adversarial binaries and excessive force rarely stick, and my ultimate objective is student learning, after all, not their unconditional surrender to my will. This by no means excuses those in my charge who shirk their responsibilities for their own education: there are natural consequences, in other words, if those whom I call "Charlie" choose not to surf. But a better appreciation of student circumstances has made me more flexible in managing the inevitable adversities of a semester, and according to numerous course evaluations, my caring about student progress is often contagious. Put another way, while we still grumble about each other, all of our performances are clearly better. A final factor of note, one that admittedly might apply only to smaller departments like mine, is the frequency with which the same student takes several of my courses. What levels out a lot of the obstacles to winning hearts and minds here, at least, are the multiple opportunities my colleagues and I

have to facilitate student appreciation of why their views matter to history, as much as why history matters to them. Our majors in turn can act as something of a cadre, or core group that models historical thinking to their classmates from other disciplines.

Regardless of the specific setting, a comprehensive syllabus is vital for clarifying student learning objectives, detailing performance expectations and maintaining cohesion throughout the semester. Here, I largely endorse Todd Estes' excellent insights in *The History Teacher* on the power of the syllabus to reinforce the fundamental goal of "helping students learn to think like historians," even if only within a single course.²⁵ Estes, moreover, well demonstrates the extent to which skilled history teachers already instinctively practice constructivist pedagogy, whether or not they invoke the theory. To translate his major points into its terminology, a well-designed, or "promising," syllabus provides the rootedness students need to confront the challenges leveled by the course at their existing mental models of what history is and how it is practiced. Such a document offers a stabilizing landmark that students might refer back to at key moments in their zigzags across the learning landscape. Besides requirements and rewards, importantly, it lays out student responsibilities for success in the course, which underscores learning as an active, shared process, rather than the passive reception of a teacher's transmission of knowledge.

Since the framework is well-detailed elsewhere, I will offer just a few examples of what course objectives and assignments might look like in this format. First, my syllabi, reflecting the university template noted above, include a brief table of target skills for a given course and how each will be assessed. The table makes it readily apparent to students that the required research paper, for instance, is designed to advance their abilities in effective writing, document analysis, and evaluating the relative merits of different arguments. To be sure, these goals are obvious to college professors, who routinely build courses around them. But it is crucial to articulate them to students, too, since most are more attuned to pursuing the minutiae of the past than historical thinking skills, and will adhere to what they already know unless we challenge their assumptions and offer something better. Second, my syllabi also contain full descriptions of major writing assignments, so that the students know what our principal line of inquiry will be right off the bat.

For example, though the paper for my Modern Japan course is not due until the twelfth week of the semester, I provide in the syllabus synopses of three interpretations of the roots of Japanese imperialism, and ask my students to consider which one is most compelling and why as they read the documents and secondary works assigned each week for class. The approach has practical benefits, in that it lets our over-committed under-

graduates fit the assignment into their schedules long before it is due. More importantly, though, it lets them mull over a complex topic, and air their ideas aloud prior to committing them to paper (which, coincidentally, gives us plenty to talk about in class). The communal exchange of ideas, moreover, helps draw students closer to what historians actually do in practice. I have found that laying out clear expectations like this also encourages some paper-writers, at least, to eschew the last-second tendencies exhibited by the bulk of their peers. As we know, when it comes to writing, most college students try, like the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*, to do it all in one night, albeit without the happy ending. Lastly, each of the tactics outlined here serves the necessary purpose of de-mystifying just what it is we college professors are “looking for” in our assignments.

What I consider to be the most effective tool in the de-mystification process, however, is the inclusion in the syllabus of a concise rubric that defines the full spectrum of my standards of success and failure in terms of student writing. We historians in our own scholarship make our arguments perfectly clear in our introductions, so that readers can recognize our views and assess the effectiveness of our evidence all the way through an essay. As teachers, we require that our students do the same, and each of us has at least an intuitive idea in mind of what this should and should not look like in practice, most likely with the emphasis on the latter. Yet, I can think of no case among the countless history courses I took as a student in which a professor actually let us know in advance what his or her specific expectations were. Nor had I done so in the majority of my time on the other side of the desk. My students, too, were left to figure out largely on their own what I was after, and the inevitable result was an interminable cycle in which they repeated the same errors and I wrote the same corrections over and over again on their papers. More than the mutual tedium, the fatal flaw in this system is that the focus is squarely on the arcane criteria of the instructor, rather than on student learning. Admittedly, early introduction of a rubric is not a magic cure-all; adding yet another component to an already lengthy syllabus might worsen the information-overload that afflicts our students. There is the danger, in other words, that many might just ignore it, the prevention of which requires instructors to constantly reinforce its merits in class as well.

The upsides, though, are plentiful. Unlike the comprehensive syllabus, the rubric can be reduced to a single, easily accessible page, which closely resembles the internet pop-up boxes and textbook cut-aways to which students are accustomed. The presence of clear standards also helps dispel the misapprehension cited earlier that the “life of the mind” is our exclusive preserve, and that there is an unbridgeable divide between the knowledge of the professor and that of the undergraduate. Such trans-

parency, moreover, translates instructor expectations into the language of established student priorities. That is, though my syllabi include tables of learning objectives, my students predominantly think in terms of GPA. The fact that the rubric pairs these objectives with letter grades provides a rootedness that allows students to see a correlation between the two, and possibly to begin to transition themselves from a focus on grades to one on skills. For some, the shift in emphasis might also spark a greater awareness of their individual patterns of thought, which is itself a major step towards the higher-order, metacognitive abilities that we seek to help develop in our students.

We might also consider the issues of assessment and accountability. On the one hand, the rubric provides a natural means for us to gauge our effectiveness during the semester, while also generating the “measurable results” in which administrators and accrediting bodies are increasingly interested these days. Clear standards also deny, on the other hand, the exploitation our ambiguity as a safe haven by those few students who wish merely to muddle through college unaffected. Finally, there is the potential of forming a united front against inelegant writing with colleagues in our home departments and across the university. The rubric that I have adapted for use in history courses, for example, originated as a tool to assess student essays in Writing 100, a required course for undergraduates at Niagara (See Appendix). My hope here is that the more students are presented with the compatible standards of different disciplines, the more they will be able to internalize and build upon them.

While the syllabus and rubric set the ultimate objectives (or “horizons” in learning theory terms) towards which we want our students to progress, it is the actual assignments of a course that challenge their preconceptions and require them to build new mental models in negotiation with others. It is these tasks, too, that indicate the real extent to which students have internalized historical thinking skills, or whether or not hearts and minds have been won on some level. My current framework for designing assignments is a direct response to the sizeable, recurrent gaps I noticed over time between my pedagogical intentions and student performances, especially when it came to the processes of writing and of creating historical knowledge. Specifically, although I wanted my students to see each assignment as a step in their pursuit of continuous improvement, they instead saw each as self-contained. There was a clear pattern: a student submitted a paper; I returned it with extensive comments about its strengths and deficiencies; the student flipped to the grade, grimaced, and moved on to the next chore. Rarely did we discuss thought processes or the “tier-by-tier” procedures that are essential to individual improvement.²⁶ Editing was a lost art, meanwhile, since most students were fixated on

meeting deadlines, rather than on the quality of their scholarship. Also problematic was the one-sided framing of course content. As is essential, I present a cohesive collection of documents and secondary works for mutual examination in the context of a particular course, and am fully versed in the major controversies and interpretations of a given field. What was missing, however, was active student participation in the selection of these materials, especially on a communal level. That is, students often conduct research for an individual paper, but they seldom share their findings with their classmates the way we historians do with our colleagues. The major issues, then, were how to encourage students to both revise their work and to view themselves as members of an intellectual community engaged in learning and creating knowledge.

As means to these ends, I added two new approaches to the Fall 2007 version of my 200-level course on the Vietnam War: linked writing assignments and an ongoing individual research requirement. First, a few logistics: the class met once a week for nearly three hours, from 4:20 to 7:05 PM, and had an enrollment of thirty students, all undergraduates from a variety of majors, primarily history or political science. The writing assignments included three formal essays, including a take-home final, and an in-class midterm exam. The initial five-page essay, due in the third week of the semester, served as a “preconception check,” which in this case was designed to reveal what students already thought about Vietnam and how their ideas reflected the existing historiography.²⁷ More of a speculative piece, it required students to argue which of the authors in the first chapter of *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* presented the most compelling interpretation of the overall meaning of U.S. involvement in southeast Asia and why, based strictly on the perceived strength of each respective case.²⁸ Students knew from the syllabus and my in-class reiterations that this question would remain our basic point of departure for the rest of the semester. In essence, I asked students to be aware of how and why their views changed as we confronted additional interpretations and evidence, and this premise informed the analytical framework of the ensuing twelve- to fifteen-page research paper that was due in week twelve. Here, I not only allowed but encouraged students to edit their first essays into a longer, far more extensively documented version. To block the path of least resistance, I required that they also submit their original, marked essay, so that I could compare the two and measure improvements. The final seven-page essay then asked students to apply their newly developed historical expertise in a critique of contemporary essays by historians that compare the current Iraq War to Vietnam.

The second innovation required students to add actively to our common evidence base as the semester went along. Besides reading the chapters

and documents assigned in the syllabus for a given week, students were responsible for researching significant periods and events in the *New York Times* historical database (available through our library website) to reveal how various issues had been reported at the time. If our content or interpretive textbook discussed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, for example, students had to locate contemporary articles about it and share their findings with the class. Any references in secondary works to original *New York Times* articles were also tracked down, and we then assessed in class how accurately and effectively the scholar under review had represented his or her sources. This process reinforced how historical scholarship is anchored in analysis instead of simply content, while greatly expanding the collection of sources that students could consult for their papers. The mad rush at the last minute to find evidence for a late semester assignment, as well as the contingent holes in coverage that such procrastination inevitably entails, were generally avoided, since the collection process had been carried out over many weeks. At a more basic level, the assignment utilized the proclivity Millennial students have to consult the Internet for information, without diminishing the centrality of printed sources on which historical scholarship has traditionally relied.

The results in terms of the quality of class discussions and written work were a dramatic improvement over earlier versions of my courses. While fatigue was a factor for some in a three-hour night course, our discussions were predominately animated, well-informed, and took place at a higher level than any I had experienced at NU before, even in classes that were scheduled for just fifty-five or eighty minutes. They were also much more student-directed, in that individuals wanted to let the rest of us know what they had found in the *New York Times* database, often with just minimal prompting from me. Students spoke to one another, rather than simply to me, and my role was more to facilitate discussion than to relentlessly attempt to reinvigorate it as in the past. In terms of the written work, although the initial efforts spanned the expected gamut of competency due to the diversity of student backgrounds, the research papers and final critiques were markedly better than their predecessors, particularly in their use of appropriate evidence, a major part of my assessment rubric. What struck me the most, though, was the apparent increase in student historical thinking skills and ownership of their work. For example, whereas about a third of students regularly volunteer answers in a typical class, the number nearly doubled in this one. The usual late semester grumblings over having to write yet another paper, moreover, were largely drowned out by well-supported comments about the specific ways in which the authors in *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam* (our final textbook) did not provide sufficient evidence to prove their arguments.²⁹

To be sure, the nature of the topic helps explain the successes, and, as always, the delivery required adjustment. Relevant outside sources on Vietnam are plentiful and easily accessible, for instance, which is not the case for modern Japanese history, as we will see. Nearly everyone has an opinion about Vietnam, moreover, and the war still evokes raw emotion. The partisan essays and contemporary documentaries like *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* (1968) and *Hearts and Minds* (1974) that were included in our common evidence base were designed to provoke student responses, and they did. The difference, though, was that over time, most of the students clearly transitioned from opinions to substantiated arguments: what students thought about an issue, in other words, counterbalanced how they felt. There were of course some shortcomings, too. The first essays taught me that I had overemphasized analysis at the expense of historical accuracy, as several students were not as well-versed in what had happened in the past as I had assumed. One student, for example, submitted an elaborately argued and documented essay that attributed U.S. intervention in Vietnam to the loss of the entire Korean peninsula to communism. I thereafter made sure to discuss the basic timeline of the war in each class and include the key events and dates in the objective section of the midterm exam.

There remained as well a few holdouts among the students, including some who still saw Vietnam through Hollywood movies, which gives a good indication of where many people get their initial information.³⁰ A few others arrived each week having already spent almost five hours in other classes, and just wanted to punch the clock in mine. A *New York Times* article from 1963 found by one of my students offers some sound advice on what to do about our rare “insurgents.” Shortly after the disastrous battle of Ap Bac in January of that year, which made it all too clear that South Vietnam could not stave off the North alone, columnist Arthur Krock reminded President Kennedy of what then-Senator Kennedy had declared a decade earlier. No amount of U.S. effort, JFK stated, could defend a country that was not willing to do so itself.³¹ As learning theories tell us, it is, in the end, the learner’s responsibility to learn, although we can certainly go a long way in supporting their efforts.

Perhaps a final question remains about how applicable the counterinsurgency analogy is to broader Asian history courses, such as Modern Japan, whose content and sources might not be as readily accessible to students as a specialized one on the Vietnam War. Since its objectives are teaching effectiveness and student engagement, the conceptual framework and basic methods remain largely intact regardless of course subject. That is, my commitments to assessing my delivery of key concepts and to “adapting while doing” stay the same, as does my emphasis on the facilitation of

student learning through challenging preconceptions, involving students in the selection of course materials, and building intellectual community and metacognition. As noted earlier, my Modern Japan syllabus includes clear course goals, a comprehensive rubric, and a full description of the major writing assignment, the last of which also establishes the investigative framework of the course.

Specifically, I ask students to evaluate three premises: Japanese ultranationalism in the 1930s and 1940s was a direct result of flaws in the Meiji system that was established by elites in the nineteenth century (Straight Line); Japanese militarists led the rest of the nation astray in the 1930s and 1940s by masking the real nature of imperialism at that time (Dark Valley); and a majority of Japanese in fact favored the expansion of their empire regardless of means (Banality of Evil).³² Each premise is based on established scholarship and each can easily be supported or refuted using the evidence base of the course. To facilitate the process, I assign a general textbook and key articles, as well as part two of the second volume of the newly revised classic, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, which is a collection of essential documents of modern Japan.³³ Because “Bookzilla” (as my students fondly called it) at almost seven hundred pages proved too big to be absorbed in one semester, I now assign chapters and ask students to consider which documents they think are most relevant to our discussion and to explain why in class. The documents are also required evidence for the major research paper that is due late in the semester, and I make sure that the previous exams and shorter essays address the larger themes and build on one another. Students therefore enjoy the benefits of being active in selecting course content, albeit at a necessarily more limited level than in the Vietnam class.

The main effectiveness of the counterinsurgency analogy here, though, is its emphasis on anticipating and countering the forces that might impede learning, particularly the lack of student rootedness in the topic that may be inherent to courses like Modern Japan (depending on student demographics). Most of my students, for example, hail from the western New York area, and so have had little firsthand exposure to things Japanese. Not surprisingly, the initial preconception check frequently reveals established mental models of Japan that are firmly anchored in the U.S.-dominated historical background with which many students begin their college coursework. My course content, therefore, contains not just written sources, but a wide array of images, including woodblock prints, propaganda posters, films contemporary to a given era, *manga* (comics), and *animé* (animation), in order to add sights to words. I often pair the visual texts with U.S. and/or European counterparts in order to enlist existing student assumptions in the construction of new mental models.

For example, I juxtapose the typical U.S. aerial photos and black-and-white footage of the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima with the hellish ground-level scenes in the *animé*, *Barefoot Gen*, to stress the radically disparate historical vantage points that the two nations generally have of the event.³⁴ I also compare scenes from the pensive nuclear protest film *Gojira* to its campy American counterpart, *Godzilla*, to serve a similar end for the 1950s.³⁵ More inclusive still is the MIT website “Visualizing Cultures,” which provides bilateral representations of Perry’s “Black Ships” from the 1850s, the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the atomic bombings of 1945.³⁶ To be sure, this technique has its hazards. I have been horrified, for instance, to witness how effortlessly *Know Your Enemy: Japan* (Frank Capra’s masterfully manipulative 1945 propaganda film) can erase eleven weeks of complicated Japanese history from the minds of undergraduates, a few of whom repeated its simplistic master narrative in their subsequent research papers.³⁷ The lesson here is that students might slide back into their old patterns of thought if the passive viewing of a film takes the place of an oral or a written exercise that requires them to actively articulate how the film reflects the themes of the course. I now hand out a set of analytical questions in advance of the screening of only a few select scenes, which allows for a more in-depth discussion afterwards. I also offer an extra credit assignment that encourages students to identify and describe instances of Orientalist binaries that they might encounter through YouTube, video games, or other multimedia outlets, in order to tap into their information-gathering skills and to reinforce a core concept of the course. Drawbacks aside, the most prevalent reaction to the technique I have received from students is that the chance to view competing narratives side-by-side in both texts and images has enabled them to appreciate historical complexities at a higher level than ever before, which is, after all, what I am after.

Conclusion: Minding the Credibility Gap

In closing, there is another lesson of the Vietnam War that helps accentuate the most vital insights of counterinsurgency and learning theories as they can be applied to the improvement of teaching. In his groundbreaking book, *Choosing War*, Fredrik Logevall skillfully pinpoints the “irony of America’s credibility dilemma” in regards to the military escalation of its commitment to South Vietnam in the mid-1960s. The Johnson administration operated under a false premise, namely, that “failure to stand firm in the war would cause allies around the world to question, and perhaps lose faith in America’s commitment to their defense, and embolden ad-

versaries to act aggressively.” In fact, the opposite was true: the more force the United States used, the more its allies doubted not its will, but its judgment.³⁸ As we know, the same basic principle applies to teaching as well. We all lose battles, doubt ourselves, and at times despair. Indeed, as Ken Bain points out, even the best among us do not always adhere to “their own best practices.”³⁹ But the most self-defeating approach we can take is to see our students as the enemy, regardless of how grating the traits of “kids today” might become. An inflexible, one-size-fits-all pedagogy, like carpet-bombing, not only fails to distinguish the established skills of individual learners, but also obliterates many of the landmarks that students use to find their way forward. Though the jargon of learning theories might be jarring to us at first, as historians, we already grasp many of their tenets through the cultural turn in our scholarship. The application of constructivist principles to history teaching, then, promotes what Nagl might see as a “unity of command,” or a mutually beneficial coordination between teaching and doing history. To be sure, neither the principles of constructivism nor counterinsurgency will totally erase the duress of the semester or the tensions inherent to the teaching-learning dynamic. Those traits of our long, twilight struggle will surely continue. Some of our students’ epiphanies, or more likely wake-up calls, will come later in life, long after they have left us. But appreciating what matters to our students significantly increases our ability to win hearts and minds, hence facilitating real learning. The ultimate goal is that when our recent graduates ask themselves if they are better off now than they were four years ago, the answer is a definitive yes from the vast majority who accepted our occupation.

Notes

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1. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

2. I first learned of the term “culture of distraction” from a brochure for the 2007 annual meeting of the Psychotherapy Networker held in Washington, D.C. In addition, see Thomas Cottle, *Mind Fields: Adolescent Consciousness in a Culture of Distraction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001).

3. For a synopsis of the characteristics of the “Millennial Generation,” see Michael Coomes and Robert DeBard, eds., *Serving the Millennial Generation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

4. See Joel Michael and Harold Modell, *Active Learning in Secondary and College Science Classrooms: A Working Model for Helping the Learner to Learn* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003). For an excellent synopsis of the history of student learning communities (SLCs) and proposals for faculty learning communities (FLCs), see Milton Cox and Laurie Richlin, eds., *Building Faculty Learning Communities* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

5. For a thoughtful discussion of authority in the classroom, see James M. Banner, Jr. and Harold C. Cannon, *The Elements of Teaching* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997) 21-34.

6. Nagl, 6-10.

7. Though this synopsis draws on Nagl, 3-53 (chapters 1-3), see figures 1-2 (p. 10), 2-2 (p. 30), and 3-1 (p. 51) in particular for quick reference.

8. Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 17.

9. *Ibid.*, 19.

10. *Ibid.*, 15-20. The idea of “rootedness,” which can be described as a grounding in recognizable content, is more fully explained in Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 167.

11. Gerald Graff, *Chueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1-2.

12. Bain, 22-47 is a highly accessible introduction to constructivism and also makes the point about how the best teachers understand its tenets on some level. For a more detailed explanation, see Catherine Twomey Fosnot, ed., *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), which has deeply informed my understanding of the theory and its potential applications to history teaching.

13. Bain, 47.

14. On metacognition, in addition to Bain, see M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford, eds., *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), 1-27.

15. Fosnot, ix. See also Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, “From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education,” *Change* 27, no. 6 (November-December 1995): 13-25, (chart 1 in particular); and Malcolm Brown, “Learning Spaces,” <<http://www.educause.edu/LearningSpaces/6072>>, for succinct delineations of the traditional “Instruction Paradigm” versus the constructivist “Learning Paradigm,” especially table 1.

16. See Barr and Tagg for the bicycle analogy; M. A. Simon, “Reconstructing Mathematics Pedagogy from a Constructivist Perspective,” *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 26, no. 2 (1995): 114-145, as cited in Fosnot, 286, for the sailboat analogy; and Fosnot, 287-288, for the landscape analogy.

17. See Donna Killian Duffy and Janet Wright Jones, *Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

18. Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains,” *The Atlantic* 302, no. 1 (July/August 2008): 56-63.

19. David Lowenthal, “Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000),

63-68.

20. For further discussion of the “sustained effort” required of historical understanding in addition to Lowenthal, see Diane Ravitch, “The Educational Backgrounds of History Teachers,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 143-155. I first came across the term “thumbs tribes” or “thumb generation” as a description of today’s “technology-tethered” students in Trey Popp, “Digital Natives in Tomorrow’s Classroom,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (November/December 2007): 48-53.

21. For a cogent commentary on the impact of standardized tests on history education, see Ted and Nancy Sizer, “Beyond the Bubble: Authentic Assessment in an Age of Standardized Testing,” *Common-Place* 8, no. 4, <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/cp/vol-08/no-04/school/>>. I thank Tom Chambers for bringing this article to my attention.

22. In addition to the Coomes and DeBard edited volume cited in note 3 of this essay, I have also found the articles and exchanges at www.MillennialGeneration.org to be helpful in elucidating the current debates and exchanges about how this age group navigates the world.

23. Nagl, xii. T. E. Lawrence, better known as “Lawrence of Arabia,” is generally considered the godfather of modern counterinsurgency.

24. Theron P. Snell, “First-Generation Students, Social Class, and Literacy,” *Academe* 94, no 4 (July-August 2008): 28-31, very well articulates what I have also experienced with a similar student population.

25. Todd Estes, “Constructing the Syllabus: Devising a Framework for Helping Students Learn to Think Like Historians,” *The History Teacher* 40, no. 2, <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/40.2/estes.html>>.

26. Carol Srole, “Building History Skills Tier by Tier,” *Perspectives on History* 46, no. 2 (February 2008): 26-29.

27. Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 132-137.

28. Robert J. McMahon, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, third ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003).

29. Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam: Or, How Not to Learn from the Past* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

30. Wineburg, 234-248 describes a similar experience about popular movies and collective memory of the Vietnam War in his study.

31. Arthur Krock, “In the Nation: Kennedy’s Foresight of the Events at Ap Bac Willingness Not Shown Alternative Difficult,” *New York Times* (1857-Current file), 8 January 1963.

32. My methods here have benefitted from, Paul D. Barclay, “Propaganda or Documentary? The Showa Emperor and ‘Know Your Enemy: Japan,’” *Education about Asia* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 31-38.

33. Wm. Theodore de Bary et al., eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Part 2: 1868-2000*, second ed., abridged (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

34. *Barefoot Gen* (1983), by Keiji Nakazawa, dir. Mori Masaki, 85 min., Orion Home Video, 1995, videocassette, Geneon, 2005, DVD.

35. Both films are available in *Gojira/Godzilla* (1954 and 1956, respectively) Deluxe Collector’s Edition, dir. Ishirō Honda, 98 min. and 79 min., Classic Media, 2006, DVD.

36. Besides images, “Visualizing Cultures,” <<http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/>>, includes very useful explanatory notes by the eminent historian of modern Japan, John

Dower.

37. *Know Your Enemy: Japan*, 1945, dir. Frank Capra, videocassette (63 min.) videorecording, Columbia Pictures Home Video, 1990, black and white.

38. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War*, in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, third ed., ed. Robert J. McMahon (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 193-194.

39. Bain, 19.

Appendix: Grading Guidelines for History Essays

These guidelines are general and are interpreted at the discretion of the professor; please ask me if you have questions or if you are unsure about the specific meaning of each, and I will happily clarify them for you.

	Excellent (A)	Very Good (B)	Serviceable (C)	Needs Serious Work (D)	Unacceptable (F)
Academic Integrity	Essay always legally and ethically attributes ideas, languages, and graphics to the original source in a standard format with no errors.	Essay consistently attributes ideas, language, and graphics to the original source in a standard format with few errors.	Essay inconsistently attributes ideas, language, and graphics to original source, at times in a non-standard format.	Essay consistently fails to attribute ideas, language, and graphics to original source or does so in a non-standard format, but without intent to plagiarize.	Essay is plagiarized, or borrows heavily or completely from other sources without crediting them or uses decoy sources.
Thesis/Argument	Essay has clear, original, and compelling thesis that is appropriate to the assignment and is consistently and exclusively made from the introduction to the conclusion.	Essay has clear thesis that is appropriate to the assignment and is consistently made, but is based more on class discussions or texts than original thought.	Essay has a general thesis that superficially answers the assignment, but relies heavily on insights drawn from class and only indirectly explains how and why the issues it includes are significant.	Essay simply restates the assignment question in the introduction, then is mainly a retelling of the basic factual narrative with only a passing explanation of how events fit together into a coherent whole.	The essay contains a random array of facts, many of which are inaccurate, with no apparent relationship among them.
Factual Examples and Evidence	Essay contains direct proof for each of its assertions, using both factual examples (what occurred) and analytical evidence (appropriate interpretations of relevant and credible primary and secondary sources).	Essay contains direct proof for each of its assertions, though the balance slightly favors factual examples over analytical evidence.	Essay contains direct proof for most of its assertions, but provides predominantly factual examples, with limited use of available primary sources and inadequate analysis of them.	Essay contains little direct proof for its assertions, relies mostly on synopses of events as its evidence base, and only lists a few of the relevant and available primary sources for a given issue.	Essay contains very little to no evidence, either factual or analytical, to support its assertions.
Accuracy	Essay contains rare grammatical, factual, and typographical errors.	Essay contains minor grammatical, factual, and typographical flaws that do not undermine the argument.	Essay contains several grammatical, factual, and typographical errors that obscure the argument at times.	Essay contains numerous grammatical, factual, and typographical errors that consistently obscure the argument.	Essay is filled with grammatical, factual, and typographical errors that make the argument unclear.

Adapted by Robert Kane for History courses at Niagara University from the Rubric for WRT100 (“Thinking and Writing”) created by Jennifer Morrison.