

Developing A Signature Pedagogy for the High School U.S. History Survey: A Case Study

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MANY OF US who teach and love history have fond memories of the introductory lecture courses we took as college undergraduates. Our professors were effective communicators, experts in their fields, and their lectures reflected years, even decades, of scholarship—not only in the particular subject matter at hand, but also in historical ways of argumentation and making meaning of sources. Perhaps, as was the experience of one of the authors of this essay, the readings for the U.S. history survey course consisted of monographs and lengthy primary documents, with lectures serving the purpose of providing and shaping the overarching narrative. Or, as in the case of the other author of this essay, a massive textbook, as well as a few primary and secondary sources supported the lectures. Such courses usually included smaller teaching tutorials facilitated by teaching assistants, but for the most part, the pedagogical expectation was that, by telling U.S. history in an engaging manner and by offering us the opportunity to read and discuss primary and secondary sources, we, the students, would be able to absorb the arc of American history and learn to synthesize and contextualize the sources in our conversations and in argumentative essays. In other words, it was assumed that we,

the students, would acquire historical thinking skills by seeing them modeled to us. Because we loved history and had some aptitude for it, those of us who would go on to be historians and history teachers did just that; superficially, this approach appears effective.

For a long time, Advanced Placement and other advanced-level U.S. history courses at the high school level were modeled after the collegiate survey course. This reflected both curricular expectations (especially in the case of AP classes), and teachers' desire to prepare college-bound students for college-level history courses. However, the last two decades or more have seen some significant changes in the teaching of U.S. history at undergraduate and high school levels. Many of these changes at the high school level have been generated in collaboration with professional historians at colleges and universities. A lot of this work advocates discipline-based training and the practice of historical thinking skills, which focuses on primary and secondary source analysis and encourages students to actively seek understanding of the past rather than to passively receive knowledge of it. Most of this work, steeped in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)¹ starts from the premise that historical thinking skills are not intuitive and that history curricula and pedagogies must be designed to teach them explicitly and deliberately.

In 2012, the History Department at Buckingham Browne & Nichols (BB&N), a competitive Pre-K-12 co-educational college preparatory school in Cambridge, Massachusetts,² set out to redesign our eleventh grade U.S. history course with those principles in mind. The course we developed (we ran one section as a pilot in 2013-2014, and began teaching the new course grade-wide in the Fall of 2014) kept the basic chronological structure of a survey (with some key modifications), but jettisoned other hallmark features of the traditional preparatory school survey: the huge college-level textbook, prioritizing coverage, and the smattering of primary documents. Instead, our course relies heavily on curated primary sources and secondary scholarship, organized around central issues, problems, and questions in American history. The goal is to teach our students to think like historians, to "do" history, rather than simply "learn" history. Why is this important? Why should our students, the vast majority of whom are not going to be professional historians or history teachers, need to learn how to do history like

historians do it? For one thing, we believe the skills essential to doing history—critical reading and contextualization of diverse sources and points of view, understanding and analyzing arguments, developing relevant questions about an issue, effective argumentation (oral and written) that synthesizes multiple sources—are vital skills for all college-bound students to acquire, and are valuable skills to have in a great many professions. Perhaps more importantly, these skills are essential to help students become informed and engaged citizens of their nations and of the world.

The Journey

The journey to creating the U.S. history survey course we now teach began in 2005 when the Upper School History Department at BB&N commenced an internal and external review process that precipitated an era of curricular reform across all four years of our course offerings. At the time, we taught a traditional U.S. history course to eleventh graders, using a lengthy college-level textbook.³ All U.S. history students also spent nine to twelve weeks of the school year working on research papers (a hallmark of junior history courses at many preparatory high schools) while simultaneously, for most of that time, completing course content. As part of the internal review, senior students were extensively surveyed about their experience as students. In those surveys, students expressed satisfaction with the history program, but also a high level of stress over workload. In that time, we were asking students to get through a college textbook, complete a nine- to twelve-page research paper, and, in a few sections, do additional primary source readings and AP exam preparation. At the same time, though we may not have been able to articulate it through the lens of SoTL insights, we teachers were also becoming frustrated with trying to plow through a textbook while spending scant time doing the kinds of reading and analysis of diverse sources that characterizes “doing” rather than “learning” history.

Amongst other recommendations, our outside reviewers in 2005 echoed the departmental interest in rethinking AP preparation as the focus of our U.S. history course because the premium on coverage was a source of stress. The department dropped the AP designation beginning in the 2006-2007 academic year, but this decision did not

seem to diminish students' stress or perceived workload; dropping the AP designation had done little to change the students' experience.⁴ This made sense, since we continued to use the same textbook and spend as much time on the research paper as before. We had no desire to eliminate the research paper assignment, which we continued to believe was an invaluable part of our students' history education.⁵ In 2009, we changed to a shorter single-author textbook.⁶ We also decided to limit the research project to a ten-page paper and to cut the project duration down to seven weeks, five of which had no other content coverage. In 2011, we adopted the brief version of the textbook. All of this had the aim, not only of making student workloads manageable, but also of allowing us more homework and class time for reading and discussing historical sources other than the textbook. Increasingly, however, we found that it was the textbook, no matter how brief, that got in the way of us having rich conversations about historical issues in the classroom.

There were two major reasons for this. First, in multiple studies of our students' reading speed, we found that the average junior was able to read and assimilate 3,500-4,500 words in one hour (the homework time is limited so as to ensure that students can complete homework every evening after mandatory sports). At this rate, reading even a brief textbook would take most of the available homework time. These studies supported the data we had gleaned over the years in student surveys. The second problem with textbooks was that no matter how inclusive, well-constructed, and historiographically up-to-date, it was difficult to discuss their contents in a way that felt satisfying in terms of developing students' historical thinking skills, because students saw the textbook as a static repository of a factual historical narrative. At the end of the 2012 school year, a group of department members met with the purpose of radically remaking our U.S. history survey, which we dubbed "U.S. History Seminar."⁷ At the center of our revision was the idea that, in order to teach students to think like historians, the majority of their homework time needed to be spent reading primary sources and secondary scholarship, the majority of their class time should be spent discussing these texts, and assignments should ask students to analyze and synthesize historical sources and evidence to construct arguments that answered complex and consequential questions. Although this meant getting rid of the college textbook,

we were not prepared to abandon a chronologically organized and comprehensive U.S. history course in favor of a thematic course. Nor were we comfortable leaving students to read only edited primary and secondary sources because we felt students needed a contextual framework for analyzing them. Thus, in addition to the curated sources mentioned earlier, we decided to write our own narrative, organized around twelve units that would be both chronological (although there would be some overlap) and thematic, centered around guiding questions. Finally, we recommitted to keeping the research paper assignment, only this time, the work students did leading up to starting that project in January would better prepare them to produce those papers.

Signature Pedagogies

The sum of those choices, decisions, and changes, however, did not a curriculum make; while these choices were a direct response to the needs of the students and would guide our decisions moving forward, we made a deliberate decision to create curricula that would foster the most adequate pedagogy to meet the needs of our students as we sought to organize a new course. As a group, we looked at both our own experiences as veteran teachers as well as to the professional literature for guidance. We tapped into the ideas of SoTL, specifically ideas about signature pedagogies, to help us formulate and explain our curricular and pedagogical reform.

Lee Shulman developed the concept of signature pedagogies,⁸ which provides a conceptual framework through which to examine our goals and to align the curriculum and classroom practices to meet those goals through a process of backward design.⁹ Shulman explained signature pedagogies as “the types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their profession.”¹⁰ In consequence, different disciplines have specific ways of thinking, knowing, and doing subject-specific work. A signature pedagogy aims at having students acquire the special mode of thinking of the discipline, thus it is different—yet benefits from the findings about—generic pedagogies that can be applied to any and all disciplines. The question for the history teacher is: “What are the ways in which my discipline seeks to communicate and impart this set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to its learners?”¹¹

Shulman identified three dimensions of signature pedagogies: a surface structure, a deep structure, and an implicit structure. Broadly, surface structures refer to classroom practices; deep structures refer to teaching practices and methods; implicit structures refer to the values of the discipline. In our process of curriculum review and evaluation, we had to sift through much professional literature about the teaching of history. The concept developed by Shulman provides a new lens through which to evaluate both the literature coming from cognitive psychology about generic pedagogies and the specific practices and concerns from history. In addition, it gave us a lens through which to evaluate approaches, methods, and practices. Because signature pedagogies “encourage students to do, think, and value what practitioners in the field are doing, thinking, and valuing,”¹² we could re-engage with long-standing conversations about the teaching of history, such as the discussion of coverage and the relative merits of depth vs. breadth.

In the United States, there has been robust discussion about the structure of introductory courses since the early years of the professionalization of American History. The debate has centered on value of chronologically bound “coverage.” That discussion has emphasized what Shulman would call the deep structure of the pedagogy—the assumptions as to how best impart knowledge. In “The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model,” Joel Sipress and David J. Voelker provide a history of the survey course and the lecture as the dominant pedagogical practice in the history classroom. They argue that this approach was and continues to be premised on a basic assumption that “basic factual and conceptual knowledge was a prerequisite for more sophisticated forms of historical study.”¹³ The dominant structure of introductory courses in history often involves providing facts first, covering the materials by having students read textbooks, and then either lecturing or having a teacher-centered Socratic conversation. However, this dominant pedagogy has been rightly criticized as not necessarily aiming at helping students acquire the particular mode of thinking of the discipline. In our own high school course, we consistently felt frustrated by our efforts to cover the material typically found in a textbook, not leaving enough time to teach skills or engage in deep analysis of historical problems and questions. We also recognized that our students, even the most

able ones, struggled to master the narrative of U.S. history, and persistently viewed history as a series of facts to be learned. Given the traditional course structure, this perspective was understandable.

Alternatives to the chronologically organized survey and lecture approach have existed as long as the survey. As early as 1897, a “source method” emerged as an alternative. Joel Sipress and David J. Voelker point out that Harvard’s Ephraim Emerton called for the introduction of teaching seminars with an emphasis on source analysis; these calls have succeeded in transforming advanced college courses and graduate education in history. The history seminar is a source-based, often thematic discussion and it can be said to be the signature pedagogy of the history profession. However, the assumption is that students engaged in those upper-level courses would have previously acquired the facts that would then allow them to practice history thinking skills. In that sense, history seminars built upon the introductory surveys rather than challenging the dominant approach of those surveys.

Critique of introductory survey courses has focused on the lack of teaching with sources and history thinking skills; these critiques have been leveled against the survey almost as long as the survey has been used in colleges. So it is not surprising that many efforts have been made to create curricula that mirrors those upper-level and graduate courses. According to Sipress and Voelker, in the late 1960s, Smith College and the University of Wisconsin piloted “laboratory courses” that eschewed learning facts in favor of “doing history.” And starting in the 1980s, an increasing number of articles have continued to explore these limitations of the survey. More recent work on the application of “uncoverage” to history has again leveled similar criticism to the survey. Uncoverage, according to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in *Understanding by Design*, is the approach that allows students to focus on thinking skills rather than concentrate on the acquisition of facts.¹⁴ They suggest that through a process of backward design, the curricula be organized around these deeper understandings. The work on uncoversage is potentially transformative as it has moved discussion in the direction of reflecting upon a signature pedagogy for introductory history courses.¹⁵ Yet Sipress and Voelker point out that “Despite over a century of critique, the assumption that knowledge of a large body of historical facts must precede historical thinking continues to shape

how students encounter the discipline.”¹⁶ It is usually, and perhaps unfairly, assumed that the survey persists because recalcitrant instructors merely reproduce the dominant pedagogical approach without much questioning. This straw man, however, is not sufficient to explain the persistence of the chronology-bound introductory survey and the lecture. As teachers with much experience, we recognized that students can’t possibly contextualize sources without knowing the contours of that context. Students who work exclusively with primary documents will analyze sources in depth, but do so decontextualized. We felt that while thematic courses allow students to engage in advanced work, and at some level our own course has distinct units of inquiry, they are missing the overarching perspective that allows students to grasp the arc of American history, which is the minimum context necessary.

Thus, for most history instructors, there is a tension between their desire to move away from the survey course as they know it and move away from a chronological and somewhat comprehensive curriculum. Curriculum review, then, had to start with the discussion about context coverage. If we want our students to think like historians, how much coverage do our students need? None? A little? A lot? This tension is particularly relevant because chronological thinking is among the Historical Thinking Standards produced by UCLA’s National Center for History in the Schools.¹⁷ Kristy Brugar explains, “Chronological thinking is an integral part of historical reasoning. Students need a strong sense of chronology, both absolute (when events occurred) and relative (in what temporal order), in order to examine relationships among events or to explain historical causal relationships.”¹⁸ Thus, the concept of uncoverage leaves instructors in a quandary as they should move away from the survey and to more thematic approaches while also helping students stay connected to the larger chronology of the field and the specific chronology of the themes explored. However, it is clear that in order to think chronologically, students should have a basic grasp of the arc of history and some information about major events that anchors their knowledge in a timeline. It is not possible to think chronologically and have no grasp of chronology. Purely thematic source-based approaches have floundered because they often don’t address this key aspect of the professional mode of thinking. Most history instructors at BB&N, and probably outside our institution

as well, feel that an introductory course in U.S. history should leave students with a grasp of the basic chronology of U.S. history. The acquisition of such chronology is not a goal in itself, but it is required to provide context; when viewed through that perspective, it becomes plain that we had to organize a course, homework, and classroom explications that would give students that basic grasp of factual information they need.

In designing a new course, we had to determine what texts the students should read to acquire this context. The question about student reading emerged as our second question. Since the 1980s, the work done by Sam Wineburg, David Pace, and others has pointed us to one of the fundamental disciplinary values that undergird the profession; historians understand that texts are socially constructed and that the past is then represented through a multiplicity of perspectives—in Shulman’s terms, this would be called the implicit structure of the profession. In 2001, Sam Wineburg published “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy,” arguing that the critical difference between how students and historians read is not about the quantity of factual information managed by professional historians as opposed to high school students.¹⁹ The fundamental difference, Wineburg argues, is the belief that students understand texts statically while historians understand them as social products: “When texts are seen as human creations, what is said becomes inseparable from who says it.”²⁰ For students, “the locus of authority was in the text; for historians, it was in the question they formulated about the text.”²¹ This is a fundamental difference in perspective between students and historians. Therefore, one fundamental goal of all introductory history courses should be to help students shift their approach to reading sources. In that endeavor, textbooks, in themselves and regardless of their length or the number of primary sources added, emerge as a challenge. Wineburg argues that the textbooks that dominate instruction lead to a kind of disciplinary homogenization, by which he means that textbooks appear to the students as “factual” rather than as social constructions. His work invites us to rethink not just our use of sources and scholarship, but also—and perhaps more importantly—the anchoring narrative of introductory courses. Like Wineburg and others before us, we concluded by questioning the value of textbooks as the primary source of factual information

and focusing on the idea that factual information should come from authors the students could understand as fallible—their teachers. We first concluded that we had to use a short narrative that explained the arc of American history. Then we decided to write our own narrative to replace a traditional textbook. The other reason, of course, was to allow us to assign more secondary and primary sources as homework, since the narrative we wrote is much shorter than a textbook. It is important to note that the classroom approach to explaining this minimum narrative content could be a mode of direct instruction, but this mode of classroom instruction should also be kept to a minimum. Using other classroom approaches to the exploration of these materials would require more time, an extremely limited resource.

In addition to the problem of authority in factual narratives, historians have pointed to the paradox of teaching perspective. In his 1993 article “Beyond Sorting,” David Pace argued that the goal of history instruction is to introduce students to new cognitive modes. Students should interpret multiple perspectives each with their own internal logic and integrity, and formulate evidence-based arguments. Yet Pace believes that this approach creates a paradox; he argues that, unfortunately, “a discussion of the problem of perspective assumes a prior ability to think in terms of perspectives.”²² Students must undergo a transformation in the way they think, not merely change their language. They can’t merely be told these skills, so instructors must create circumstances in which students learn these skills by themselves. Pace concluded that “what is ultimately needed is a new notion of curriculum, in which the development of certain crucial abilities is systematically encouraged across a student’s career.”²³ The conclusion is that students should be encouraged to explore multiple perspectives and eschew the single narrative. Both Pace and Wineburg point to the necessity of providing students with dissonant primary sources, but also with dissonant secondary scholarship.²⁴ Pace’s work calls for providing students with conflicting primary sources as well as conflicting secondary source scholarship. It became clear that the bulk of our student reading should concentrate on reading a multiplicity of primary and secondary sources at home. The appropriate classroom methodology for working with this material had to differ from those used to deliver factual information; they had to be student-centered. These could

vary from the seminar conversations, fishbowl discussion, projects, or other student-centered approaches.

Finally, other scholars, such as Robert Bain, have explored the role that questioning and inquiry play in the field of history instruction. He explains, “History begins with—and often ends with—questions, problems, puzzles, curiosities, and mysteries.”²⁵ Bain points to the pedagogical advantages of formulating such questions, as well as the intersection with historical thinking. Bain is then pointing to another key historical thinking skill that undergirds our instruction, constructing meaning from evidence. Just as significant as understanding multiple perspectives and being able to grasp that history is a social construct, students should be able to build their own arguments. In fact, proposing history education as a series of exercises in which students build meaning from a variety of sources and texts most closely mirrors the work of the historian than any other activity performed by students. It is often the way in which students are assessed in history—the document-based question in the AP exam for instance. In his 1970 work, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*, William Perry proposed an argument-based approach to humanities instruction.²⁶ As Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker explain:

[A]rgument must become the organizing principle of the course. While there is no single template for an argument-based course (just as there is no single template for a coverage-oriented course), examples of these courses do share a number of defining characteristics. Such courses are, above all, question driven.²⁷

If we want students to move beyond analysis, critical thinking about sources to construct meaning in their own introductory history courses should be built around historical questions and puzzles. As Bain argues, “One way teachers can build instructional cohesion... is to organize the curriculum around history’s key concepts, big ideas, and central questions”²⁸ In our course redesign, we concluded that students should have organizing questions around which to select primary and secondary sources, as well as to focus the factual narratives.²⁹ Answers to those questions and problems also provide the logical understandings students should be left with at the end of the course. Because our assessments ask that students answer those questions, these are authentic assessments.³⁰

Developing the U.S. History Seminar

The U.S. History Seminar at BB&N was designed to help our students develop historical thinking skills—the ways of thinking of the historian. We designed a course that would be built around student inquiry into organizing questions. These inquiries would be fully student originated at times, and teacher directed at others. We would provide a short, chronologically organized narrative, as well as a plethora of selected primary and secondary sources. Pedagogical approaches had to vary from a discrete and contained amount of direct instruction to more vigorous use of student-centered pedagogies, such as seminar discussions and projects. Assessments would be the natural product of the problems posed to students and, whether delivered in the form of a paper, a project, a re-enactment, a debate, or a test, they would all be authentic. In short, while creating this course, we deliberately sought to address key problems common to the traditional U.S. history survey and the exclusively thematic courses. Specifically, our course addresses the “coverage” problem, the “textbook” problem, and the “authority” problem.

Coverage

As we have seen, a big part of what has hampered U.S. history surveys has often been the perceived need to cover the entire span of American history. This is particularly true of the AP course, which continues, even after the implementation of its curriculum redesign in 2014-2015, to include a sizable span of history and a fairly comprehensive list of key themes and developments (even as the emphasis on memorizing facts has been de-emphasized). Outside of the AP, other high school courses and college surveys generally seek to cover a dizzying amount of material in a relatively short amount of time. The most efficient way to do this kind of coverage is through courses that are primarily lecture and textbook based. It can also (though it does not have to) lead to courses that feel to students like a “one damn thing after another” slog through the narrative of U.S. history. Even in courses where the lectures are engaging and analytical, or where teachers resort to more entertaining techniques, there is little explicit time available to teach how to do historical analysis, in no small part because of the demands of coverage.

Although the U.S. History Seminar at BB&N does “cover” the colonial era through the 1990s, we made deliberate choices in how we constructed our curriculum and content, rethinking, somewhat, the periodization of the survey, creating twelve units that overlap chronologically while still more or less being “in order,” and structuring the units to engage with essential themes and problems. The units are as follows:

- 1453-1754: Colonial Era
- 1747-1783: Revolution
- 1776-1844: New Republic
- 1800-1850: Market Revolution
- 1820-1877: Sectionalism, the Civil War, and Reconstruction
- 1877-1919: Gilded Age and Progressive Era
- 1877-1933: American Empire Part I
- 1890-1945: Modern Culture
- 1929-1966: New Deal Order
- 1933-1990: American Empire Part II
- 1945-1980: Post-WWII Social Change
- 1946-1992: Conservatism and Beyond

In some cases, the units overlap quite a lot chronologically, as Units 3 and 4 do, but the focus is quite different for each: Unit 3 deals with the processes and challenges of new nationhood, while Unit 4 concerns the social, cultural, and economic developments of the first half of the nineteenth century (including early industrialization, western expansion, the expansion of slavery and the slave economy, and social reform movements). Other units combine topics that usually take up several chapters in a textbook, a decision that alleviates the coverage problem while also facilitating a thematic analytical focus. For instance, Unit 5 “covers” the origins of the Civil War, the war itself, and the Reconstruction period. This is efficient, but more importantly, it allows students to examine central questions about the constitutional crisis, sectionalism, and the consequences of slavery and emancipation in a more purposeful and integrated way. Similarly, Unit 6 covers topics and time periods that may be spread across several textbook chapters, but in our seminar are held together around the emergence of the United States as a modern industrial society and Americans’ responses to the challenges that developed from this. Our somewhat unorthodox periodization and organization of our course allows us to create a chronological survey that is *also*

a thematic seminar; we can give our students a sense of the narrative arc of American history, while allowing them to develop historical thinking skills as they wrestle with some of the key questions and themes in American history.³¹

Textbook

A key part of the BB&N U.S. History Seminar, and one directly linked to the coverage issue, is our decision to eliminate the college textbook we were using and write our own contextual narrative for each of the twelve units. Each unit consists of a relatively short essay and includes an introduction that poses some guiding questions for the unit. Writing the unit narratives allowed us to efficiently provide students with background information oriented around the course's periodization while allowing time to explore the guiding questions in depth through primary and secondary sources. For instance, students read the narrative for Unit 5 over two or three days, and this sets them up for deeper discussion of sectionalism, the Civil War, and Reconstruction—through a variety of sources—for two or three weeks after that.

Authority

Question-based learning in history classes must continually ask students to read, consider, assess, and synthesize multiple perspectives on a topic. No matter how much a textbook or a lecturer seeks to include multiple perspectives and explain or demonstrate the contested nature of U.S. history, a situation where students are getting the lion's share of their information from one or two sources will work against that goal. At BB&N, we noticed that students consistently saw their history textbook as a static narrative whose content they were supposed to master, not as the product of a dynamic process of knowledge-production within an often contentious discipline. Our U.S. History Seminar seeks to solve this problem, first, as we have already discussed, creating a much shorter "textbook" (the narratives), which leaves classroom and homework time for students to contend with a number of primary and secondary sources, and to spend much more time on these sources than they do reading the narratives. We do not seek to undermine the idea that

sources have authority, or that some sources can be more reliably “authoritative” than others. On the contrary, our curriculum is set up to encourage students to interrogate *all* the sources they read (narrative, scholarly essay, primary sources), to develop their own, informed perspectives on a topic, and to have some authority of their own when speaking or writing about American history. Our students encounter contradictions and corroborations among the narrative their teachers wrote, excerpts of scholarly essays or books by historians, and primary sources. They encounter sources that extend, deepen, or complicate their understanding of a topic. Working through these contradictions, corroborations, and complexities is the main work students do in this course, and in that sense we hope we are helping students not just to think like historians, but also to read, write, and discuss like historians as well.

How It All Works

The vast majority of juniors at BB&N take the U.S. History Seminar, divided into eight or nine sections of fifteen students each. In a given year, five or six teachers teach the course. From the beginning, we wanted the class to be consistent and fair across the sections, while at the same time allowing some flexibility in coverage and content. We produce a set of two booklets containing Narratives 1-6 and 7-12, along with a timeline for each unit and some essential documents and reference items (the U.S. Constitution, list of presidents and their terms of office, etc.). The course also has an online presence, accessible to teachers and students, through a course website. The narratives are all there, but most importantly, this is where all the primary and secondary sources are held, as well as collections of visual images, maps, and tables for use as homework, for assignments, or for the classroom. The sources were curated by teachers and excerpted to manageable length (most secondary source texts are 4,000 words or less and most primary source texts are 1,000 words or less).³² The source collections for each unit are extensive and expand every year; there are many times more sources in a unit than a teacher is likely to use.

This is the structure allows us both to maintain consistency and allow flexibility. Every teacher must cover all twelve units and contend with the problems and questions raised at the beginning of

each unit. Every teacher must assign primary and secondary source readings to students. Every teacher must create assessments that ask students to assess and synthesize sources, and to use sources to construct arguments. However, teachers may choose to spend more time on one unit than another. While all teachers are asked to cover Unit 3 (which deals with the making of the U.S. Constitution and major political developments in the New Republic) and Unit 5 (on the sectional crisis and its consequences) in depth, they can choose which other units to cover in more or less detail. Furthermore, teachers have total freedom in deciding which primary and secondary sources to assign in any of the units. It will be obvious to anyone looking at the list of our twelve units that each of them could take several weeks to explore in depth, and spending only a week on any one of them means leaving things out. Our limited number of teaching days in a year and our commitment to the research paper assignment makes it impossible for us to cover every unit in depth. Each teacher must make deliberate choices about how to explore each unit, and how much time to spend on it, but we have attempted to provide a structure, and the resources, for each teacher to construct a meaningful course for their students. This is how we have decided to address the coverage problem while still developing students' chronological thinking skills. Give students a framework for understanding U.S. history in the manner of a survey, but provide opportunities to explore selected topics in more depth than a high school history class typically would.

A Typical Unit in the BB&N U.S. History Seminar: “The Market Revolution”

“The Market Revolution, 1800-1850” is an example of a unit that teachers can explore in more or less depth as they choose. One of the authors of this article, Susannah Walker, spends a fairly substantial amount of time, about two weeks, on this unit, which covers social, cultural, and economic history of the antebellum United States through the lens of assessing the impact of the continuing and accelerating development of capitalism in those decades. The narrative explores and attempts to synthesize such topics as: the role of technology on transportation and communication, western expansion and its impacts on Native Americans, the expansion of

slavery through the internal slave trade, early industrialization, immigration, and social reform movements. The unit is meant to complement the previous unit, which deals with political and diplomatic history up to 1845, and provides students with a broad context for examining the sectional crisis in the first part of Unit 5. The problems/questions we raise at the beginning of the unit include: “What were the various economic, technological, and social developments that made up the Market Revolution? How were they interconnected and how did they change life in the United States?” and “What were the costs and benefits of the Market Revolution for people in the United States, and in what ways did circumstances like social status, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and region affect people’s experiences of this transformative era?” The purpose of having multiple questions is to be able to reach different reading levels and to give teachers and students the option of investigating different angles on the same topic.

Walker has chosen to focus on gender and race in this unit, particularly in connection with early industrialism, slavery, and reform. Although this unit’s narrative can be read as one night’s worth of homework, she breaks it into two so that there is time in class for students to read and discuss short primary source excerpts and analyze visual sources for topics that will not be examined in as much depth later on in the unit: technological innovations, western expansion, Indian Removal, and ideologies of Manifest Destiny, immigration and nativism, etc. Students read two secondary sources (an excerpt of Barbara Welter’s classic, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” and an excerpt from Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*), and spend four or five more days analyzing a selection of primary sources including materials from and about the Lowell Mills, excerpts from slave narratives, abolitionist and pro-slavery arguments, Transcendentalist writings, documents connected to the Second Great Awakening, and writings by women’s rights activists and other reformers (the primary and secondary readings are assigned in topical order, not as written here; for instance, students read Welter and the Lowell documents on successive days). Walker ends the unit with an in-class essay, organized DBQ-style. The students get a question and a set of primary sources like the AP exam’s document-based question, but they get the question and the documents in advance, and bring their

introductory paragraph with thesis into class on test day. This allows students to develop more nuanced and sophisticated arguments. Teachers could well make this an at-home paper project, if they wanted to work on more polished writing skills, and might even ask students to do limited research on the course site for additional resources to the ones they read for class.

This is how Susannah Walker teaches Unit 4, but other teachers can (and do) choose different areas to focus on, spending a little less time, perhaps, on industrialization in order to make room for a whole day discussing readings about western expansion and Indian Removal. Teachers can and do spend a little more, and a little less time on this unit, and they use a variety of assessment types besides papers, including tests, presentations, debates, and creative assignments such as student-made mini documentaries and student-made “pamphlets” for social reform movements. The only thing we all commit to doing is covering the narrative, using some additional sources, and helping students to engage with the guiding questions and problems set out at the beginning.

Pedagogies, Classroom Practices, and Assessment

Our approach in the U.S. History Seminar lends itself to student-centered pedagogies that also hone skills in critical inquiry. The proportionally shorter amount of time that we spend working through the narratives might be a little more teacher-centered, as it is often held as a Socratic dialogue interspersed with “mini lectures” (short teacher explanations of especially complex topics of no more than fifteen minutes). Strategies for teaching the narrative material might include extended explanations of an important concept using images, maps, and very short primary texts in class to illustrate key themes, asking students to work in groups to create an annotated timeline and discuss/debate turning points or moments of contingency within that chain of events (e.g., “At what point was the Civil War more or less inevitable?” or “When did the American Revolution really begin?”). In terms of assessing students’ knowledge of the narrative (essentially testing their sense of the contextual framework of a unit) teachers use a range of assessments, such as quizzes or online posts, during coverage of the narrative or in an objective section of a larger end-of-unit test.

The bulk of class time, however, is spent discussing the primary and secondary sources, and, here, students do most of the talking. The curriculum is well suited to Harkness-style seminar strategies,³³ where teachers are partners of the students by structuring the environment of the conversation and posing questions, but it can also accommodate a seminar in which the teachers direct the conversation more actively. It can accommodate debates, rotating student discussion leaders, or small-group “jig-saw” discussions. Whatever the method, students are encouraged and expected to use context knowledge from the narrative, and the guiding questions from the introduction to the unit, to analyze and discuss the readings each day. They are encouraged and expected to compare, contrast, and make connections among the multiple perspectives they encounter (and, of course, the number of those perspectives increases as the school year progresses). Assessments for units certainly can, and often do, consist of argumentative essays (in-class or take-home) in which students use the primary and secondary sources they have already read and discussed. At the same time, the format of the course, and the resources available online allows for, and perhaps even encourages, a number of other possibilities. The curriculum certainly lends itself for project-based assessments. Some teachers have created small, guided research essay assignments, in which students are given the question and told to stick to the course website for sources. Other teachers have created extensive graded debate assignments. Unit assessments have included newspaper projects for the Civil War and Reconstruction unit (students work in groups to examine real newspapers from the period and create newspapers of their own that are true to the period), student-made documentaries for the Unit 4 Market Revolution unit, and student-produced pamphlets for 1960s-era social movement organizations. These assessments that look into the skills of doing history rather than learning facts are our way of creating authentic assessments.

Within the context of the curricular content, learning goals, and pedagogical approaches of the U.S. History Seminar at BB&N, we believe that the seven-week research paper project that is part of the course is even more valuable, and that students are better prepared for it. By the time we begin the assignment in January, students have already been introduced to the idea that history is contested, debated, and above all *made* through asking questions about the past, and

analyzing sources in order to try and answer those questions. They have already had to read primary and secondary sources extensively, and synthesize multiple sources in their writing. They have often done limited research on the course website, and the research paper asks them to take these skills further, applying them to a more difficult set of tasks: defining their own topic, learning the relevant context, asking good questions, looking far beyond curated sources on the website to find the secondary and primary sources that can help them to explore those questions, working toward a thesis, and writing a well-organized and coherent paper. It is still a hard assignment for high school juniors, but it is one that they are better equipped to tackle than if they had spent the previous four months reading a textbook supplemented by a few primary sources each chapter.

Teacher and Student Reactions

At first, teacher responses to the course have been mixed.³⁴ Some find that more coverage, more “facts first” would produce better overall results; therefore, they have introduced more secondary sources in the “coverage” of the units. It is important to note that because of the flexibility of the curriculum, teachers have enhanced the course by adding their own content. After making particular additions, most teachers have embraced the values, methods, and the classroom practices promoted by the curriculum.

Student responses also appear to be mixed.³⁵ When asked directly, many students say they would prefer to have what they are used to; a chronological survey undergirded by a textbook and assessed through regular multiple-choice quizzes and tests. This is to be expected—students in junior year have had years of training and they have learned to be successful in this kind of course. Expectedly, they are most critical of the teacher-written textbook—as they should be. However, this critique is evidence that they have acquired a level of comfort with the idea that the “textbook” is a social product that they should approach with a certain degree of skepticism. That said, students have been able to continue succeeding at the highest levels in standardized tests such as the AP exam, which is evidence of the success of the teacher-written narrative. In addition, data on the work they have been doing with primary and secondary sources is highly encouraging. In student surveys, well

over ninety percent of students find that the primary sources help them build their own understanding of history, and over seventy-five percent explain that secondary sources have helped them hone their own ideas. In addition, over ninety percent of students see a clear connection between the curriculum, classroom discussions, and assessments. In other words, it is evident to the students that the unit questions, the reading and analysis of primary sources and secondary sources, as well as the assessments that ask them to build their own understanding of history are aligned.

Conclusion

The U.S. History Survey at Buckingham Browne & Nichols School constitutes a signature pedagogy in that it allows teachers to help students read, write, discuss, and think about history like historians do—through analysis, synthesis, and contextualization of primary and secondary sources, with a focus on historically significant guiding questions. At the same time, unlike courses in which students almost exclusively read primary sources organized around key themes in U.S. history, our course uses secondary sources and the department-produced narratives to encourage chronological reasoning and to provide an overarching framework that we think improves and enriches students' understanding of those themes and questions they explore in depth over the course of the year. Though we are exploring modifications, such as adding maps and images to the printed narrative booklets we distribute to students rather than asking them to look at those materials on the website while reading, overall, we are encouraged by our experience teaching the course over the last few years, and we are interested in integrating some of the lessons we have learned into history courses for other grades.

Notes

1. In his 1990 book, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, Ernest Boyer called for a new approach to teaching in colleges and universities. He proposed that scholarly work extended to the classroom and

identified teaching as one of four scholarly activities. This new field of inquiry into teaching was intended to be bound to specifically disciplinary ways of knowing, and bound to classroom experiences. In other words, it was not meant to replace educational research, but instead to offer a look into the teaching of disciplines through the lens of those disciplines. Robert Barr and John Tagg's influential 1995 article, "From Teaching to Learning," expanded the field to include a student-focus: learning. Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (New York: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching/Jossey-Bass, 1990). Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," *Change* 27, no. 6 (November-December 1995): 12-25.

2. The school's "2016-2017 Fact Sheet" describes Buckingham Browne & Nichols School as follows: "a coeducational day school distinguished by a deep, broad, and challenging program of study, was formed in January 1974 by a merger of two longstanding Cambridge independent schools. Approximately 1,020 students are enrolled in Beginners through Grade 12, with about 525 students in the Upper School. The graduating class is 127. 100% of the seniors go on to four-year colleges. Seventy-seven members of the faculty hold master's degrees; thirteen members have earned doctorate degrees." Admission at BB&N is competitive, as there are approximately 900 applications for approximately 150 places. The student/teacher ratio is 5.9:1; the average class size is 11.7 students. In the history department, all eleven instructors hold advanced degrees and three hold Ph.D. degrees in History. Buckingham Browne & Nichols School, "Buckingham Browne & Nichols School Profile 2016-2017," <https://www.bbns.org/uploaded/PDFs/Upper_School/BBN-College-Profile-2016.pdf>.

3. Mary Beth Norton,, Carol Sheriff, David M. Katzman, David W. Blight, and Howard Chudacoff, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, eighth ed. (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2007). Teachers were extremely satisfied with the nuance and scope of this textbook and had used it for about a decade.

4. In our 2012 conversations, we briefly discussed, but quickly rejected, reinstating the AP in light of its impending curricular and exam redesign which debuted in the 2014-2015 school year, and which emphasizes historical thinking skills in ways similar to how we wanted to in our course. The continued requirement that AP-audited U.S. History courses use an approved college-level textbook was the stumbling block for us. For reasons that we touch on later, we wanted the maximum possible of our students' reading to be in primary and secondary texts.

5. A survey of ten colleges in 2010 revealed that college introductory history courses often required students to write a lengthy essay.

6. Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). Foner's textbook, with its broad themes and essential questions, is an outstanding textbook; teachers were very satisfied with it.

7. We should point out here that being an independent school gave us a couple of key advantages in doing this. In particular, we have much more control over our curriculum than most public schools, a situation that made it easy for us to drop the AP in the first place, and to contemplate a comprehensive change in

the content and structure of our U.S. history course. Secondly, small class size (averaging fifteen students per class), makes structuring a curriculum around seminar-style discussion easier.

8. Lee S. Shulman, "Signature Pedagogies in the Professions," *Daedalus* 134, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 52-59.

9. We followed ideas of curriculum design developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2011).

10. Shulman, 52.

11. Anthony A. Ciccone, "Foreword," in *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, ed. Regan A. R. Gurung, Nancy L. Chick, and Aeron Haynie (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2009), xv.

12. Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1361. For other work concerning signature pedagogies, see Nancy L. Chick, Aeron Haynie, and Regan A. R. Gurung, "From Generic to Signature Pedagogies: Teaching Disciplinary Understandings," and Joel M. Sipsess and David J. Voelker, "From Learning History to Doing History," in *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, ed. Regan A. R. Gurung, Nancy L. Chick, and Aeron Haynie (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2009),

13. Joel M. Sipsess and David J. Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 1053.

14. The literature of uncoverage is extensive. Calder, "Uncoverage"; Timothy D. Hall and Renay Scott, "Closing the Gap between Professors and Teachers: 'Uncoverage' as a Model of Professional Development for History Teachers," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 257-263; Paul Taillon, "'Coverage' and 'Uncoverage': Teaching the U.S. History Survey in New Zealand in Twelve Weeks," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 1 (July 2009): 124-134; Peter Vickery, "Progressive Pedagogy in the U.S. History Survey," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 83 (Winter 2008): 10-13; and David J. Voelker, "Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses: A Sample Strategy," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (August 2008): 505-518.

15. Calder, "Uncoverage"; Russell C. Brown and Stephen C. Schell, "Not Your Grandfather's U.S. History Class: Abandoning Chronology and Teaching Thematically," *The American Historian*, no. 8 (May 2016).

16. Sipsess and Voelker, "The End of the History Survey," 1061.

17. UCLA explains that "Chronological thinking is at the heart of historical reasoning. Without a strong sense of chronology—of when events occurred and in what temporal order—it is impossible for students to examine relationships among those events or to explain historical causality. Chronology provides the mental scaffolding for organizing historical thought." UCLA History/National Center for History in the Schools, "Chronological Thinking," Historical Thinking Standards, <<https://phi.history.ucla.edu/history-standards/historical-thinking-standards/1.-chronological-thinking/>>.

18. Kristy A. Brugar, "Empowering Students Through History: 'The Giver' as a Metaphor and Preparation for Studying History in the Secondary Classroom," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 1 (November 2012): 85-94.
19. Samuel S. Wineburg, "On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach between School and Academy," *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 495-519. Similarly, see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 63-88; and Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," *The Journal of Education* 189, no. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2008): 159-167.
20. Ibid., 76-77.
21. Ibid., 77.
22. David Pace, "Beyond 'Sorting': Teaching Cognitive Skills in the History Survey," *The History Teacher* 26, no. 2 (February 1993): 214.
23. Ibid., 213.
24. Sipress and Voelker, "The End of the History Survey," 1055.
25. Robert B. Bain, "'They Thought the World Was Flat?' Applying the Principles of How People Learn in Teaching High School History," in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, ed. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005), 179-214, <<https://www.nap.edu/read/10126/chapter/5>>.
26. William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970).
27. Sipress and Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course," 1064.
28. Bain, "They Thought the World Was Flat?"
29. These are specific and nuanced questions rather than year-long themes of "essential questions."
30. Grant Wiggins, "The Case for Authentic Assessment," *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 2, no. 2 (November 1990), <<http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=2&n=2>>.
31. Because the units and the narrative that undergirds them have been generated by the instructors, they can be changed and improved over time.
32. It is important to note that teachers of textbook-heavy survey courses and even some textbooks resort to adding sources by reducing complex primary sources to very short excerpts. We concluded that this approach undermines the ability of students to analyze sources on their own.
33. Lawrence Smith, and Margaret Foley, "Partners in a Human Enterprise: Harkness Teaching in the History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 4 (August 2009): 477-496.
34. Teachers have not been formally surveyed; this feedback was obtained through discussions at formal quarterly team meetings.
35. Students have been surveyed twice a year (Fall and Spring) since the inception of the course in 2012.