



Teaching Historiography to High School and Undergraduate Students

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Teaching Historiography to High School and Undergraduate Students

When I was asked to teach historiography to undergraduate history majors five years ago, I reluctantly agreed. As a student, I had taken only one class in historiography and that was at the graduate level. It consisted of a long reading list of books on the philosophy of history written by various prominent historians over the years. Although it was a seminar class, we met only a few times over the course of the academic year, and had no explicit direction in how to read the books, or why we were reading them. We were left to make sense of these imposing theoretical works on our own. At the end of a frustrating year, I passed the examination, but had no idea what I had learned or why I had to take that class, and came away feeling that theory and historiography were best left to more advanced history scholars.

I was surprised, therefore, when my first full-time teaching position included teaching such a complex subject to undergraduates. In what I later came to see as a wise decision, the history department at this small liberal arts university had decided to make a concerted effort to introduce historiography to history majors not only by requiring a senior-level historiography class, but also by including historiographical topics in all classes. Luckily, my predecessor at my new job had left behind a syllabus and a wealth of monographs for which I will be forever grateful. She had required five books, which introduced students to controversies in the historical profession, focusing on the postmodern challenge to modern history (1). In addition to readings from these books, she required a list of monographs which illustrated various historical approaches and methods. Although some of the readings were a little over the heads of my students and the reading load was heavy for even my best students, I personally enjoyed the readings and became more interested in historiography myself (2).

Over the years, I have adjusted the course to better reflect the breadth and depth of historical thinking from ancient times to the twenty-first century, and present the theories in a way that all undergraduates can grasp. As I have adjusted the course and made it my own, my appreciation of the value of historiography has grown. Like most historians, I previously valued it as a way to explore the methods and theories of other historians who have studied the topics I am researching; to gain a better sense of where my own research fits in and to see more clearly where there are gaps in the scholarship. Now, however, I also value historiography for the critical thinking skills and historical insight that it brings to my students. Many of my undergraduate students had never before thought critically about the histories that they read. They knew the basics of how to analyze primary documents, but never thought to question or think more deeply about historical secondary sources. They learned more about their teachers and their own philosophy of history, as well as better understanding the authors' perspectives in the books that they read. Several of them told me that they wished that they had taken the course in high school or as freshman, so that they knew beforehand how to read history and how to make sense of it all. This simplistic view of history is understandable given that most high school

and undergraduate courses heavily rely on textbook readings. History textbooks are normally written in a narrative format, which sends the message to students that they are simply presenting "the truth" about the past, implying that there are no other interpretations of the events, no other truths about the past (3). This approach to history not only obscures the reality of our profession, but also eliminates the most interesting part of our profession—the controversies and debates which have shaped it over the years.

Many history teachers at the high school and undergraduate level, however, are still reluctant to introduce historiography and theory to their students. Some, like myself, had little training in historiography, or historical theory and philosophy, and have a suspicion of what we do not already know, preferring instead to focus our efforts on sharing the abundance of historical information which we do know. As I have done more research, I have discovered that this avoidance of theory and philosophy is fairly common in the British and American historical professions in which I was trained. According to Peter Novick, the German academy has had a much stronger tradition of historical philosophy than England and the United States. While American historians borrowed heavily from the German system in their own creation of the American historical discipline in the nineteenth century, they misunderstood Leopold Von Ranke's idealist philosophy, interpreting him instead as "an unphilosophical empiricist." Novick asserts that this misinterpretation "underwrote an already existing American predisposition to disparage philosophical speculation about history . . . American hostility to 'speculative' philosophy of history quickly extended to any philosophical questioning of the self-evident dogmas of empiricism; indeed, to what one can hardly avoid terming 'logophobia'" (4). Perhaps American "logophobia" continues to make us reluctant to delve too deeply into philosophical and theoretical issues, especially in our lower-level classes. I think, however, that the tide has been turning toward deeper philosophical awareness in history in recent years, especially since postmodern theorists have had a greater influence over scholarship. More graduate students are exploring deeper philosophical issues, and perhaps more history teachers are now more prepared than ever to teach historiography.

Many of us, however, continue to believe that theoretical and philosophical issues in history are more appropriate to teach at the graduate level. The ideas may be too abstract for the cognitive developmental level for most of our students, and the reading load would be much too heavy for most undergraduates and high school students. We already have too much material to cover in our classes, so why try to include more material? Worse yet, multiple interpretations of historical events may only confuse students and cause them to doubt the truth of all history. Some high school history teachers even have to contend with state agencies which explicitly frown upon presenting multiple perspectives of the past (5). These are all very important concerns, but they may reflect the fears of history teachers more than the reality of our students'

abilities. A number of educational psychology studies have already demonstrated that many high school students are capable of abstract thought (6). The other concerns about overburdening students with more reading, too much information, and multiple interpretations are founded upon our preconceived ideas about historiography which were based on our experiences in graduate-level classes. The amount of reading and the type of reading, however, is determined by the teacher, and can be adjusted for any level of history. At the end of this essay, I will provide some suggestions for where to find these readings and how to use them to make the process of integrating historiography into high school and college curriculum easier.

Why Should We Teach Historiography to High School and Undergraduate Students?

Even if historiography is something that our students are capable of learning, and we ourselves are in fact capable of teaching it, why should we spend the time rearranging our lesson plans and reading the materials to include it in our classrooms. Aren't we all busy enough as it is? As I mentioned before, one reason for teaching historiography is that it is fundamental to understanding history and the historical profession. We do our students a disservice if we represent history as a noncontroversial presentation of "the facts." We all know that historians disagree and there are multiple versions of the past "as it really was." Our students need to know this too if they are to understand our profession.

Historiography not only enlightens students as to the inside story of the historical profession, but it also makes history more alive and interesting to them. It helps them to understand that everything is not already known and agreed upon, that there is a place for them in the profession, that in the future they can contribute to the ongoing historical debates about the past. This takes them away from being simply passive receivers of the truth, to active pursuers of the truth. As educational researchers have emphasized in recent years, active learners are better learners and enjoy their education much more than passive learners.

One of the most important reasons that I have found for teaching historiography, however, is that it is useful for learning critical thinking skills. Nearly all educators agree that our students need critical thinking skills. Historiography and critical thinking skills lay at the heart of the National Center for History in the Schools Standards in Historical Thinking (7). They argue that reading and critically analyzing the historical narratives of others are essential to understanding the interpretive nature of history. These standards require the teaching of historiographical skills, such as identifying valid hypotheses, comparing historical narratives, and evaluating major historical debates, and specify that "students need to realize that historians may differ on the facts they incorporate in the development of their narratives and disagree as well on how those facts are to be interpreted . . . written history is a dialogue among historians, not only about what happened but about why and how events unfolded" (8). Critical thinking skills are necessary for an educated, thoughtful, citizenry and for a workforce of problem-solving employees.

I would argue, and many researchers agree, that critical thinking skills are needed now more than ever. With the availability of twenty-four hour news channels, television shows, films, newspapers, and most of all, the Internet, students of this generation are faced with overwhelming amounts of information. Historiography, if taught in the right way, can provide teachers with a way to teach students how

to better understand their world and to analyze the huge amount of information that they receive everyday .

How Can We Teach Historiography (and Critical Thinking Skills) in Our History Classes?

I encourage all history departments to require a historiography course for their history majors, but I realize that this requires time and considerable effort (9). There is no reason, however, why history teachers at the high school and undergraduate levels cannot incorporate historiography lessons in their regular history classes. I begin every history course, from freshman surveys to upper-level seminars, with a discussion of the definition of history. I give students a short reading, usually the introductions to their textbooks, to help spur their thinking on this topic. Their answers normally range from broad definitions of history as the study of the past, to more specific explanations about the methods that historians use. After this discussion, we usually define history as, "an analysis of past events, which is supported by a logical interpretation of primary and secondary sources, and answers a historical question or solves a historical problem."

The process of critically analyzing histories is similar to analyzing primary sources. I use a six-step process in my classes:

The Author: Students should know important facts about the author, such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, political affiliation, and when, and where they lived, which may have shaped their interpretation of the topic. They can normally find this information either in the text itself, or the library, or online through a Google search of the author's name. You should explain how the context in which authors write shapes their interpretation of past events, and give examples to illustrate your explanation. If you want to spend more time on historiography throughout the semester, or you have a week or more to spend on discussions of historiography at the beginning of the semester, now might be a good time to introduce them to some prominent historical theories, which have shaped historians over the years. This can be as brief as explaining the difference between political and social history, or as in depth as explaining ancient histories, and then touching on selected historical theories over the centuries up to the present day. This historiographical discussion is essential for helping students to understand why historians disagree in their interpretations of the past, and how they struggle with subjectivity.

The Topic: Next, students should determine what topic, question, or problem the author is addressing in the book or article. Usually the title of the document is a good indicator, but students need to read the introductory paragraphs closely to determine exactly what historical problems or questions the author is addressing. The topic an author chooses might also be related to his or her subjectivity: how their personal and historical context might have shaped their choice of topic.

The Thesis: Students then need to understand what a thesis is, and how to find the thesis in historical writings. A simple definition of a thesis is that it is the main argument that the author is trying to prove. Theses are normally located in the introductory paragraphs and/or the conclusion. Identifying theses not only helps students analyze documents, but also gives them examples to follow in their own work.

The Evidence: Students then read the rest of the book or article, looking for supporting arguments and evidence, and critically analyzing it, questioning whether it is logically interpreted by the author, and whether it clearly supports the thesis. Students should especially look for ways that the author's perspective or bias or subjectivity may have influenced his or her interpretation of the evidence and his or her argument overall.

Theory: Students should explain what the evidence and the conclusions tell us about how the historian viewed the world, what forces drove history, and who or what were the main actors in history. If students have already studied basic theories of history, they should try to determine which theory or philosophy of history was employed by the author.

Critical Analysis: Students should next determine what the book or article adds to their own understanding of the topic; what in the essay seems irrelevant or poorly proven; and, what points are made strongly and well-documented. A student's own opinion may be expressed here, but it should be clearly supported with evidence from the book or article. This step encourages students to be reflective readers and understand their own learning process, as well as become more confident in their ability to challenge and be critical of other historians. This is essential to producing thoughtful, active learners in the history classroom.

Once students know the basics of how to analyze historical writings, they will be prepared to read and practice their critical thinking skills on any monographs assigned over the course of the semester. This process will not only give students a reading method, but will also help them to grapple with difficult works by showing them how to break the reading down into smaller components in order to better understand the meaning of the author. I find that many of my students enjoy the challenge of finding flaws in an argument, or in completely understanding the thought process of the author. To best understand how and why historians disagree over their interpretations of the past, at least two histories of the same topic should be read and compared, asking the questions of why they differ, and which version students prefer, and why. This comparative component should be used at least once in the course, but can be used more often as well. Using this method, students will become critical thinkers, while learning the historical content of the monographs. Students' critical thinking skills, and understanding of historiography and the content can be assessed through small-group or class discussions, analysis papers, or essays on exams. The method is easy to incorporate into existing lesson plans, with only adjustments made in the readings assigned and the questions asked for assessment.

Obviously, this process is difficult if the only required book in the class is a textbook. Most history textbooks do not include a variety of distinct essays by different authors. Supplemental readers or individual journal articles are better sources for appropriate monographic literature. Many excellent, popular, and powerful historical monographs are now in the public domain on the Internet. This may make them more accessible to your students, but it is difficult to get them to see an Internet assignment as a serious task, and you would need to require them to print the document and bring it to class with their notes, so that they could follow along as the class discusses the monograph.

Although more expensive, it is easier and more efficient to assign a reader which includes essays from a variety of historians, illustrating a variety of different theories, philosophies, and methods. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Twentieth-century American History* (2006) and the *Major Problems in American History* series by Houghton Mifflin are useful for integrating historiographical debates into the content of many courses (10). If you can devote at least a week to discussing historiography, you might also consider using Mark T. Gilderhus, *Historiography* (2007) or Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why* (2001) as brief introductions to different historical theories from ancient times to the present (11). These texts are also useful for helping history teachers improve their own knowledge of historiography while, at the same time, providing ways to incorporate different theories into lesson plans.

Despite its imposing name and discussions of theory and philosophy, historiography can be relatively easy to teach and learn at the high school and undergraduate levels. It is an essential part of understanding the history profession and helps sharpen students' history skills and enhance content knowledge. It can also be used to teach important critical thinking and reading skills. I encourage all history teachers to experiment with introducing it in their history classes. Even in the middle of the semester, it is possible to introduce historiography by discussing and analyzing different interpretations of any topic. In the last section of this article, I have provided some ideas for lesson plans for high school and college U.S. history classes. The basic ideas here can be applied to virtually any history class. I hope that they illustrate how easily historiography can be taught and give all history teachers some useful ideas. □

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National Standards

Historical Thinking Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
Standard 3A. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions by identifying likenesses and differences.

Standard 3B. Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.

Standard 3C. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships bearing in mind multiple causation including (a) the importance of the individual in history; (b) the influence of ideas, human interests, and beliefs; and (c) the role of chance, the accidental and the irrational.

Standard 3D. Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues as well as large-scale or long-term developments that transcend regional and temporal boundaries.

Standard 3E. Distinguish between unsupported expressions of opinion and informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence.

Standard 3F. Compare competing historical narratives.

Standard 3G. Challenge arguments of historical inevitability by formulating examples of historical contingency, of how different choices could have led to different consequences.

Standard 3H. Hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to changes as new information is uncovered, new voices heard, and new interpretations broached.

Standard 3I. Evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past.

Sample Lesson Plan for a United States History Survey Week One: Analyzing Primary Sources

Day 1

Required Reading: the prologue in Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History* (2005).

Class discussion questions:

1. What is history?
2. What are primary and secondary sources? Give examples of both and how historians might use them.
3. How do historians find answers to their questions and write history?

Assessment: Have the students write an essay question based on these questions. Use these questions periodically throughout the semester in class discussions related to specific historical themes.

Day 2

Required Reading: *Genesis*, Chapter 1 and the *The Kumulipo* (the Hawaiian creation chant). Students can find the King James Version of the Bible, at Bible History Online (<<http://www.bible-history.com/kjv/Genesis/1/>>). *The Kumulipo*, translated by Queen Liliuokalani (1897) is located on the Sacred Texts website at <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/pac/lku/index.htm>>. If using these websites, be sure to provide students with background information about each of the sources, when and where written. Both documents can also be found in Paul Spickard's *World History by the World's Historians* (1998).

Classroom discussion questions

1. Who are the authors? When and where did they write? Why did they write their histories? What might have influenced their writing?
2. What is the topic of each history? What question are they trying to answer? Summarize the thesis of each history in your own words. What are they trying to argue or prove?
3. What kinds of evidence does each use to support their argument?
4. What does their evidence and argument tell us about how they saw the world? What drove history in their view? What caused things to happen?
5. Do they logically interpret the evidence in your opinion? Why or why not? Are these histories equally valid and accurate? Why or why not?

Classroom discussion

Have students share their answers in small groups. Next, have each group share their answers with the rest of the class.

Discuss mythopoetic history and scientific history. Link these different creation stories to the different world views that Europeans and Native Americans would bring to their encounters.

Assessment

Students can be required to answer these same questions for other primary and secondary source readings throughout the semester.

If you only have time for one or two days of class time for historiography, you might want to assign a term paper which requires them to read two monographs or articles on one topic, and write another paper similar to this one.

Days three through five

Begin the thematic-based lecture, readings, and assignments and incorporate the conclusions reached from the lessons of the previous two days into the class discussions of the specific historical theme discussed.

Week Two: Analyzing Secondary Sources

Reinforce the lessons about sources from the first two days of the previous week by applying the core questions to secondary sources. For example, a lecture on Christopher Columbus and the conquest of America:

Required Readings: Textbook coverage of the voyages of Christopher Columbus and the first chapter of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1997).

Classroom discussion questions

1. Who are the authors? When and where did they write? Why did they write their histories? What might have influenced their writing?
2. What is the topic of each history? What question are they trying to answer? Summarize the thesis of each history in your own words. What are they trying to argue or prove?
3. What kinds of evidence does each use to support their argument?
4. What does their evidence and argument tell us about how they saw the world? What drove history in their view? What caused things to happen?
5. Do they logically interpret the evidence in your opinion? Why or why not? Are these histories equally valid and accurate? Why or why not?

Classroom discussion

Have students share their answers in small groups. Next, have each group share their answers with the rest of the class.

Assessment

Have the students write an essay based on these questions as they relate specifically to the textbook version of the conquest of America and Zinn's version of the events. This exercise will demonstrate that critical analysis needs to be applied to both primary and secondary sources.

Suggestions

Throughout the semester, integrate a critical discussion from monographs that correspond with content topics:

The American Revolution

Bernard Bailyn, "The Revolution as an Intellectual Movement," in *The American Revolution: How Revolutionary Was It?* Second Edition, ed. George Athan Billias (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965): 87-100.

Elaine F. Crane, "Dependence in the Era of Independence: The Role of Women in Republican Society," in *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits*, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 253-75.

The Civil War

Francis Couvares, *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives* (Free Press, 2000), chapter ten.

Nineteenth-century Westward Expansion

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/turner/>>.

Jane Tompkins, "Indians" "'Indians': Textualism, Morality, and the Problem of History" <http://omni.cc.purdue.edu/~sbenning/elro2c/Indians_Essay/Indians.html>.

The Vietnam War

Essays by George McT. Kahin and George C. Herring in Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds., *Major Problems in American History Since 1945* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 300-320.

Endnotes

1. Dr. Debra O'Neill's required reading list included: Joyce Appleby, et al. *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994); William A. Green, *History, Historians, & the Dynamics of Change* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993); Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Beverly Southgate, *History: What & Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Paul R. Spickard, et. al. *World History by the World's Historians* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998).
2. I should add that students not only read the books, but they read approximately twenty other monographic essays over the course of the semester, in addition to research and Internet projects.
3. The National Center for History in the Schools identified this problem in 1996 and urged teachers to expose students to a variety of perspectives on the past. "Overview to Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation," National History Standards (1996), <<http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/thinking5-12.html>>
4. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 30.
5. See Kornblith and Lasser's essay in this issue which discusses Florida's 2006 legislation requiring American history to be viewed as factual and not constructed.
6. Jean Piaget, *Judgment and Reasoning in the Child* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1928) places abstract thought in the "formal operational stage," which is entered in adolescence.
7. National Center for History in the Schools, "Overview of Standards in Historical Writing," National History Standards (1996), <<http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/thinking5-12.html>>
8. Ibid.

9. If your department is interested in exploring this, please feel free to visit my department's website at <<http://www.wingate.edu/history/acad/history/default.aspx>>.

10. Larry Madaras, ed., *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Twentieth-Century American History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006); see also, Paul Spickard et al. *World History by the World's Historians* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998); Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, eds., *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). My own reader for high school and undergraduate history students in the United States is slated to be published by Pearson-Longman in 2008.

11. Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2007); Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Medieval, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

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