

PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES OBSERVED IN SURVEY HISTORY COURSES
AT MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

For this project, I observed two sections of History 2010 (United States History Survey I) taught by Robert Hunt and Kenneth Scherzer, one section of History 2020 (Honors–United States History Survey II) taught by Janice Leone, two sections of History 2030 (Tennessee History) taught by Fred Colvin and Mary Hoffschwelle, and one section of History 1020 (Survey of Western Civilization II) taught by Jerry Brookshire. In addition to noting the date, time, and location of each class, I reviewed syllabi for course objectives, cognitive instruction, and empirical data. I evaluated the learning environment, i.e., what was fixed, what was flexible, what was positive, and what was negative. I watched for student attitudes to instructors, materials, and methods, and I especially looked for learning resources and teaching techniques used by each instructor. After visiting these classes, I briefly interviewed each teacher (except J. Leone) and used the question set in the appendix of this paper. By observing pedagogical processes and reflecting on these with practitioners, I hoped to sharpen my own pedagogical techniques, critique the tools available for teaching history survey courses at the university, and increase my awareness of the teacher’s opportunities for improvement of pedagogical skills in relation to student needs.

Syllabi. Syllabi ranged from two to nine pages in length. All listed course objectives, and four included the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Learning Outcomes for history survey in the General Education Curriculum. All syllabi specified textbooks and/or supplemental reading, assignments, due dates, means of assessment, and grade scale. Four had a dated schedule or outline, one had only an outline of topics to be

covered, and one had no schedule or course outline. All syllabi noted policies for class attendance, contact information and office hours for the instructor, a student's withdrawal from the course, and plagiarism. Each syllabus added provisions for disabled students.

The college syllabus obviously has evolved into a predictable matrix. In my opinion, the only deviations from a set pattern were negative ones, i.e., punitive statements about failure to meet assignment deadlines. Better would be a gestalt approach that engages students to build their own grade. This could be done without sacrificing the "necessities" of the syllabus for contractual purposes. Allowing students to participate in the construction of the syllabus, within reasonable guidelines and with instructor guidance, would greatly facilitate interest and motivation in the course and its contents. This would take some time, but it could be done in the first week of class meetings and could be used to teach United States history lessons about negotiation, compromise, and compliance.

Course objectives and outlines further emphasized the cognitive or thinking aspect of learning history. But very little has been incorporated by way of the empirical or experiential aspect of learning history, except for reading, some discussion, writing essays and reviews, and slight exposure to video presentations. More needs to be done with how students do learn and can learn history, and this can be reflected in the course syllabus. The pedagogical jargon of the TBR objectives, i.e., Bloom's taxonomy, certainly highlights the rational processes involved in history education, and such is admirable in its intent. Students, though, must be encouraged to experience history and the various ways of collecting and assembling the data. Methodology is foundational to message, and the syllabus should so indicate.

Some kudos for syllabi that I observed were: one surveyed early American history from the perspective of mega-history; one addressed students directly with “you will” in the objectives; one gave students an incentive to do well early in the course (i.e. exemption from the final exam); and one required use of WebCT.

Learning Environment. Classes met in four 40-student classrooms (Peck Hall 200, 213, 219, 220), one 25-student seminar room (Peck Hall 107), and a 300-student lecture hall (BAS S102, Farm Bureau Lecture Hall). Each room had fixed marker boards, projection screens, video monitors, on/off lights, and windows (except the lecture hall and the seminar room). Peck Hall rooms had flexible desks and chairs, but it would be time-consuming to set these up differently than the present linear, ranked row arrangement. Students had spacious two-foot by three-foot tops on new desks. Some rooms had wall maps, some had free-standing or floor maps, and some had both. Tables and lecterns for the instructor could be configured as desired. A stool or seat for the instructor was not observed in any of the classrooms. Projection equipment was portable and available to all instructors. The lecture hall and seminar room had computers that could be used with projection equipment for presentations. In addition, the lecture hall, with state-of-the-art electronic gadgetry, had comfortable, theater-type seating but small desk tops, adjustable lighting, multiple video monitors, and a surround sound system.

Classroom positives included great audiovisual capabilities, excellent acoustics, attractive and bright settings, flexibility of projection possibilities, and spacious work areas for students (all but the lecture hall). Classroom negatives were lack of space and cluttering from too much equipment (especially in the front of rooms), problems with light (i.e., too bright for good projection or too dark for discussion and note-taking), arrangement of seats/desks not the best for

discussion (except the seminar room which had students seated in a semicircle), noises from other classes or from cooling/heating systems, the size of the lecture hall that made it difficult to see projections from the back of the room, and the side entry of the lecture hall that caused a distraction when latecomers arrived.

If possible, I would want an environment conducive to discussion. But I would not reconfigure the seats each class period just to achieve such. I would also minimize audiovisual equipment to give the classroom more open space. This gives the instructor the space to interact and mingle with students and openness for students to interact with each other if necessary. Maps are good, but map stands and wall maps are cumbersome and do not give the students hands-on experience. For geographic considerations, I would prefer to use handouts or reference the textbook or a map supplement. Projections are okay during lecture or discussion, but the lighting challenges can be difficult to manage. Again, I would give priority to handouts or refer to printed materials. Videos and slide presentations can be used most effectively as their own unit or block of instruction with discussion preceding and/or following. The use of the marker board, however, is a must. And a dedicated seat for the instructor would be helpful for occasional use, but desks do fine if no elevated chair or stool is available.

Student Attitudes. Survey valuations presume some degree of accuracy between observed behaviors and typical feelings, i.e., inattentiveness equals something negative or inquisitiveness equals something positive. In reality, a plethora of possibilities exist for correlation of attitudes with actions. Caution is in order. Inattentiveness may mean a lack of sleep or deep thought about the subject. Inquisitiveness may mean the questioner is trying to impress a classmate or is ignorant of a matter. Each person and each situation must be judged

thoroughly on its own merits if it is to be judged accurately. The bottom line is that attitudes might be impossible to determine unless voiced by the individual.

Regular classes averaged about twenty-eight students, while the honors class had seventeen in attendance, and the class in the lecture hall had nearly two hundred present. Most students paid attention to instruction, lecture, or discussion. Occasionally, a few seemed disinterested, but this was hard to gauge. In one class, two students engaged in disruptive talking but settled down after a couple of minutes. In another class, students seemed more attentive to instructions about assessment than to the day's lecture. In a third class, one student used his laptop computer. Presumably, he was taking notes. One student was busy eating sunflower seeds and reading other material. Another engaged in reading her textbook and making notes on key concepts for the next exam. In the lecture hall, a few students talked in a whisper, periodically. [In the lecture hall, you can see everything from the back. And because the acoustics are excellent, you can hear even the quietest whisper.] One student played Tetris on his cellular phone. Several nodded and approached sleep, especially after the first sixty minutes of lecture. One student left before class ended. Little interaction of instructor and students during the lecture made it difficult to know what students thought or felt. At least, note-taking indicated student interest and involvement.

Visuals like handouts, maps, projections, or writing on marker boards captured the attention of students, if only briefly. But the method that best helped students to focus on the lesson was dialogue or discussion. Several instructors used this method effectively. Some discussion took the form of questions and answers. Conversation between instructor and individual students predominated; no formal conversation among students was observed. On the

average, classes reached an excellent sixty to seventy percent participation. By far, the greatest participation happened in the honors seminar. The instructor used a relaxed interactive style. She addressed all students directly by name. She prodded each student to think and jogged his/her memory by means of redirection, exploration, humor, or dilemma. She gave each one time to think and respond. She led students to look for reasons why things occurred, and she deepened their understanding by asking questions about relevance. The small class size and the physical setting facilitated such interaction. But the key to excellent discussion resulted primarily from the skillful pedagogical work of the discussion leader.

Meaningful dialogue with give-and-take interaction can be a great way to learn history. Of course, as class size increases, the percentage of involvement decreases. Too, some students do not learn well with interactive methods. In fact, they may see it as disruptive to learning, and they may be intimidated by the instructor, other students, or the need to think and speak quickly. Guided discussion can be used for their benefit to temper the harshness of spirited exchange. Other ways to involve students and get them talking and interacting are role play, presentations, and group discussions. As always, relevance of the topics discussed is critical.

Learning Resources. Instructors used a variety of resources such as textbooks, study guides, lists of terms, statistical data, maps, historical narratives, photographs, lecture outlines, and primary documents. Use of the following was not observed: artifacts and video clips. The nature of the classroom setting, no doubt, and its limitations present a barrier to utilize certain resources for learning. The challenge for the history teacher is to bring these resources into the classroom if possible either literally or via media. Otherwise, the teacher must motivate students

to seek these resources outside of class. Assignments for field study, archive work, and informal oral interviews can supplement classroom work.

Teaching techniques. Or, who was this instructor? Choose from Brookshire, Colvin, Hoffschwelle, Hunt, and Scherzer.

This instructor began with a question to students about terms for the next exam. Very relaxed and informal, this knowledgeable and seasoned scholar passed along stories in a likeable, conversational style. S/he created a feeling of comfort, of being at home, an excellent learning environment. Occasionally, s/he explained a matter to an individual student one-on-one. When lecture started, this instructor made limited use of visuals, i.e., the marker board or maps, and relied heavily on verbal descriptions of his/her topic. S/he did, however, gesture appropriately and maintained a conversational style throughout with little variation. The professor moved about and, seemingly, gave the entire lecture from memory. S/he used comparison and contrast to give relevance of data to its own historical context. But, relevance to the present was not apparent. In the opinion of this observer, this approach appealed to the intellectuals, to the thinkers, as it allowed students to construct their own arguments and applications mentally in response to what was being offered. Who was this instructor?

This instructor had the lecture outline on the marker board when students arrived for class, and s/he referred repeatedly to this visual tool. S/he took time to explain concepts; s/he did not rush; s/he vividly described ideas to the students. But, very little interaction or discussion occurred. In fact, students seemed reluctant to interact or respond. This animated lecturer gestured expressively, moved about, and kept students interested with a touch of dramatic flair. S/he made reference to maps and even read a historical document to the class. S/he used simple

illustrations, i.e., a cup, to make a point and “unpacked” complex cultural problems so they could be understood more easily. In the opinion of this observer, this instructor did not need “props” because s/he painted the topic verbally with rich, colorful language. This approach would appeal to the dreamers, to the visionaries, as well as to the thinkers. Who was this instructor?

In this class, the instructor exchanged graded assignments for those to be turned in by students. S/he then gave a fifteen-minute essay quiz to students on assigned readings. Two questions were presented visually, one on the projection screen and one on the video monitor. Students were to choose one and write their answer. After the quiz, the instructor opened up discussion with questions. S/he prodded with information and more questions. Involvement from students was open and balanced, and about two-thirds of the class participated. While informative, though, it was hard to see “the big picture” or the relevance of the discussion, except as it related to the quiz just taken. Afterwards, the instructor initiated more guided discussion, yet on a limited basis, by using Elmo and asking questions about the visuals s/he projected. S/he made excellent use of the textbook as a teaching tool and talked about landscape, architecture, and material culture. S/he even played a selection of music from the period and discussed that. This instructor gave students a lot of stuff or data, but s/he did allow students time to think, to ponder, to respond. Issues of interest to students, i.e., the poverty and abuse of working girls, elicited the most discussion. This instructor combined the verbal and the visual most effectively, but perhaps overloaded students with too much data and did not “unpack” concepts. Such would appeal to the collectors, to the fact-finders among the students. Who was this instructor?

After a couple of one-on-one discussions, this instructor gave students a handout of symbols/statistics and proceeded to explain the upcoming mid-term exam. A gestalt approach

was apparent, as students would have choices and could work on their essay answers prior to the exam period. Student response was minimal, and this remained the case throughout the class. In lecture, this well-organized instructor used lots of empirical data, projected on maps and charts, to describe his/her topic and make appropriate comparisons and contrasts. Often, s/he paused for student reactions, but the material evoked few comments or questions. The presentation was informative and laid out the rationale for conclusions reached, but it was hard to tell if students were engaged on a cognitive level. Relevance to a bigger context was not made apparent. This approach would appeal possibly to the organizer, to the one who likes to systematize. Who was this instructor?

This instructor also talked with several students one-on-one before class started. After explaining to the entire class the deadline of the first paper as a prerequisite for taking the mid-term exam, s/he began the lecture. The lecture outline was projected overhead, and, apart from a few responses to rhetorical questions that were cut short by the instructor, very little interaction with students occurred. While lecturing, the instructor paced some, gestured fittingly, and varied the pitch and tone of his/her voice. With lots of facts, concepts, and ideas, breadth superseded depth in covering the material. The instructor embellished the presentation with lavish anecdotes and illustrations—tidbits about people and events. In a remarkable way, this learned historian used individuals to tell the historical story. But, s/he always put the individual's story in an ideological framework which served as the big picture. Questions were used to examine and to probe discovery, but the interaction was driven totally by the instructor. Students had little involvement in the process except as they thought and processed the material individually and silently. Plus, students could only guess what was significant and what was not, since there was

so much stuff to choose from. This approach would definitely appeal to thinkers, to intellectuals.

Who was this instructor?

Instructor Interviews. The instructors interviewed averaged twenty-five years in the teaching profession. Reasons for becoming a teacher of history varied considerably and included love of social science, influence of a high school history teacher, enjoyment of contemporary affairs, heritage of teaching among family members, frequent association with grandparents and other elderly persons, love of reading, influence of a college professor, difficulty with chemistry in college, need of a job, and opportunities to research and write. Self-designated metaphors of these professors also varied significantly: leader, facilitator, guide, thinker, debater, explainer, professor, manager, mentor, coach, cheerleader, and storyteller. They related their teaching to life outside the classroom by talking with people about history, gathering data and information, looking at teaching history not as a job but as a way of life (i.e., the art of being a historian), reading, thinking, and being intellectually active, and debating current events.

Teaching history allowed these instructors to stay connected to young people and their concerns, to learn more about themselves, to work on issues of organization and management, to deepen understanding about the human past and the essence of human existence, to observe how things operate in the world, to experiment with ideas and interpretations, to satisfy their own inquisitiveness, and to stay personally motivated academically. Most felt that additional university duties like committee work, administrative responsibilities, community projects, or research and writing enhanced their teaching and helped them have influence on campus or in the community by meeting a lot of different people. One cautioned that too much non-teaching work can cause overload, but the problem was relative and balance was the key.

According to these professors, the most rewarding aspects of being an educator were engaging students in debate, watching students grow up intellectually, receiving compliments from former students, reading good reports, writing letters of recommendation, controlling one's own work time or schedule, analyzing complex problems, pursuing new ideas and new information within the context of historical consciousness, exchanging ideas in a genuine rather than a mechanical way, having another chance each semester (i.e., there is a beginning and an end), and interacting with human dynamics (i.e., things not anticipated or unpredictable). Conversely, they said the most difficult aspects of being an educator were sustaining the same course over a long period of time, putting up with the sense of entitlement among some students, dealing with students who cheat, staying current to teach upper division courses, tolerating certain disruptive administrative chores, enduring the conflict of cultures in the country and its erosion of our ability to debate questions rationally, and surviving the repetitive nature of the work.

They made the following suggestions to this "young, bright doctoral student who aspires to be a college / university history teacher." Keep it playful, it has to be fun. Concentrate on the good students, and make sure good students get a good education. Don't get discouraged. You'll never persuade everybody, so relinquish the impulse to convert. It's great to be earning a living with your mind. Maintain a spirit of optimism. Remember that students can be one of your best resources. And, don't forget that history teaching is neither all content nor all skills.

APPENDIX–QUESTION SET FOR INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW

How long have you been teaching professionally? Where?

Why did you become a history teacher?

How would you define yourself as a teacher? That is, what metaphor would you use, i.e., explorer, facilitator, mentor, etc.?

How does your teaching relate to your life outside the classroom?

Is this life-application related more to learning as a profession or more to the teaching of history?

How does your teaching reflect your personality?

Is it possible to separate the two?

Do you have any other university duties?

How does this affect your performance as a teacher in the classroom?

What else do you do as part of your vocation?

Do you use this in your teaching?

What do you feel are the most rewarding aspects of what you do as an educator?

What do you see as the most difficult aspects?

Do you have any suggestions for a doctoral student who aspires to be a college / university history teacher?