

END OF SEMESTER REFLECTIONS,  
OR, WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT TEACHING HISTORY

As I sit here and think about what I have read, observed, and written about pedagogy and the teaching of history during Fall 2004 semester, my head feels dull and my mind seems blank! Maybe this is because I do not do introspection well. Perhaps the dullness exists because I have not had any caffeinated beverages in about two weeks! Whatever the rational cause of my insipidity, I must call to memory those ideas and impressions which can be revived. I do have a final essay to produce forthwith. I will proceed with self-analysis, evaluation of pedagogical literature that I read, impressions about classroom and instructor observations, and the planning and organization needed for teaching a course, in that order.

Self-analysis. A key to professional success in teaching is self-awareness. This is particularly the case when teaching history, since a person's point of view affects how history is taught and even what is believed about history. My own inclination is to take things at face value as much as possible, although I realize this can be naive and misleading. Interpretive filters constantly rearrange and even distort the meaning of the past and its actual remembrance. Verisimilitude can help recover what can be known about past events. But even verisimilitude cannot produce complete objectivity. The personal element is invasive, as it penetrates to the heart of experiential epistemology. It cannot be totally countermanded, nor should it be. Otherwise, we would function as computers or robots. So the human element, as in sports officiating, necessarily hinders and distorts historical understanding. The human element spices all human knowledge, including historical knowledge, with liveliness and significance, that is, the spice of life.

These things I *believe* because of my religious upbringing. My perception of human depravity, with the possibility of redemption, conditions all my epistemological yearnings. At best, these yearnings are subjective enterprises. But the important thing is the possibility of redemption that directs collection of data toward an important goal or purpose.<sup>1</sup> Thus, when analyzing, the appropriate question might be: “How can this be seen as redemptive?” This no doubt is a bias, but I feel that it is a good bias. The only other possible alternative would be nihilism or despair. This is true, I think, because of the waste that has occurred and continues to occur in human affairs. History can be quite negative. If history teaches anything, it teaches the reality of a fallen, unredeemed human condition that produces hatred, destruction, and war, and, in my mind, this turns theodicy sour. Human waste and theodicy do not mix well. They contradict, unless you postulate a deity who acts only malevolently.<sup>2</sup> But history also can be progressive. History illuminates the world. History tells about recovery, healing, and enlightenment—the saved or redeemed human condition. As a result of redemption, history books tell us about the beautiful, the good, and the virtuous, and this, in turn, produces hope in the basic dignity of the human race. Consequently, history wields power as an independent force for good or for ill.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>While writing this, I am listening to Mr. Mister’s *Go On* compact disk with tunes like “Healing Waters,” “Dust,” “Something Real,” “Bare My Soul,” “Watching the World,” “Power Over Me,” and so forth. This has me in a melancholy mood. I like the melancholy mood. To me, it is the best mood for reflecting.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us: Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>Compare Paul Valery, *Reflections on the World Today*, “History is the most dangerous product ever concocted by the chemistry of the intellect. It causes dreams, inebriates nations, saddles them with false memories . . . keeps their old sores running, torments them when they are

These personal prejudices, held by others, establish my consideration of historical data. The subjective dynamics at work are specified nicely by the categories of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)—Introverted, Sensing, Thinking, and Judging. It amazed me how accurately this “test” portrayed my personality. But, after all, I supplied the perceptions and answers! While serving as a chaplain in the Air Force, I used the *Prepare* inventory for engaged and married couples. In my estimate, *Prepare* proved beneficial to couples about two-thirds of the time. I do not know how the MBTI compares, but it hit the mark with me. An effective and motivated administrator probed just the right areas to explore and define my personality and its relevance to pedagogical concerns. My key personality traits are explorative, creative, self-motivated, eclectic, cognitive, rational, and relevant, but contra affective and emotive. The best part of the MBTI identifies potential clashes between different “types” of individuals. And the hazards of assuming harmony between alike “types” can be inferred. I will keep this assessment on file and read it periodically just to see if my personality changes over time. Most likely, these basic attributes will stay with me for life.

Assigned readings. None of the three books assigned for reading, a minimal requirement compared with other graduate seminars, left an indelible impression. None changed my course of thinking on a pertinent issue or topic. While quite informative, none compelled (i.e., you cannot put it down until you finish). Nor did any of the books become an experience in reflective

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not at rest, and induces in them megalomania and the mania of persecution.” Quoted in Andrew Wheatcroft, *Infidels: A History of the Conflict between Christendom and Islam* (New York, NY: Random Books, 2004), ix.

meditation. Only a few books do this anyway. Regardless, Sam Wineburg's book<sup>4</sup> challenges the teacher of history with a variety of methodological approaches based on recent research models. The textual approach undoubtedly is persistent in historical pedagogy. This method is indispensable, and ways to assess learning adhere accordingly. But such limits "history" superabundantly, both chronologically and thematically.

In the classroom, teachers need to broaden learning and its assessment to include more ways people actually learn their history. The telling of stories as well as their transmission orally is extremely important. Audio and visual media in modern times powerfully sway the meaning of history. The continuous interaction of humans with the physical landscape needs more emphasis. This is really the reintegration of two academic disciplines, history and geography, that have been separated. Artifacts and material culture can indicate a lot about people and their history, so the archaeologists know. The interaction of people according to groups should inform the past, as sociologists fondly remind us. These "texts" augment classic written texts of historical inquiry. Students do well to acknowledge their experience of these texts, just as they must encounter written texts. The difficulty in the classroom, which is an artificial environment (i.e., not the "real" world), is providing students with legitimate tests that measure both depth and scope of lessons learned by nontraditional methods. Frequent communication and observation for an extended period of time is best. Instructors typically have only one semester to ascertain mastery of a very complex subject by a large number of students—a daunting task!

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<sup>4</sup>*Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

Instructor observations. During the semester, the most memorable experiences occurred when I visited history classes and then briefly interviewed each professor. I knew the teaching style of several, since I had them previously for course work. But it was good to see all of these instructors in action. This learning technique follows the old apprenticeship style of professional development, or what is called teaching by example or modeling. It provides an experienced-based means of acquiring skills, which is an excellent way to learn. After observing and analyzing the pedagogical techniques of each professor, I enjoyed the privilege of talking to them and asking them for their views on teaching history. What becomes memorable, as with most teaching and learning, is not so much the content of the teaching but the personality or mannerisms of the teacher. This tells me that the *how* of teaching must be very important. Etched in my memory will be the frankness and thoroughness of Dr. Hoffschwelle, the argumentative style of Dr. Scherzer, the gentlemanly dignity of Dr. Colvin, the genial politeness of Dr. Leone, the insightfulness of Dr. Hunt, and the matter-of-fact ways of Dr. Brookshire. These are not the only traits of these professors of history, but they are defining characteristics. They are what I will remember and what I will take with me from my encounter with them. As I prepare to lead students myself, this helps me remember that how I say something may leave more of a lasting impression than what I actually say.

Course preparation. Preparation for teaching a course is something I like doing. Looking for and evaluating textbooks for possible use in a course seems routine. Writing a syllabus is no problem. Putting together an outline and schedule requires little extra work. But herein lies the danger that the process has become too easy, too mundane, too taken for granted. Conversely, what is hard for me is to choose between what to use and what not to use in a particular course

(i.e., content selection), simply because the breadth of material is vast. And the means of student assessment remains a gnawing issue. For most of my life, I have been schooled with traditional means of assessment. But I have been introduced to other means of assessment in undergraduate education courses. I felt a little uncomfortable with those assessments, but I got used to it. As I recall, I was more personally involved in the grading of my own work. Pitfalls in such an approach might come as a result of any student's lack of integrity. However, problems with a minimal number of students may be worth the effort to engage most of the students more thoroughly in their own grade formation. The grade, after all, belongs to the student. An increase in student involvement and interest legitimize more use of nontraditional assessment methods, in my thinking.

While I still have much to do with the structure of the History 2010 (Survey of United States History I) course that I will teach in the spring, I look forward to teaching this class. I have taught in church settings for a large portion of my life, but I have never taught in the university before. Speaking before a group is no problem, but it will be different. This will be a sustained effort, and, to my students, I am supposed to be the expert. I will try to impress them with the fact that I am a co-learner and a *facilitator* of their own experiential learning of the history of the United States. Their impressions, of course, will be their own, but I will work hard to help them understand my role as teacher and helper. I know if I can engage a sizeable majority of them in intellectual interaction, then the class will go well. But if the learning of history seems too dull, or I seem too dull, then attention to matters of motivation and incentive may be required. If I can convey to them the relevance of lessons from the past, then History 2010 can serve a greater usefulness to students than just getting three more general education credits.

As I conclude these reflections, I am listening to Mr. Mister's "I Wear the Face" which is more upbeat and less melancholy than other selections in their *Go On* compact disk. And I am reminded of the answers I got from my professor interviewees to the question: "Do you have any suggestions for one who aspires to be a college or university history teacher?" They told me:

"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."

"Don't forget that history teaching is neither all content nor all skills."

Personally, I think their collective wisdom represents the best of my internship experience this semester.