TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING HISTORY

In a post-modern world of deconstruction, gender studies, and multi-culturalism,

Marshall McLuhan's aphorism–"the medium is the message"–seems on the surface appropriate

in regard to teaching history. But such an assessment superficially measures traditional

methodology's resistance to potent influences like computer technology and group process in

today's diverse and fluid academic environment. On the one hand, the problem that history

teachers confront rests in the need to define clearly the content of the historical enterprise. The

recent and ardent controversy over standardization of the history curriculum for the nation's

secondary schools reflects the magnitude of this difficulty.[1] At the post-secondary level, the

diversity of perspectives (e.g., cultural, economic, political, religious, social), each with its

supporting curricula and textbooks, also suggests a need to standardize. On the other hand,

rather than a problem about content or definition, the challenge is to make history more palatable

to students through techniques that can be used effectively for historical studies.

The profession itself unfortunately suffers from a poor image–something both perceived

and real. As one historian notes, "Practitioners of the craft are peculiarly susceptible to pedantry

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[1] Diane Ravitch, "The Controversy over National History Standards" (Chapter 18), and John P. Diggins, "The National History Standards" (Chapter 19), in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 237-275. For a broad survey of what is at stake, see the essays in Michael Berube and Cary Nelson, eds., *Higher Education under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

and assorted other stuffy pretensions that occasionally attract public derision."[2] As an example

of this, Robert Utley recalls an advertisement for a history professor at the University of Maine:

"Wanted . . . someone who could combine 'synchronic and diachronic analysis of events in a

transcultural and holistic mode.'" Paul Simon, the U.S. Congressman from Illinois, had quipped

about this advertisement: "'The teacher who responds to that ad will undoubtedly be the next

dullest teacher of history in Maine–exceeded only by the teacher who wrote that ad. If higher

education is to receive adequate public and congressional support, it must provide more than

scholarly nothingness.'"[3] Although an older judgment, the problem of negative perception still

lingers and perhaps is even more intense. Significantly, this charge of history as obscurant has

pushed some practitioners of the craft to extremes.[4] But relevancy need not be achieved by

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[2]Robert M. Utley, "Beyond Pedagogy: History out of School," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1977): 397.

[3]Ibid.

[4]See, for example, the Teaching Radical History section in *Radical History Review*; Dan Okada and Marc Adin, "Vietnam: The Veterans' Account," *RHR* 58 (Winter 1994): 166-170; Miriam Formanek-Brunell and Lidwien Kapteijns, "History in Global Perspective: Cultures in Contact and Conflict," and Julio Cesar Pino, "History of Civilization I," both in *RHR* 59 (Spring 1994): 121-141. Each sample emphasizes content rather than method.

alteration of history's content. Good pedagogical techniques can overcome pedantry and infuse

historical studies with verisimilitude and relevance.[5]

For history as well as other disciplines, technique first of all comes from the teacher as a

fallible person with certain beliefs and capabilities. Competence in pedagogy proceeds largely

from the disciplinary training of the teacher. As part of a project called Knowledge Growth in a

Profession, two researchers discovered that a teacher's own field of study "wielded a strong–and

often decisive–influence on their instructional decision making."[6] Social studies teachers who

were mostly novices, for example, revealed sharp differences in how they conceived and

conveyed to students the role of fact, interpretation of evidence, chronology and continuity, and

causation in historical discourse. Suzanne Wilson and Samuel Wineburg cited "the way in which

our teachers' undergraduate training influenced their teaching. The curriculum they were given

and the courses they subsequently taught were shaped by what they did and did not know. . . . In

a sense . . . their *lack* of knowledge . . . was most decisive in their instruction."[7] In their

application of this research to pedagogy, Wilson and Wineburg infer:

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[5]On a theoretical level, Lawrence A. Cremin's *Public Education* points in the right direction. According to Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., he "proposes that schools of education broaden their scope and vision by attending to the educative process across the entire life span, in all the situational, institutional, social, and cultural contexts in which it occurs, and historically as well as in the present and alternatively imagined futures." "Historical Revisionism, Educational Theory, and an American *Paideia*," *History of Education Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1978): 208.

[6]Suzanne M. Wilson and Samuel S. Wineburg, "Peering at History through Different Lenses: The Role of Disciplinary Perspectives in Teaching History," *Teachers College Record* 89, no. 4 (1988): 525.

[7]Ibid., 534-535.

> Knowledge of the structures of disciplines . . . is critical to teaching. . . . Learning about disciplines is not simply a matter of acquiring new knowledge, however. It also entails examining previously held beliefs. . . . For our teachers, their "knowledge" of the subject matter was as much a product of their beliefs as it was an accumulation of facts and interpretations. . . . History extends beyond knowledge of the past. . . . Learning is not merely an encounter with new information, for new information is often no match for deeply held beliefs.[8]

Epistemological groundwork, upon which each professional builds his or her pedagogical know-how, prominently shapes the entire enterprise of teaching history. But like any foundation that sits bare with no superstructure, so do epistemology and theory remain ineffective without good pedagogical skills.

In historical discourse, techniques like the traditional lecture appear to be entrenched and unavoidable. And adherence to the old ways quite often obfuscates the obvious. As an alternative to the proven but overworked lecture method, one history professor pinpoints *the* critical area for the study of history that is based on written texts–reading. Reading is FUNdamental, Robert Marcus notes, yet:

> Historians with their sixteen-plus grade reading levels may have forgotten how difficult is the prose we ask students to read. Most difficult of all are primary sources with their frequently problematic vocabulary and syntax, obscure internal references, unfamiliar systems of thought, uncertain historical context, and often opaque connections to present concerns. But unskilled or inexperienced readers find difficulty even with the prose of the best textbooks. . . . Historians extensively qualify what they say. . . .

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[8]Ibid., 537-538. For teacher education, this implies: "Teaching the ways of knowing encompasses more than a 'Curriculum and Instruction' methods course. . . . Creating in our students an *awareness* of different ways of knowing is . . . a worthy goal." Compare "Beliefs, Values and Ideologies in Course Design" (Chapter 3) in Susan Toohey, *Designing Courses for Higher Education* (Buckingham, England: SRHE & Open University Press, 1999), 44-69.

Historians do not write in the straightforward expository prose you find in many other fields.[9]

To overcome this general reading deficiency, Marcus outlines a system of collaborative learning whereby "students in highly structured situations . . . *teach others what they have learned by reading*."[10] By assigning class members to gender balanced, academically stratified (by reading ability) groups of six or seven, Marcus effects "applied" history–the telling or verbalizing of the traditions of history by the students themselves. As a result of the collaborative learning process, students "apply their reading to problems presented by the assigned exercises, simple descriptive ones at first, but eventually complicated ones demanding critical thinking and moral judgments."[11] Marcus confesses that this technique, from a traditionalist's perspective, minimizes efficient use of classroom time (since lecture covers more content) and the teacher's role as expert (since he or she must be subordinate to assigned texts and prearranged exercises). Marcus further realizes that "collaborated learning tests one's sense of control. . . . You have to accept–or better yet enjoy–noisy classrooms, lip from students, lessons whose length you can't easily control, and few chances to show off you learning."[12] But the rewards of students'

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[9]Robert D. Marcus, "Nonreaders Anonymous: Reading History Collaboratively," *The History Teacher* 33, no. 4 (2000): 454.

[10]Ibid., 455.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., 468.

increased reading ability, greater comprehension and retention of the subject matter, and

enhanced application of historical facts more than compensate for the supposed disadvantages.

Another history teacher agrees that new methods may be the secret to helping students

retain the stuff of history. He argues, "The source of the perceived content deficiencies may be

more related to *how* history is taught than to *how much* history is taught. . . . Unless and until

history teachers become familiar with and comfortable with learning theories . . . simply

increasing the amount of history taught will not increase the amount of history learned."[13] In his

use of schema theory for labor history, David DeChenne's goal is to move students from content

mastery to "higher order cognitive objectives such as interpretation, application, and analysis."[14]

While complex and somewhat esoteric, schema theory poses a viable option for pedagogical

practice that is proven and effective. DeChenne cogently reasons that this technique's processes

assist the student's initial learning of data and its long term retention as well as retrieval and

possible applications of the information. He states:

> Cognitive structures of hierarchically organized, related concepts, generalizations, and/or constructs form the intellectual scaffolding, the concept map, the mental model, the ideational framework, which allows the learner to take otherwise random facts, to remove them from their "brute isolation," and to transform them into meaningful building blocks which are related to, and help to construct, the larger idea-structure.[15]

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[13]David DeChenne, "Schema Theory, Educational Applications, and a Model for Teaching Labor History," *The History Teacher* 26, no. 2 (1993): 185-186.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., 178.

He does foresee, though, a potential problem for the application of schema theory to historical studies, because history lacks a unified conceptual base, "a single, hierarchical content structure." He overcomes this problem by devising a linear model for labor-management relations. In this respect, his schematic functions much like an advance organizer that omits the hierarchical features of thoroughgoing schema, a technique that he nevertheless finds beneficial for students in acquiring and retaining the facts of history.

Some students, particularly those from minority groups or less well-to-do families, have trouble with learning course content due to linguistic or language problems. The target audience certainly should determine to some extent the pedagogical techniques selected by the instructor. One researcher, Anthony Bernier, believes that "while historians and other teaching faculty routinely revise course content to incorporate new scholarship, they should revise their pedagogical approaches to reflect changes in the *linguistic* and *social class diversity* of their students as well."[16] With shifting demographics in the university classroom, the need to reduce "academic alienation" on the basis of language becomes apparent. But not all history teachers perceive the necessity of linguistic accommodation. To raise their level of consciousness to this critical issue, Bernier observed United States history survey classes for about a year and identified terms and concepts that were "unfamiliar" and "confusing" to at-risk students. He categorized the problematic vocabulary according to three types: (1) content terms or "common knowledge" within the discipline of history; (2) language terms or vocabulary frequently used but

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[16]Anthony Bernier, "Diversity's Challenge In the Classroom: Language and History Pedagogy From the Student Optic," *The History Teacher* 28, no. 1 (1994): 37.

from outside the discipline; and (3) language masking content or language with variant meanings,

unfamiliar metaphors, and oxymora. Bernier summarizes:

> *These problematic terms . . . should not be simply discarded from lectures or avoided in textbooks*. . . . When history faculty begin to recognize that these language typologies impede student access to content material, they can develop strategies and techniques to address them. Furthermore, as faculty incorporate these strategies into normal lecture revision, assignments, and examinations, they improve persistence and performance . . . for all history students.[17]

While Bernier offers little by way of specific pedagogical techniques, he does highlight a

requisite condition for intelligible learning in the history classroom–plain speech that can be

understood by the students. He consequently sees the effort by professors to consciously review

and revise their pedagogical approaches as an absolute requirement. He even laments:

> While faculty may try a variety of methods to spruce up their lectures and "keep students interested" with "common" metaphors, informal speech, class-based vocabulary, and cultural references, they run a high risk of obstructing content for working-class and second language students whose experiences preclude access to the intended meaning and who rely especially heavily upon literal translations and explicit definitions.[18]

In a demographically diverse environment, previous notions of what might be obvious or

understood about linguistics cannot be presumed.[19]

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[17]Ibid., 39.

[18]Ibid., 45.

[19]On a larger scale, the issue of bilingual education is more than just a matter of pedagogy. Carlos J. Ovando writes: "I am convinced that the current debate on bilingual education is not just about pedagogical effectiveness–does it work or not–but about how language diversity fits within our prevailing national ideology." "Politics and Pedagogy: The Case of Bilingual Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 60, no. 3 (1990): 341.

One possible solution to meeting the instructional requirements of distinct social groups comes from the development of special courses or even entire programs that provide indispensable teaching via special content and adaptable technology. While many of these programs focus on disciplines other than history (e.g., English as a Second Language), some do function as sub-disciplines within the general field of history.[20] Depending on the need and the resources, they give educators an opportunity to target neglected segments of the university population. In some cases, content and methodology become blurred. This appears to be valid for many courses and programs in gender studies.[21] In other cases, pedagogical benefit may be exaggerated. In his survey of Holocaust studies at American colleges and universities, Stephen Haynes gives an excellent overview of the various classroom and evaluative activities used by instructors. Classroom activities include lecture, discussion, video/film, visitors, small groups, class writing, student presentations, interviews, and field trips. Evaluative activities include

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[20]For issues and techniques that confront practitioners of oral history, see Ronald J. Grele, "Values and Methods in the Classroom Transformation of Oral History," and Tracy E. K'Meyer, "'It's Not Just Common Sense': A Blueprint for Teaching Oral History," in *The Oral History Review* 25, nos. 1-2 (1998). For speciality fields of study, their interdisciplinary nature often creates a problem with pigeonholing them in a more traditional discipline. See Stephen R. Haynes, "Holocaust Education at American Colleges and Universities: A Report on the Current Situation," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 299.

[21]In an overview of her survey course on Asian American women, Nancy I. Kim headlines pedagogy as collective, consciousness raising, and community orientation. She states, "I believe collectivity is the core of the transformative and radical nature in the course. By emphasizing collectivity and group-centeredness throughout the course, the classroom transforms into a space for community building and students may ultimately view themselves as extended members of the greater community." "The General Survey Course on Asian American Women: Transformative Education and Asian American Feminist Pedagogy," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3, no. 1 (2000): 58.

papers, exams, participation, journals, quizzes, student presentations, book reviews, and analysis

of documents. Haynes surveys these only on the basis of utilization and does not assess their

value or effectiveness. He correctly observes, "Assertions of the uniqueness of the Holocaust

may be of some use in meeting the multicultural challenge. But in the highly politicized world of

American higher education, few outside the field of Holocaust studies are likely to be

convinced."[22] Such outreaches regardless of the limitations serve a genuine purpose and become,

in a sense, a technique of educators to incorporate otherwise excluded students into the

mainstream of the educational process.

The greatest impact, no doubt, on the education of students as well as instructors from all

backgrounds has come by way of computer technology. The changes in pedagogical methods

that have resulted would be difficult to estimate. Use of computers seems ubiquitous, but

historians still resist modernization of their pedagogical world. As Daniel M. Ringrose notes,

"The integration of technology into history teaching is a cautious, contemplative process."[23] The

steady increase in media slide shows, electronic discussion forums, and web resources indicate

growing adaptation to the realities of the twenty-first century. This is true in spite of critics who

"question the value of teaching technical skills rather than content . . . [or] find the exercise

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[22]Haynes, "Holocaust Education at American Colleges and Universities," 289-294, 302.

[23]Daniel M. Ringrose, "Beyond Amusement: Reflections on Multimedia, Pedagogy, and Digital Literacy in the History Seminar," *The History Teacher* 34, no. 2 (2001); electronic article @ http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/34.2/ringrose.html, accessed 25 November 2002.

valuable, but very time consuming."[24] For example, three-fourths of the instructors polled in

Haynes's study made use of computer technology in teaching the Holocaust. The variety

included Holocaust list-serve, personal research, "Maus" on CD-ROM, e-mail discussions, world

wide web sites, presentation software, internet bibliography, and electronic courses.[25]

Instead of traditional papers and projects, Ringrose required a multimedia "paper" in his

upper-division seminar on urban history and a multimedia project that involved oral history in his

course on memory, warfare, and society. The rationale for this "pedagogical experiment" came

primarily out of intuition ("a vague sense that 'we should be doing this'") rather than any

"judicious consideration of the costs, benefits, procedures, and pedagogy."[26]   With technical

assistance and much class time dedicated to each project, Ringrose found that students effectively

learned how to present historical data and infer logical conclusions from the multimedia format.

But he also mentions two main weaknesses. First, he believes "it is extremely difficult to make

and sustain a complex argument in the multimedia format." Second, he feels "multimedia

creativity" encourages "style over substance."[27] He argues: "Media presentations encourage a

fractured, one-screen-at-a-time organizational mode, one that indicates contemporary students are

conditioned to gather information in discrete visual bits even when the connections between

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Haynes, "Holocaust Education at American Colleges and Universities," 293-294.

[26]Ringrose, "Beyond Amusement: Reflections on Multimedia, Pedagogy, and Digital Literacy in the History Seminar," n.p.

[27]Ibid.

them are tenuous at best."[28] Ringrose nevertheless lauds the use of computer techniques in

historical studies and recommends refinement of tools and objectives.[29] And he does not foresee

any inherent incompatibility between historical discourse and computer-driven technologies.

Most teachers of history appreciate the "old-fashioned" lecture but acknowledge the

valuable contribution of a great variety of techniques. Different pedagogical methods should not

be in competition with each other, and balance is a real key. New techniques can build on older,

proven methods. Both old and new can coexist to the benefit of instructors and students alike.

For the historian, the past is prologue, and the same can be said for the historian's pedagogical

techniques.

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Compare the technological application of "a rather simple, straightforward teaching philosophy" by Richard W. Slatta, "Connecting Teaching Goals with Technology," *History Computer Review* 17, no. 1 (2001): 19-29.

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