The Introductory History Course

Proceedings of the AHA
Annapolis Conference on
the Introductory History Course

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PREFACE

The American Historical Association held a conference on The Introductory History Course at Annapolis, on September 28, 29, and 30, 1980. The conference and this publication were made possible by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., of Indianapolis.

The conference was called by Warren Susman, vice-president in charge of the Teaching Division in the prior two years (1977-79), and it was chaired by the then current vice-president, David D. Van Tassel (1980-82). Mack Thompson, then executive director of the association, and Charlotte Quinn, then assistant director, presided and participated.

The purpose of the conference was to present six model introductory history courses, each of which would be read by all of the participants beforehand and evaluated by two participants at the conference. The models and critiques were to serve as the basis for a wide-ranging discussion of the introductory course.

In all there were twenty-five participants: six model presenters, twelve critics, and three graduate students as well as the previously mentioned officers of the American Historical Association.

The purpose of this publication is to provide, within space constraints, a rich share of each of the models as well as a sampling of criticism and discussion.

To select approximately fifty pages of discussion from a thousand pages of transcript is a risky undertaking. I have chosen those parts of the discussion which I thought most participants would designate the most important. My goal was to capture the tone, direction, and "sense" of the meeting rather than to provide "representative" excerpts from the discussion.

Some of the high points virtually leaped off the transcript intact. Some of the important discussions had to be pruned of thick underbrush. One discussion, the last, had to be traced like some underground stream which intermittently burst to the surface, sweeping us away at the end.

We wish to express our appreciation to Lilly Endowment Inc., and especially Vice-President for Education Laura A. Bornholdt, for its generous support. I want to thank the officers and staff of the American Historical Association, including Mack Thompson, Samuel R. Gammon, David D. Van Tassel, and Charlotte Quinn for their help in realizing the conference and publication. I want to thank all of the participants for their support and assistance, then and since. I am especially indebted to Warren Susman, whose conference this was, for helping with the manuscript, particularly the awkward task of including a critique of my own model. Finally, I would like to thank Jamil S. Zainaldin, deputy executive director of the American Historical Association, for his free hand and unflagging support and Sammetta P. Banks, administrative assistant, for her tireless work in preparing the manuscript for the American Historical Association.

Kevin Reilly

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 1980 the Teaching Division of the American Historical Association hosted a Conference on the Introductory History Course at Annapolis, Maryland. Those who assembled for this Annapolis convention had few illusions about what they might accomplish. They came, as the guidelines for the conference suggested, as "concerned teachers" to explore and discuss freely and frankly one of the most persistent problems facing most teachers and departments of history: the nature and function of a basic course in history. The Teaching Division had frequently found this problem central at the various regional teaching conferences it had sponsored, a source of controversy at sessions on the program of the association at its annual meeting, and a matter of genuine concern in the professional literature as well as in many inquiries to the division itself.

The decade of the 1960s had witnessed the elimination of a required history course in the curriculum of many colleges and universities and the multiplication of a wide variety of alternative elective options designed to attract students. The 1970s saw the beginning of efforts to reinstitute some kind of history requirement. The question, increasingly, was what kind of course should this be? This curricular confusion had in fact made the very definition of terms difficult: were we talking about an "introductory" course meaning a course basic to a sequence of history courses, an only course in history for undergraduates, an introduction to an history major, a significant aspect of a liberal arts core of courses, a course that in fact introduced the student to the study of history as inquiry or one that introduced students to the sweep of history itself, the facts and the record? What were we talking about: a required course, an elective course, a liberal arts course or one tailored to preprofessional or even professional programs?

Against the background of such confusion, the Teaching Division invited twenty-five men and women, teachers and scholars selected largely because of their demonstrated interest in the questions under discussion and because of their considerable classroom experience. They were known to be exceptionally able teachers. But none was selected to represent a particular intellectual position or political constituency. In a general way an effort was made to include teachers from every kind of academic institution of higher education: public

and private, college and university, liberal arts and more professionally oriented, two-year and four-year, urban and rural, those with "open" and those with more "elite" admissions standards. As much as possible geographic diversity was also considered in the invitations with teachers from the East Coast, West Coast, Middle West, and Southwest attending. While wide and varied teaching experience was central to the conference, three graduate students at the very beginning of their teaching careers attended and participated with special effectiveness. To provide some critical distance the conference also listed among its membership a philosopher with a special interest in the philosophy of history and long-time involvement in an historically-oriented basic humanities course and a social scientist with expertise in both the practical and theoretical issues in social science education.

The participants were invited to discuss the issues. In order to provide a concrete basis for such discussion, the conference commissioned six very different models of possible courses based on actual experience at six very different kinds of institutions. Developed in advance, all of the models were sent to all participants. Each session of the conference was then devoted to a discussion centering on a particular model and the brief critiques presented by the two conference members given that assignment.

The models which formed the basis of discussion were:

(1) Toward Two-Sex History: A Model for the European Survey Course from the Renaissance to the French Revolution (Stanford);

(2) Restructuring the American Survey: A Focus Group for the Introductory Course (an opportunity for in-depth work in connection with a basic survey) (University of Wisconsin Center, Marathon County);

(3) Presenting History as a Policy Tool: An Introductory Variant for Preprofessional Students (Carnegie-Mellon);

(4) Reading History: An Historical Classic as the Basis for an Introductory Course (Amherst):

(5) Introductory History as Topical History (World History organized in terms of the study of basic human issues and problems) (Somerset County College, New Jersey);

(6) Introduction to Modern Urban Civilization Through a Cultural History of New York City (SUNY at Stony Brook).

The participants were Joyce Antler (Brandeis); Cleo Cherryholmes (Political Science, Michigan State): Sandi E. Cooper (Richmond College); Constantin Fasolt (Columbia graduate student); Jane Gover (NYU graduate student); John B. Halsted (Amherst); C. Warren Hollister (University of California at Santa Barbara); Martha C. Howell (Rutgers); Jerry M. Israel (Illinois Wesleyan); Marvin Levich (Philosophy, Reed); James J. Lorence (Wisconsin, Marathon County); Carolyn C. Lougee (Stanford); Bullitt Lowry (North Texas State); Charlotte A. Quinn (AHA); Kevin Reilly (Somerset County College, NJ); Kevin Ryan (NYU graduate student); James Shenton (Columbia); Peter N. Stearns (Carnegie-Mellon); Warren Susman (AHA and Rutgers); William R. Taylor (SUNY at Stony Brook); Mack Thompson (AHA), David D. Van Tassel (AHA and Case Western Reserve): Daniel Warshaw (Fairleigh Dickinson); Donald Weinstein (University of Arizona); and Henry R. Winkler (President, University of Cincinnati).

Warren Susman
Rutgers University

linkages, whether the fact that they are taking these courses has significance in their lives whatsoever. We are just sort of satisfied with the requirements.

One of the reasons that I am hesitant about going back to history requirements, although I value them as well, is that I am not sure that we would know what we were doing in terms of having the particular requirements, and whether we would ever be able to assess what we have done, or what the consequences were.

This seems to me to be a problem that we have in ways which are somewhat different than most other disciplines, unless you want to assume that there is a certain body of facts or data that you want to test on.

PROFESSOR VAN TASSEL: The time has come. This discussion will go on, no doubt, in the far flung regions of the United States, wherever you go.

CONCLUSION

Warren Susman

The conference made no report or recommendations. Rather it provided me with a special assignment: on the basis of a careful reading of the verbatim stenographic record of all discussion, prepare a short report on the major themes and issues, agreements and disagreements and comment from my own personal perspective on what I believed to be significant outcomes.

Briefly--and perhaps too boldly--here are some of the major conclusions that the record suggests:

1. There can no longer be one introductory course for there is no one model possible to serve this function at all institutions for all students.

2. Memorization of fact ought not to be a substitute for thinking. In fact, thinking historically is one of a series of basic skills that can be developed in an introductory course and the development of these skills is probably more important than the communication of the facts.

3. "Historical facts should not eclipse the scholarly process through which historians reach them, refine them, and debate them." There is much about the processes of historical inquiry and interpretation themselves that are of special value to all students, not simply to those interested in the study of history. Therefore, all students should somehow in their introductory course learn to operate as historians do to develop these special abilities as well.

4. "Relevance is vulgar and indispensible." All introductory courses should be built in large part on an understanding of student interests, situations, and needs.

5. Such "relevance" cannot be approached unless the historian's mission to deal with human continuity and change over time and space include an

examination of the private as well as the public, the role of women as well as men, the view from below as well as the vision from the top of society. This also means that all introductory courses, even the more traditional Western civilization and American history survey course, must make some effort to include an examination of a larger world, a more global vision.

6. In spite of the fact (or maybe because of it) that it is not possible to think of one model for an introductory course, it is desirable to think in terms of the achievement of more common ground for all students, perhaps in skills, in understanding history as process, or even in achieving or maintaining some form of cultural literacy which all can share.

These conclusions are unexceptional and I suspect unexceptionable. Many of the propositions are expressed as goals or even wishes. Little is suggested about how they might--assuming that would be in fact desirable--be achieved. But they all do suggest some important currents in our professional culture itself and I think finally raise questions not only related to the teaching of history but to the very nature of the discipline as enterprise.

In spite of the fact that textbook publishers continue to revise and commission new texts for what remains a dominant course in Western civilization at many colleges and universities and the same fact holds true for basic survey courses in American history, those who gathered at Annapolis did not believe that this pattern could in fact hold or could do the necessary job. Students, institutions, teachers, scholars are all so different, their interests so diverse, their needs so exceptional from case to case that there was a consensus that it made no sense at all looking for one course or even one kind of course (like Western civilization) that could possibly satisfy in all or even in most cases. While much attention had to be paid to differences in student preparation, ability, and interests, there was also serious examination of student needs as well as faculty interests and needs. For some, the inability to designate a single introductory course indicated serious problems: a crisis of confidence among historians in what they had to provide and a growing cultural illiteracy that meant there was limited common ground from which to begin.

Did historians have, in fact, a body of certain knowledge that was of general value to all students? Did all students have the kind

of background, expecially the kind of cultural understanding and awareness to enable them to take advantage of whatever historical knowledge historians did have to offer? Too often throughout the conference the answers for many were negative. The problem was not only an intellectual one, however, but also a moral one. If the teaching of history was a moral enterprise (and more of this key issue later) then what were the responsibilities of teachers of history? How ought they prepare their students? What was it important for them to know? Would this depend on the nature of the students?

It was one of the ironies that attended the conference that there was so much discussion of the problem of cultural literacy. The failure of students to share in a common historical cultural awareness that helped many teachers to decide there could not be one common introductory course had in fact been in large part the justification, the very rationale for the traditional course in Western civilization that began to flourish in the between-the-wars period and was the standard introductory course (and perhaps still is) from then on. It proposed, among other things, to provide an understanding of a common heritage and a system of values. While it is clear that current so-called cultural illiteracy cannot be attributed to the failure of courses in Western civilization to do their assigned job, it does suggest that educational objectives have to keep pace, somehow, with changing social situations and cultural circumstances.

Many participants at the conference felt no crisis of confidence here. They in fact rejoiced at the creative possibilities made possible by the demands of various students for various courses. There were those who cherished and rejoiced in all this new diversity and saw it as a great creative opportunity characteristic of what was in fact happening within the discipline itself where recent scholarship added more complexity, diversity, and therefore controversy. That is, the challenge was not simply the result of changing student abilities but rather the result of the changing nature of the discipline of history itself. New and varied courses might be precisely the way to find out what it all means, to restructure and reorganize the complex material of history in new and more meaningful ways.

Clearly a new argument is developing for sustaining the study of history in our colleges and universities and even more in justification of an introductory course in history. This argument holds that the study of history is fundamental because of the skills it develops or ought to develop in students. Thus an introductory history course becomes a course in mastering basic skills necessary to the liberal arts and to an effective career after college. Some of these are defined in terms of simple behavioral objectives:

1. effective reading, writing, speaking;

2. investigating, analyzing, arguing, criticizing;

3. perceiving (learning how and why we see or understand the way we do), conceptualizing (learning how and why we make and use abstractions), the use of analogy and metaphor.

Surely students in history courses--one would hope all liberal arts courses--get additional experience and training in all these skills but in what sense can the development of these skills be said to be basic particularly to history?

Many of these skills are related to the more general question of the use of evidence, supposedly something of special significance in historical study. Drawing conclusions from the evidence seemed to many a basic value of historical study. Here a brief was made for the extension of the kinds of evidence used. In addition to various traditional written documents, students should be trained to use quantitative evidence, maps, records, photographs, works of art and architecture, objects from the material culture, song and dance, records, movies, newsreels and TV documentaries as well as newspapers, etc. Given the vastness of the "evidence" and the variety of problems associated with the use of such materials and the building of arguments on the basis of such evidence, this stress in skills might very well mean a sacrifice of historical content to the emphasis on the historian's method or process.

Whatever the consequences, this interest in student skills so evident at the conference was part of an intensive interest in the introductory course essentially shaping or changing the student in significant ways--although not always so much through new knowledge as through new skills that are expected to lead to new attitudes. The use of evidence should lead finally to the development of the arts (or should it be sciences?) of explanation and interpretation. They should learn how to know what constitutes a satisfactory explanation and how that differs from an effective interpretation. There was considerable reference to "thinking historically" (everyone thought that was a good thing for everyone to do) and although it was never defined it seemed to mean understanding that all human activity was ultimately (?) historical in character. Historical thinking will get students to see themselves and the institutions and values of their day as products of the past, revealing the relativity of ideas, institutions, ways of life. Historical awareness will train students to value the achievements of civilization over time. It will also upset students and make them critics of the present. History will

"open minds" to the discovery of "real" questions and real problems and sharpen a focus in the definition of a problem that will thereby assist students in dealing with policy issues.

But most fundamentally the argument becomes a moral one. Historical understanding leads first to a feeling for the experience of others, to empathy or sympathy, essential and moral sentiments. And it leads as well to a recognition and acceptance of diversity, and acceptance of complexity, and acceptance of controversy as if it were a necessary part of the world in which we live. Thus, historical understanding is held to enable us to make decisions, the better those decisions the more moral the act. Thus the final argument for "skills" maintains a moral assignment for historical understanding and thinking and makes history a moral discipline, perhaps producing "better" people as a consequence of their study of history.

If I have insisted on my own rather skeptical stance in this discussion of introductory history as skills, this is not because I have not held most of these views myself and defended virtually all these propositions. From simple behavioral skills to complex moral ones, historical study most certainly does involve "skills." But what discipline doesn't and are the most elaborate propositions either verified or verifiable? What impresses over all is the exceptional concern for students and the belief that what matters most in a course is what happens to him or her and, in effect, how they behave rather than what they know. Early in our deliberations there was a plea entered to use our courses to help students "find their own voices." My reading and rereading of the transcripts made me recall a famous letter that the great Jacob Burckhardt wrote to the great Nietzsche in 1874.

> Yet as a teacher and lecturer I think I may say that I never taught history for the sake of the thing which goes by the high-falutin name of world history, but essentially as a general subject. My task was to put people into possession of that solid foundation which is indispensible to their further work if it is not to become aimless. I have done what I could to bring them to take personal possession of the past--in any shape or form--at any rate not to sicken them of it. I wanted them to be capable of plucking the fruits for themselves, nor have I ever had in mind to train scholars or disciples in the narrower sense; all I aimed at was to make every member of my audience feel and know that everyone may and must take independent possession of what appeals to him personally, and that there is joy in so doing.

I believe that most of those who gathered at Annapolis would have nodded in agreement with the famous historian and teacher of 100 years ago. Nothing was more striking than the deep concern with students. There was much less concern about historical fact. Indeed, there were warnings, near the close of our meeting that our deep concern for student needs might tempt teachers into a kind of "presumptuousness." "If we begin to worry about what students need to know, I hope we know that they need to know an awful lot more than we can provide for them, something that among other things their priests and ministers provide for them."

The emphasis on skills and student needs often led to treating history primarly as inquiry and little as a body of knowledge, as something known. The insistence, too, on a variety of basic or introductory courses raised the question of whether history did indeed have a suject matter? What has happened, one participant asked, to the experience of life, the "existential aspect?" Is there a subject to be grasped as well as skills available to help in the grasping? Is history a discipline in the normal sense of that term, a distinctive set of intellectual strategies for understanding the world and its people, a particular form of knowledge, structuring experience with the use of meaningful public symbols?

Once upon a time, the story would have, there was an objective body of historical knowledge that might be passed with relative ease from generation to generation. Alas, today, while there is a body of knowledge, it has grown so vast, complex, diverse that no one can tell what is significant or important. Obviously, this view represents myth rather than history. What is in fact the case is that new knowledge and new interests in a changing social and moral order raise serious questions about relative significance or about our criterion for selection of information to be presented. That is not a new problem for the historian as scholar or as teacher. It has always gone with the territory. The traditional Western civilization course had a more or less agreed upon hierachy of facts and values; virtually every course and every text book stressed at least the same developments and events. That vision was the consequence of a particular time and place, a specific situation.

"We no longer have a point of view on which we can rely." This was the charge presented to the conference. What was meant, in effect, is that there are competing points of view, controversy about significant visions, complexity as the consequence of broadening historical concern--the private, women, the view from below, everyday life, cultural history. The older visions cannot contain the new bodies of knowledge; the older formulations and conceptual boundaries don't adjust themselves easily. And Western civilization--that neat package--finds itself looked down upon by other more global visions.

There is a confusion about the selection of property from the vaster body of knowledge--what is it to be used for and why? But if you don't have or can't develop criteria for the basis of making judgements of importance, or deciding what to include or exclude, do you really have a discipline or a subject to teach?

Clearly the profession knows the state of subject matter at any given moment. All of this raises the question of the relationship between scholarship and teaching not significantly addressed at the conference. But what finally did appear to be central was the proposition that there were some things at least on which we could agree, as simple as those were: the importance of change over time, the significance of a development like the French Revolution, etc. But, secondly, and even more importantly, the problem of selection belonged to the teacher and he or she was professionally and even more significantly personally--morally--bound to make that selection. Obviously, the teacher was conditioned by training and discipline; but he or she was also a morally responsible agent. His or her course was a creation, a personal creative act. The decisions were his or hers, based on a reasonable and public criterion. The teacher not only has such a criterion; he or she also operates in terms of a conceptual framework, an analytical point of view--all of which should be open to public scrutiny. In this sense the act of teaching is a moral act.

The role of the teacher in shaping the course, the importance of his or her self-expression, the significance of classroom innovation and experimentation, team teaching and the like--all of these things argued for the importance of the course experience not simply for the students but also for the teacher as well. These special needs again personalized the very process of teaching. No two courses--very much like no two books on the same subject--could possibly be exactly alike.

I was impressed with the emphasis that appears over and over in the transcript on teaching and learning as moral acts and on history as a moral discipline. Indeed, one participant challenged the group: can someone really live morally in this world without having historical knowledge, that is knowing the boundaries of his own condition? Yet I wonder: what is the fundamental role of the discipline if we assume that teaching a course represents a personal moral act--a series of choices--and that taking a course represents personal development in effect selected by the student, his or her moral choice on which he or she will act.

The whole problem raises many more questions than it can answer because we simply do not know--nor have we learned a procedure for

knowing--what really goes on in a classroom, what really happens to students and teachers. We can perhaps test for knowledge--although we can learn little of its effect on students even if they know. We have many assumptions about learning (i.e., passive learning is bad and therefore lectures are inferior to discussion sections in stimulating true learning) but rarely are we able to test these prejudices. Valuable things may happen for both the teacher and student in a classroom that neither intended or was aware of.

Yet in spite of all of these doubts--and all our genuine ignorance about the process of learning or the process of teaching--I was convinced as I looked around the table at Annapolis that I would be perfectly happy with almost any course taught by any of the gifted teachers present. I came prepared to argue for a particular vision of a course; I ended convinced that it was in fact the teacher and not the course that counted in very much the way the conference discusion had suggested. And that was not a happy consequence. For there is nothing more difficult to define or discuss than good teaching (unless it is effective ways to learn) and it was always the one significant issue my teaching division colleagues absolutely refused to discuss during my brief tenure with the division. Too difficult and too politically dangerous.

The very fact that the conference spent as much time as it did on teachers and students, on their needs and their roles, provided a real surprise. I had expected the discussion would center on "kind" of courses (Western civilization versus world history; history from the bottom up versus history of the power brokers; history as inquiry versus history as story, etc.).

But the view that any course and perhaps most especially an introductory course ought to be the result of a creative act by one or more teachers seems somehow quite right. The giving of a course should very much resemble the writing of a book: there should be a thesis one attempts to develop--perhaps several--and the presentation of the evidence (all kinds of evidence) which can be used to test the thesis. There should be a selection of issues and materials on the basis of established criteria, very much as there is a selection of data in a book; there should be explanation and interpretation; a critical conceptual framework that is clearly established and revealed. A good course should be precisely like a good book--its formal order clear, its conclusions logical, its meaning outlined. As the student participates in the working out of the plan, in the testing of the thesis, in the examination of the evidence, the public debating of the issues and conclusions, he or she should be free to make it his or her own, to reshape it--the material and the evidence--in ways that makes sense to the student. Ideally, the very operation of the course will make this possible but at the very least the student

should be able to follow what is being done and should understand both the procedure and the materials.

My second personal conclusion: in order to teach the past you have to know the present. I am more and more convinced that this is the case and the Annapolis conference convinced me. Historical relativism argued that the presentation of the past always reflected the present in which it was being presented. But it is also the case that in an effort to communicate what you have learned about the past in the present you are forced to express that understanding in the language of today, addressing an audience that lives in today's world and thinks in terms of the conditions and institutions of that world. This is especially true about students. To explain to them the past in the present they must see it as distinct from yet related to that present. Historians--and especially teachers of history--therefore need to know the contemporary world if they are effectively going to present a different, a past world to a member of that contemporary world. No significant relationship between the past and present or understanding of the past in the present can be made without effective knowledge of now. Understanding the present may also help us understand not simply overselves and our students but the very pastness of the past.

Finally, all I have said about skills (history as inquiry) and subject matter (history as life experience) argues how deeply teaching is a part of the larger set of professional historical issues. As this brief report has seen, teaching raises essential historiographic issues. This should come as no surprise. Often scholarship becomes a discipline when it is forced to teach--to pass on its systemized knowledge in effective and organized ways. Teaching requires the communication of what is known and the decisions about what is known and what should be communicated are essentially crucial questions of the discipline itself and not just of teachers of the subject matter of the discipline.

I have often argued that there was a time when it seemed unlikely that anyone would insist that there was no point of view on which teachers of history could rely. First in the 1920s and 1930s there was no crisis of confidence--intellectual or moral--in the discipline. It was an age when those involved in the major historiographic debates were also involved in the key discussions of the teaching of history and the social sciences, when those who were in fact shaping the nature of professional historical production were also busy helping to shape the way history was being taught in the schools and colleges. The separation between scholarship and teaching that grew after the Second World War certainly did not help the teaching enterprise and may not, when finally assessed, have helped

scholarship either. Whatever the truth of that case, the point remains that the current crisis represented by the problem of the introductory courses is in some real sense the result of an increased separation between teachers and scholars in the general historical community. Sessions on teaching are ghettoized at annual meetings; one chooses between a scholarly session and a teaching session. Yet the fact remains that an effective course demands to be informed and shaped by effective scholarship and effective scholarship to have its impact fully felt needs to be taught.

The Annapolis conference convinced me once again that effective courses and effective scholarship must somehow be related again. At our conference our teachers all were scholars; but it was more apparent during those three days that teaching issues were historiographic; that course creation was a function of the larger discipline; that the continued separation of those related functions in part defines the crises of confidence everyone refers to.

There was an Annapolis convention many years ago that remains historically significant because it led to the calling of a greater convention, one that took up the larger question of federal union. Whatever its very limited accomplishment, I might have the temerity to hope that this Annapolis meeting will suggest to others a need for reexaming the question of another union, teaching and scholarship.