Teaching Business History to Liberal Arts and Humanities Students

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I was pleased to learn that this year's meeting would include a session on the teaching of business history, and honored when Tom Cochran asked me to participate. I have long felt that the history profession generally -- and business history no exception -- pays too little attention to the problems and potential of teaching. As a latecomer to the profession (I started teaching at age 36, after 13 years in various branches of industry), I was astonished to find myself in a craft where neither journeymen nor apprentices engage in an organized effort to improve the skill which is their raison d'etre.

That we have suffered from this neglect seems to me as obvious as the declining national enrollments in history, though certainly the trend has other and perhaps more complex roots. I am, therefore, pleased to see a new attention focused on the question of teaching. This session is, in fact, the second such I have spoken at in the last six months.

My enthusiasm for the new concern we are showing for the art of teaching does not necessarily extend to the way in which we are approaching the problem. At these sessions, a few of us talk to the rest of us about how we teach. The record suggests that this may be a case of the blind leading the blind; having created the problem, I am not sure we are the ones to solve it. This uncertainty extends to my own role in these conferences, for while there are certainly fine teachers in our ranks, it does not necessarily follow that they wind up on these panels.

Those of us who have, one way and another, achieved established positions have rarely done so by virtue of teaching. Indeed, the very reverse is too often the case; that is, we have succeeded by relegating teaching to second place -- often a distant second place -- in allocating our time and energies. As we all know, the road to tenure but rarely winds through the classroom. Publication is the expressway to success and, I suspect, becomes more so in stringent times such as we are now experiencing.

There are grounds on which publish or perish can be defended, but there is another aspect of the teaching/tenure relationship

that defies justification. For many junior faculty members it is a fact of life, albeit a rarely discussed one, that not only will teaching well not win tenure, teaching too well may put it out of reach. In such places -- and I myself survived one of them -- small enrollments are sometimes safer than large ones, for the assistant professor whose courses are too large runs the risk of being accused of low standards, intellectual flabbiness, popularization, and that besetting sin, presentism.

I suspect that those among us who know most about teaching are the members of that growing underclass of one-year appointees, adjuncts, and holders of terminal positions, which we, in our shortsightedness, have helped administrators perpetrate upon us. These folks have to be ready to teach anything, and to do so on short notice. For them, classroom technique becomes a matter of psychological if not professional survival.

My own qualifications as a panelist on teaching may be a bit thin. I myself took two business history courses, one taught by Stephen Salsbury, the other by Al Chandler. That is a small sample from which to generalize, even for a dedicated nonquantifier. I have not been in any kind of classroom as a student for nine years. Worse yet, I belong to that most cosseted, self-indulgent, untouchable of all subgroups, the tenured full professordom. My teaching experience has been limited to two similar and atypical environments, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and the State University of New York at Binghamton. Both schools draw their clientele from a narrow arc of the social and intellectual spectrum. With a relative handful of exceptions I have not taught anyone but the children of the upper middle class from the top tenth of high school averages and SAT scores.

On the other hand, I have taught business history to some nontraditional types: prisoners at the Jackson State Penitentiary in Michigan; United Auto Workers shop stewards, and a motley of types in extension classes. In traditional settings I have been successful enough to win a teaching award at Michigan and my courses were always in the top 10 percent by enrollment among the history department's course offerings. Teaching is a subject I have thought about a lot and on which I am strongly opinionated and since an opinionated mind and a platform are a combustive combination, I shall plunge ahead.

One of the wisest things I have ever heard on the subject of teaching was told to me by a graduate school colleague of mine at Johns Hopkins, Robert Shorthouse, now in the history department in the University of Victoria, Canada. Shorthouse (another opinionated man) asserted that nothing a teacher had to do -- plan courses, choose books, prepare lectures and seminars, write and grade examinations, devise a system for grading -- would ever make sense unless he or she had worked out two kinds of philosophies. The first was a philosophical justification for the existence of

whatever institution one was affiliated with. The second was a personal philosophy that related one's own efforts to those of the institution as a whole.

In my own case, I have always taught at state universities where the mission, and the philosophy underlying it, was crystal clear: the function of the state univeristy is to turn out semi-finished replacement parts for the system. As a business historian, I found it easy to fit under this umbrella, defining my own role as that of explaining how the business system works and how it came to be the way it is. For a Chandlerite like me, the present clearly functions within perimeters laid out by the past, so I have not found the task a difficult one.

In addition, I think business historians have a built-in advantage over their brethren in other fields. Our specialty is an aspect of American life in which most undergraduates have an intense interest. Rank-and-file undergraduates acknowledge a dominance of the business system in American society that historians and other social science and humanities types concede only grudgingly. Most undergraduates, moreover, are destined to spend their lives in the embrace of the business world and are anxious to learn all they can about it. This vast potential clientele includes most liberal arts and humanities majors, for the scattering of future poets, painters, and professors in their ranks is vastly outnumbered by the legions of preprofessionals and those who ultimately expect to become employees of American business in one form or other. In my experience, students from all points of this spectrum can be drawn into business history classes, and it is important for us to get them there.

There are many reasons for trying to attract students to our classes, but here I am going to pass over the idealistic -- such as the hope that we may temper their pragmatism with a bit of humanism -- and move on to the pragmatic. To an increasing degree higher education funds are being allocated on the basis of cost effectiveness, which most commonly translates into body counts. Given the demographic and economic realities of American society, I see no reason to think this trend will diminish. History departments, then, are in competition for the student markets. This often means compete or shrink and may, in extreme cases, mean compete or die. It seems better to me to face this reality and respond intelligently than to ignore the facts and twist slowly in the chilly wind of declining appropriations. The unwillingness to face such unpleasant realities on the grounds that somehow it was demeaning to do so is another aspect of the academic world that has baffled me. I spent eight years in a history department whose elders hunkered down and waited for the glorious 1960s to return, defeating all plans to combat declining enrollments on the grounds that they involved compromising intellectual integrity, whatever that was. I thought this struthian postion was nonsense, and

think so still. The 1960s are gone forever, as historians of all people should realize; moreover, I see no reason why we cannot package our product more attractively without raping its quality. My current department has reversed the national decline in history enrollments without noticeable sacrifice of quality.

I see myself in a dual role, as merchandiser as well as teacher, with a responsibility to attract students in addition to teaching them. This is a burden that I feel we must accept, particularly all of us in American history, whose enrollments contribute massively to respectable department average figures, thus creating a lee in which colleagues with less marketable specialties can anchor snugly. I realize that attracting students is a burden many academics resent and few have had preparation for, either pyschologically, or in terms of training, but I am not one of them. This brands me as a "popularizer," so I may as well embrace that label openly, and admit to being a "presentist" and a "crowd-pleaser" as well. I do not think this means doing things worse, but it does involve doing them somewhat differently from the preceding generation of teachers, who often benefited from structured curricula, required attendance, and restricted drop-add privileges. Few of us today enjoy these advantages; students can and do vote with their feet. Dealing with such a fickle clientele requires careful consideration of both our students and the materials we put before them. Nowhere is this more true than when teaching business history to liberal arts and humanities students, for the subject matter is new, if not downright alien, to them, and presents them with the necessity to learn not only a new set of facts, but a novel terminology as well. It is a fact of life, as I have discovered in nine years of teaching business history, that in these days of few prerequisites, one can assume very little knowledge of American history among one's students; moreover, despite having lived their lives, in effect, as wards of the business system, they know next to nothing about it.

These last remarks should not, however, be interpreted as a negative evaluation of today's students. In fact, the tendency to denigrate them is one I do not admire and expresses a feeling I do not share. I think today's students are the best people we have ever had come before us. I am continually reimpressed with their energies, their decency, their tolerance, and their intelligence. It is true that their preparation sometimes leaves something to be desired, but even this criticism is often overdone, or reflects not upon them, but on the system that produced them, a system that we, not they, created.

It is false to say, as a general proposition, that current students can neither read nor write. It is more often true that they do not, or will not, but I think this fact relates to the quantity they are asked to absorb and the greater freedom of choice they enjoy. Students at third-rate schools are asked to

read more than students at first-rate schools were a generation ago. In the absence of structural constraints forcing them to wade through massive assignments, they become wise as wolves at sniffing out the necessary minimum and dealing with it. I doubt that their predecessors were more assiduous. As far as writing goes, the best of them write so well that I am dazzled every semester, while the worst are no worse than ever. I am completely unimpressed by what the standardized testing industry has to say on this subject. I despise all such tests (though I myself benefited from them), mistrust the results, and detest the industry that produces them. If we as a profession would quit serving as a cut-rate brain trust and docile market for this parasitic nonsense, the testing business would soon collapse, to the betterment of us all. Finally, I am wholly indifferent to my students' mathematical abilities. Their inadequacies are a comment on the "new math," not on their own abilities. Besides, pocket calculators are cheap and I suspect that most people, like me, do serious multiplication and division once a year, at tax time.

I also doubt that our students have sustained much damage from television. True, they watch too much of it and true, most of what they watch is awful, but I remember a childhood spent reading garbage books and crouching in theaters on Saturday afternoon, watching serials and features that were pure trash, and violent to boot. The principal effect of television has been to heighten the students' perceptivity to visual and aural nuances. This means that students reflexively look upon their teachers as performers and their classrooms as the stage, television, or movie screen on which we perform. Consequently, if the performance is poor, students may not see past the surface to the substance, for their critical faculties are acute and they are accustomed to tuning out things that do not entertain them. In some ways this is unfair to instructors because few of us have much native ability as thespians and fewer still any training along those lines. It is not our fault, moreover, that our audience has paid a stiff price for admission; as actors we are grossly underpaid as well as undertrained.

On the other hand, a television-trained audience has its advantages. It is no bad thing, for example, to lecture to people more inclined to watch and listen than to bow their heads and scribble. In addition, their perceptions of visual subtleties can be put to good use. A lecturer can convey a great deal with a wink, a raised eyebrow, or various statements in body language. I also think, although I would not want to push this too far, that students have absorbed a sense of dramatic timing associated with one-hour television formats. This too can be adapted to the classroom situation by structuring lectures so that they first involve the audience, then build to a climax, pausing perhaps for commercials at appropriate intervals. I have often considered

(though never actually tried) the idea of stopping after the first 18 minutes and saying, "And now a word for European history," thereupon bringing on a colleaque to give a two-minute spiel in favor of his course. I think it might make my lecture more interesting and sell his course as well.

Having argued that we have an educable and potentially interested clientele, I would like to move on and discuss the question of materials. Here again, I am in an area where I am not sure I am the best person to deal with the subject at hand because the only novelty about my materials is that I do not use anything novel. I do not use any visual aid equipment of any kind, with the exception of an occasional map. Transparencies and overhead projectors seem abominable to me. I do not use movies for two reasons: first, when I was in the army and came into a classroom, the sight of a projector signaled an hour I could devote to catching up on my sleep, and I have observed that many students feel the same way; second, I would not be willing to show something like "Grapes of Wrath" because Henry Fonda is too tough an act for me to follow. Whatever goes on in my classroom goes on live and in color, and I beg the students' indulgence by telling them that I have more lines than Richard Burton in *Hamlet* and I do not have Shakespeare to write my material for me.

The lectures themselves I try to structure to discuss the development of permanent elements of the American business system. I do not spend much time on passing historical phenomena, however interesting some of these may be to me personally. I elaborate, for example, on the ways in which the all-purpose merchants' functions spun off under the impact of rising volume into specialized houses. I do not talk much about how the all-purpose merchant functioned during his heyday. I describe in detail the problems that led Cyrus McCormick to develop his distribution system. I say very little about the stages of technological development of the reaper. If all this sounds like "presentism," well, that is because it is just what it is. I do not mind being called a presentist, any more that I object to being a "popularizer" (defined, as far as I can tell, as anyone whose books sell more than 1,500 copies). Today's students respond to history in rough proportion to the extent that they can see its applicability to the present, and I see no reason not to turn this attitude to advantage.

In choosing books, I have several guidelines I work within. I always assign a textbook -- most students are lost without one. My favorite is W. Elliot Brownlee's *Dynamics of Ascent* if I am limiting the course to the American experience. If I am striving for a broader context, I use Robert Heibroner's *Making of Economic Society*, a masterpeice of simplicity and lucidity. In selecting other readings, I restrict myself on principle to books available in paperback, and to books that assume no prior knowledge on the

part of the reader. In addition, I have a private motto, "Better a bad book they'll read than a good one they won't." Few students, for example, will wade through Frederick W. Taylor, but most enjoy Frank Gilbreath's *Cheaper By the Dozen*, which expounds the same thought processes at work. Even among books of quality, I strive for simplest, briefest presentations -- Glenn Porter's *Rise of Big Business* intrigues students who recoil in fright from Al Chandler's *Strategy and Structure*. I also find that students like biography and learn well from it, which partly explains why I myself have written two of them in recent years. All in all, my advice is to spare the students the books we write for each other. Distill their arguments and use the essence for lecture material. Bypass historiographical debates as well: there is plenty of time for that in graduate school. Finally, my own experience, which I hope may be contradicted by others, is that students will not read reserve materials unless driven to it in self-defense by the threat of examination. Consequently, I rarely put anything on reserve.

There are as many ways to test students' knowledge as there are hairs on a head, and I do not like any of them much. I have found two paper topics that often generate interesting work for the students to do and for me to read. I ask them either to write a family history that relates their own families' experiences to the economic development of the country, or to interview some member of the business community, searching for reflections of the past in contemporary opinions. The first produced especially interesting results, including letters from several parents saying, "Thanks to the paper you assigned, my kid asked me the first intelligent questions since he/she became a teenager." I also recommend a trip to an industrial plant if any are available nearby. At Michigan I had the benefit of the nearby River Rouge tours, which was ideal, but almost any modern factory will serve.

Obviously my own mixture of ingredients for a successful business history course will not meet the needs of everyone, everywhere. I do think, however, that certain principles are universal. Students should be met with respect for their good qualities as human beings, not deprecated for their academic shortcomings. Materials should be intelligible and, above all, presented with enthusiasm. It is unfair to expect students to get excited about history if we ourselves seem bored with it.

We have an obligation to steer students toward a level of knowledge that will help them become functioning members of the community, as well as more capable citizens. It is to this end we should bend our efforts and not waste time deploring their intellectual wretchedness. After all, each generation tends to assault the declining standards of its successors. Arnold and Coleridge would doubtless think us barbarians. Students are anxious to come into the fold, and it is our job to go out and get them. Any faculty member who cannot find students challenging

and the job exciting should look for a new line of work. There are replacments in plenty, ready and waiting.