Reflections of a Journeyman Historian

Peter Vinten-Johansen

Reading Bill McDiarmid’s study, Challenging Prospective Teachers’ Understandings of History: An Examination of a Historiography Seminar yields mixed feelings for me.¹ I am flattered by Bill’s interest in evaluating the teaching rationale and methodology I employ in an introductory historiography workshop—History 201—at Michigan State University. I am also delighted by his interest in finding out what the undergraduates learned, how they learned it, and whether this course experience has any staying power for them.

Nonetheless, Bill’s construction strikes me as much too tidy. It does not capture the anxious uncertainty I felt at the beginning of this (and every) course, my persistent reliance on intuition and tacit knowledge long after I sorted out the initial teaching encounters, and the frequent mid-course corrections in strategy required in a course I had already taught several times. These were my thoughts after my first reading of Bill’s essay, as I pondered how to convey my reservations in a companion essay he wanted me to write.

So I did what I often do when my mind is muddled—went for a run. I needed a long one into the south-campus stretch of research animal barns and pastures. Unfortunately, middle-age knees now limit me to shorter distances in town. But maybe I’ve learned to do more with less, for I returned home with a clearer head and a resolution to my dilemma: It is unreasonable to expect Bill McDiarmid to suggest the personal and professional context that explains what I do in History 201 and why I do it. Only I can deconstruct an outsider’s picture of my teaching by reconstructing how I believe it evolved. I’ll begin with the run that eventuated in this resolution.

Running with someone else provides me comradeship; penning alone is the closest I will probably ever come to meditation and psychoanalytical free-association. I have done more of the latter in the last few years than I care to because one running-partner moved away and the other (poor chap) episodically goes lame.² But on that January morning when my mind was troubled, it was just as well that there was no one to hook up with at the corner of Hagadorn and Melrose. It was relatively balmy for winter in mid-Michigan, so I was unencumbered by windbreakers and scarf. I used to reach a comfortable pace within the first mile; now it takes longer, but eventually my breathing leveled off and my mind went blank for an indeterminate period. Then came a flashback:

Two stacks of essays on my desk, about thirty in each. I had promised myself a treat when I reached the half-way point in grading the first set of take-home essays, but my stomach was too queasy to digest the bialy I had saved for a snack. Instead, I was fidgeting in my chair, wondering why I felt part of a colossal fraud.

This image triggered a mental reconstruction of a critical pedagogical episode during my first experience as a graduate assistant (for Franklin L. Baumer at Yale University in 1973).³ The students’ assignment was to summarize the argument in one of the books, and so far I had made the marginal notations and concluding comments as Baumer had instructed: “Read the books yourself, then mark the papers in terms of how closely they approximate the author’s argument.” It had seemed straightforward enough when Baumer and I discussed a few in his office before I carted off the rest: Evaluate the essays like the mid-term examinations, where the content of Baumer’s lectures provided the standard against which I had measured the students’
synopses. I had no difficulty grading these 
in-class examinations, but the essays were 
clearly troublesome, even though I couldn’t 
put my reservations into words. I began pag-
ing through Robert Goldwater’s Primitivism 
in Modern Art, the selection among four books 
that most students had chosen to read. It was 
idle paging—looking at illustrations, reading 
captions, skimming my underlinings, and 
glancing at my marginal notations.

There came an epiphanous flash. Although 
my mind’s muddle absorbed most of it, I had 
something to work with. On a piece of scratch 
paper, I wrote “INTERPRETATION.” When 
nothing else came to mind, I doodled around 
the one I did have until phrases spun tangen-
tially from the center of the page. Slowly, I 
transformed (by a process analogous to what 
is now termed clustering) an insight into a 
notion: If the historical profession considers it 
legitimate for Goldwater to interpret, rather 
than summarize, modern art; since my mar-
ginal dialogues with Goldwater’s argument 
reflected a similar orientation in my own pro-
fessional training; weren’t we, therefore, mis-
leading undergraduates about history when 
we expected them to regurgitate the assigned 
reading? I sensed that I would feel more com-
fortable grading their essays as interpretative 
exercises. But did the unmarked stack lend 
itself to such an evaluative standard?

I skimmed a couple of essays, decided that 
Baumer’s insistence on an overview sentence 
in the opening paragraph was adaptable to my 
notion, then marked a half-dozen in terms of 
how effectively the students supported their 
own views rather than approximated mine. 
After class the next morning, I asked Baumer 
to read a sample from each stack.

“Why? Is there a problem with plagiarism?” 
he replied.

“No. I’m the problem. I marked one essay 
according to the guidelines we discussed, the 
other is an experiment. I’d prefer to grade 
them all by the latter method, but it’s your 
course.”

“Can you meet me at my office in thirty min-
utes?” asked Baumer.

“Sure.”

And we walked down the stairs, chatting about 
the lecture, before parting in the street. I ran a 
few errands to kill the time Baumer needed to 
reflect on the marked essays, then knocked on 
his office door. Nearly twenty years after the 
event, I still remember how I felt before that 
meeting—totally at ease. Although I had no 
idea about the outcome, two years of conge-
nial graduate study under Baumer’s direction 
made me confident that he would make a 
decision that was fair to the students and give 
me a full explanation of his reasoning. He 
opened the door and invited me to sit in an 
armchair next to his own.

He said nothing for a few moments, looking 
instead at two essays. I had the impression that 
this was painful to him, but I was unclear why 
until he began to speak: “I’m embarrassed that 
in more than a quarter century of teaching, it 
has never troubled me to expect students in the 
survey only to summarize content. If you have 
time to mark all the essays according to the 
experimental criteria and provide me with the 
grading scale you used, I’ll read them all and 
take responsibility for handling any student 
misgivings. We can also set aside some class 
time to explain the criteria, even have this 
essay serve as a rehearsal for the remaining 
two essays for students who show improve-
ment. It means a lot more work for you than I 
had anticipated, however; are you certain you 
have time for it?”

“Not really,” I replied; “but if I don’t do it 
now, I probably never will.”
So began two decades of tinkering with structured essay assignments that promote interpretation of historical evidence. The ideal product is idiosyncratic rather than original—an analytical essay in three parts. The opening paragraph (thesis paragraph) begins with relevant historical context, defines terms, introduces the work to be discussed, and concludes with a thesis statement. The thesis statement should contain the student’s interpretation of the author’s major argument and an explanation of the meaning or significance of that argument in terms of the historical context established earlier in the paragraph. Substantiation of the thesis constitutes the middle part of the essay. Substantiating paragraphs should have topic sentences that walk the reader through a systematic and comprehensive proof of the thesis. Within these paragraphs, the student is expected to marshal the evidence (documented quotations and paraphrases) that bear on the topic and show explicitly how the evidence is relevant by explaining it in terms of the historical context. That is, I emphasize that quotations do not explain themselves; students are expected to analyze the evidence by connecting it to their own thesis statements. The final part of the essay is the concluding paragraph, in which the student restates the thesis in light of the evidence analyzed in the substantiation. I now expect students in all my classes to follow this analytical model, although I only teach writing—comprehensively—in a modern European intellectual history sequence.5

The fundamental premise of this writing model is that it facilitates intellectual engagement between teacher and students. Regular and systematic interactions, geared to improving each student’s capacity for interpreting historical evidence, can significantly advance the development of analytical skills among those who make conscientious efforts at each stage. My initial successes (in the mid-1970s) caused me problems for a number of years thereafter, however, because I became inflexibly attached to the first set of schematic exercises that brought results and to the developmental pace of a particular student cohort. I experienced a couple of pedagogically enervating years—defending my method against bewildered and (eventually) recalcitrant undergraduates, grousing about what I perceived to be inadequate preparation in high school and “freshman composition” courses, and escaping into my own research and writing. Although my first sabbatical year (1983-84) was devoted to scholarly projects, it also provided sufficient distance from my teaching for me to be able to reflect on what I had done to date.

I resumed teaching duties in the Fall term of 1984 with several modifications that, periodically refined since then, have prevented repetition of the sinkholes I created earlier. First, writing exercises have become alterable means, parts of a process toward a goal, not ends in themselves. While I continue to be explicit about my goal for every student—writing an essay that contains clear interpretation and analysis of historical evidence—the process for achieving that goal involves adjustments reflecting both collective and individual needs.

Second, I realized that I needed something that would help me establish a rough writing-baseline for each class. An ungraded diagnostic essay, written in response to an introductory outline of my expectations, now permits me to situate a new group of students within a workable range on the continuum and then revise my stable of writing exercises accordingly. For me, there are compelling psychological advantages in such a strategy. By beginning my interactions with where students “are at” in terms of my expectations, I can focus the time and energy I have available for teaching entirely on learning: advancing the students’ intellectual development, as measured by enhanced facility in discrimination, analysis, and synthesis. My standard for success in learning became relative progress for
individual students on the writing continuum, eventuating in the model essay described above and evaluated according to criteria reflecting progress toward that model. It is also easier for me now to focus on the task at hand, rather than dissipate energy by carping about deficiencies in students' academic backgrounds; the problems that exist become my problems, whether I tackle them myself or send students to someone else who has expertise I lack. Using relativistic standards on a common continuum creates a situation in which students from unusually privileged academic backgrounds remain challenged and involved because they are "competing" against their own baselines rather than their classmates.

My third modification was to make the classroom environment more conducive for students to practice the analytical skills that I expected in their essays. Why was I dismayed by the summation that dominated student essays when I structured the majority of class time around information-dispensing lectures? That is, I was using the classroom simply to lecture about background and complementary subjects to the assigned readings, expecting the students to take notes and (on their own) to extract the information needed for context in their analytical essays. The choice was straightforward: either change my essay expectations or change the structure of the class experience. I chose the latter and launched the first of an unending series of experiments whose objective is to use the classroom as a collective rehearsal space for the modes of reasoning that I expect the students to adopt when composing their essays.

At first, I confined such experimentation to seminars, the third course in the intellectual history sequence, and team-teaching opportunities. Testing new exercises and directed discussion formats on a limited numbers of students, many of whom I already knew quite well, permitted me to sort most successes and failures into two categories—those entirely idiosyncratic to a particular group or class, and those that might have some staying power. The blend of directed discussion, regular groups, and shuffle groups (a term I prefer to "jigsawing") employed in my workshop approach to History 201 reflects several years of such experimentation.7

The unexpected outcome (for me at least) of slowly making classroom activities more interactive was a progressive growth of student self-esteem and respect for each other. In my early years of teaching, most classes eventually developed an informal hierarchy reflecting student achievements on the essays; although I steadfastly refused to post grades, student scuttlebutt usually undermined my own efforts to de-emphasize grades in a situation where improvement was rewarded. But when I augmented class discussion, particularly via the small-group format where the objective was to formulate a response for later presentation, most students came to value perspectives offered by classmates for whom analytical writing was often not a strong suit. Students who had faded into the wallpaper during general discussions could gain intellectual confidence from structured group interactions. Meanwhile, most of the talking heads learned how to listen to their classmates. I'm not oblivious to the fact that some students insist until the last hour that group-work is childishly annoying and a waste of time compared to what I could provide in lectures. When the student grapevine works well, however, self-selection keeps me from confronting such unproductive criticism; after all, there are plenty of lecture classes among which to choose.

To faculty who argue that our bailiwick has no room for parcels like self-esteem and respect, I respond that there is considerable intellectual development connected to the successful interactive situations I use. For example, general discussions are often more focused when preceded by small-group exercises. Moreover, students who have come to know and trust each other gain self-critical skills more quickly from peer review of thesis paragraphs than
from individual meetings with me (where authority issues are more complicated). I would also add another advantage of interactive learning, this time advantageous to the teacher. At the end of every course, I realize that close and regular engagement with the students has generated new pedagogical ideas—how I might teach the material more effectively, with respect to the standard described earlier. And as I become increasingly comfortable with the unpredictability in open-ended (albeit structured) classroom experiences, I am increasingly receptive to the original, sometimes illuminating, insights into the material itself generated by the students. At some point not too long ago, the advantages that can accrue from interactive learning finally outweighed worries about losing control of the class. Now I'm hooked for good.

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My approach to teaching is obviously time-consuming. Although experience has already yielded some efficient short-cuts, especially in evaluating writing exercises, colleagues tell me that teaching takes more of my time, on average, than it does for them. The explanation is rarely variation in commitment to teaching; we have some shirkers in the Department of History at Michigan State University, but very few in a department that now exceeds fifty faculty members. When I speak with colleagues from other research universities, they are frequently surprised to hear my viewpoint that the preponderant majority in my department are conscientious teachers: most incorporate new material into their lectures and readings; most are accessible to the students; very few utilize any standardized testing instruments at all; and canceled classes are a rarity.

A more likely explanation for differential time requirements associated with teaching is the perceptual gulf dividing conscientious teachers into two varieties. On one side of the gulf is a variety who view their roles primarily as dispensing information and evaluating its reception by their students. On the other side is another variety, composed of those who are primarily concerned with how students process information and reason about it. Members of the latter variety find it more difficult to routinize their teaching tasks than the former; hence, I believe, the difference in time spent on preparation and evaluation between the two varieties.8

More than a decade ago, a few of us in the department attempted to formulate distinguishing personality and background characteristics for the two varieties. We first tested the notion that colleagues who had been politically active in the 1960s and early 1970s were processing teachers. We found many exceptions. However, a generational factor did seem to recur—those who reached adulthood in the late 1960s and early 1970s frequently belonged to the processing variety. I fit that profile. But no one, least of all myself, could explain why I was so zealous about teaching innovations, occasionally counter-productively so. When I thought about it all, I ascribed it to a combination of generational rebellion and cultural dissonance (from incomplete naturalization—I was born a Dane). If I may alter the bias somewhat on a bowl by Bernard Shaw, I had drifted to an impression rather than steered to a conclusion.9

Someone else helped me understand the source of my zeal. In the mid-1980s, the department chairperson, Gordon Stewart, suggested that we meet informally to discuss my long-range teaching schedule, as well as an essay containing an autobiographical component I had recently written for an anthology. Our conversation meandered to departmental attitudes about teaching and scholarship, including the general perception that I was a mutation from the professional stock. I blurted out my half-baked notion about cultural dissonance, with the modification that being a Young Dane must have something to do with prioritizing the teaching of students how to analyze
higher than more traditional pathways to professional accomplishment such as published scholarship. Gordon gave me a puzzled look, which in itself did not surprise me since we often come down on different sides of issues (although we share common goals in our teaching). Then, with sincere affection, he said something like the following lines: “Peter, I’m about your age and a foreigner, too; I belong to the same teaching variety as you do, but I hold traditional attitudes about the historical profession. What makes you a mutant is Vietnam.”

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Two flashbacks from 1966 about how Vietnam shaped my attitudes about the primacy of teaching in my role as an historian:

He really seemed an old man, ready for the retirement he had talked about while interviewing me. I knew the job was mine when he nodded at my answers to several factual questions about the American Civil War. We had never gotten to American Government; fishing in Narragansett Bay preoccupied him too much. Then he handed me a textbook. “Teach this to all five classes. I’ll pop in occasionally to check up on you.”

And another:

My first visit to the principal’s office since the hiring interview. He had attended one class, opening the door quietly about twenty minutes into the period, sitting for fifteen minutes in the back of the room, then leaving just as unobtrusively. That was this morning. After school, there had been a note in my box to see him. “You have a hearing problem,” were his first words. Not to my knowledge; at least nothing problematical showed up during my enlistment physical. “But you must. You cupped your hand behind your right ear whenever a student was talking.” That was a signal for them to project their voices so everyone in the class could hear. “You must be hyperkinetic, too. You never stood still behind your desk.” Another signal. I want the students to converse with each other, not just respond to me. “Converse? Those pupils aren’t on the scholarly track. Most already spend half the schoolday in costume-jewelry factories.”

The unasked question in the second meeting with the principal was why the pupils had not been discussing the textbook. Lucky for me, or a merely bewildering session could have taken a catastrophic turn. I had begun as the principal had directed, assigning so many pages and so many questions from the end of each chapter for homework every night, then ploughing that sterile ground again in class. After all, I had no teaching experience and no education courses in my undergraduate background. I was hired to teach twelfth grade civics only because the school district still had twenty vacancies two days before the opening of classes; a body was a body, even if it might be dragged away to Officer Candidate School (OCS) before the year was over. The social studies and history teachers in the adjoining classrooms were helpful chaps, one of them even lending me his lesson plans from the last time he had taught civics. So I followed instructions for three weeks until I was more bored than the pupils—who had learned the useful art of resignation long before my arrival.

But they could also erupt into an unruly mass that I had nary a clue how to handle until, in desperation, I asked my third period class (the “Hands” in the factories) how they felt about being pupils in this school. At first, they verbally fell all over each other. I picked up the textbook and threatened them: “It’s back to this if you can’t shut up when someone else is talking—and listen while you wait your turn.”

At the end of the period, I found myself summarizing what they had said and promising to continue the discussion the next day. By the end of the week, we had struck a bargain for the future—one day on the text, four days on other stuff, if they kept up with daily assignments. To my horror, they kept their end of the bargain and I was scrambling for new things to do in class. The principal observed that class
Then the accusation hit me square in the chest: “You play favorites.”

I had no idea what she meant. If I did anything well in my brief (and looking very brief, indeed) teaching career, it was to spread the questioning among all the pupils.

She followed up without any encouragement from me. “Third period doesn’t just go over this crap!” I made a reflex duck as she brandished the textbook. “They talk about things that matter.” Support for her bravery crescendoed to a din of noise. “Time out!” I yelled, wishing I could whistle between my teeth like my father, rather than the feeble “tweet” I occasionally muster between two fingers. Why they quieted down is still a mystery to me; obviously, I was not a figure who commanded authority by mere presence and tone. “Julie has something to say.”

Luckily for me, Julie didn’t clam up but became the fifth period spokesperson for equitable treatment in my classes. I listened to her and several supporters before asking, “But what about your part of the bargain?” Sudden silence, shifting eyes, then a few hushed “What does he mean?” before someone asked me directly.

I explained the agreement I had with the pupils in third period that underlay the new classroom format. After a bit more discussion of the mutual obligations involved, the class voted overwhelmingly—only a few abstained—to join the “Hands” in the interactive mode (as I learned much later it was called). With new respect for the student grapevine, I immediately extended the same offer to the sixth period class that afternoon, the first and fourth the following day. All accepted, although the sixth period (the college-bounders) was the most suspicious and resistant of all; perhaps they feared an inadequately primed pump when it was time to sit for the SAT.

I was in unchartered waters for me, and I thrashed about and made little headway until I developed some new strokes. The first was to cover a textbook chapter on Mondays; this
schedule made Sunday homework a drudge, but the cod liver oil prescribed by the district was down the hatch at the beginning of the week. The second stroke I developed was to deliver a mini-lecture on new material each Tuesday, immediately followed by a question-and-answer session focused on the content of what I had presented. The period ended with a handout (made from a smudged ditto master), listing questions we would discuss the next day; sometimes I assigned primary responsibilities for questions by rows. The rest of the week was spent on forays away from, and back to, these study questions, usually in general class discussion, but sometimes in groups (again by rows). Everyone soon tired of rehashing my mini-lectures for three days, but the only material available in sufficient quantity for 148 pupils were textbooks. The head of the social studies section permitted me to requisition a variety of history texts, which I spread among the five classes. I raided both the Providence public and Brown University libraries for additional sources, and I spent many an afternoon in the school library, setting up group research activities for subsequent days.

It was my good fortune that the school librarian assisted and encouraged me in every manner possible, including accepting supervisory responsibility for groups of students who periodically appeared at her door with hall passes and research assignments, but without me. The first time I sent a group to the library "on its own," a teacher down the hall lassoed and tossed them back to me with the comment, "Group hall passes aren't permitted at Hope High." So I wrote out six individual passes and sent them off again. This time, however, I decided to wait in the doorway until they passed the dragon's den. Even though my pupils were quiet lambs on that occasion, my colleague was vigilant and pounced upon them again. They shielded themselves behind six yellow passes, paused momentarily, then dashed to the stairwell as the dragon looked at me instead of his prey. I was persona non grata in the teacher's lounge from that day forth.

But I'll give my colleagues this accolade—they unfailingly kept their disgruntlement with me and puzzlement about my methods to themselves. "He's a weird one," I once overheard a neighboring teacher say to a first-floor colleague whom I rarely encountered; but to my knowledge, no one ever gossiped to the principal or criticized me in front of the pupils.

The pupils—not me—called into question their assumptions about historical objectivity when several groups discovered conflicting explanations of the same event. That is, I don't recollect any conscious decision on my part to distribute various United States history textbooks to each group or to structure comparative readings. Within the same week, however, at least one group in each period presented evidence to their classmates that historians can differ in their narratives of the past. "Who's right," someone invariably asked. "Maybe they all are; maybe none of them are," I eventually replied, but all stuck to their doubts until we discussed a recent fight between two boys. "Is there a true account of the fight?" I asked. Half a dozen were articulated within five minutes, to which I added other possibilities. Although most of the pupils remained unconvinced that any story but the one they believed was the true one, the seed of historical relativism was planted—not by me, but by each other. So was a germinating reservation about authoritative statements. In their minds, both books and teachers were authorities; those who remained unconvinced by my statement that multiple explanations existed for every event were nonetheless troubled by the incontrovertible disagreement that their classmates had discovered in the textbooks. It was clearly a disconcerting experience for most of them; but it was also a challenge, and they rose to it with increasing enthusiasm. They wanted to think for themselves. They were ready to talk about Vietnam.

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Until then, I had studiously avoided the topic in class because I did not want to impose on the pupils my deepening reservations about United States military involvement in Southeast Asia. I was a fledgling arm-chair critic, not a rabble-rouser. It had never occurred to me that I would lose my student deferment when I withdrew from medical school in December 1965. I had applied to graduate schools in history for the coming academic year with unquestioned certitude that I would matriculate somewhere. Then came a notice to report for a physical examination. No problem, according to fellow students at Duke; the armed forces just want to know if any of us “college boys” are fit for reserve duty. Several weeks after my physical examination (a euphemism for legalized bodily assault), I spun the combination on my postal box and pulled out an envelope from my local draft board containing my reclassification from student status to 1A. No problem, said my buddies again; just send them a copy of your acceptance letter to graduate school.

I decided to bring it in person and found someone heading to the District of Columbia area with whom to share a ride. I had telephoned ahead for an appointment—an unnecessary precaution since there was no queue when I arrived. I thought a bit of small-talk might soften the steel-cold, bureaucratic demeanor of the gargantuan across the desk from me, but she impatiently snapped her fingers and pointed at the folder in my hands.

She glanced at my letter of acceptance from Yale University Graduate School, gave me back the folder, and said, “No graduate deferments, except in chemistry and physics; you should have stayed in med school.”

“But, but...” I stuttered before regaining some composure: “I have friends who have deferments to other graduate programs.”

“Not from this draft board, sonny. Over 90 percent of boys graduating from high school in this district attend college, and I have a quota to fill. You’ve had your deferment. Expect to be called up any time. I’m busy! Goodbye.”

The first draft notice reached me a month or so thereafter, but I ignored it. I was procrastinating, not rebelling; I had applied to the Naval Officer Candidate School program a few days after seeing the draft board official, and I was hoping for an alternative to the infantry. If external forces had taken charge of my destiny, why not saunter into a wardroom rather than dive for a foxhole? Fear had become a decisive factor as well; my reading of The New York Times suggested that I was more likely to survive at sea than in the jungle. After tossing away two more draft notices and becoming increasingly anxious about military police knocking on my dormitory door, I was nearly ecstatic upon my acceptance to Naval OCS.

Happiness, too, is relative. At the end of the summer, I moved to Rhode Island to await final orders to report for training in Newport. There were jobs in Providence, which was why I was teaching at Hope High School in the autumn of 1966—and reading about the enterprise that had disrupted my personal plans. Bernard Fall’s books galvanized my inchoate skepticism about the official explanation—that Vietnam must not become another victim of international communist aggression—into conscious, personal opposition. But my decision to use Fall as a challenge to classroom consensus on the veracity of the official version was not a conscious attempt at ideological conversion of high school seniors.

On the contrary, the idea came to me while mulling over a mundane, pedagogical problem: How could I animate (and perhaps, justify) the weekly current events sessions? What did the pupils learn from hassles with a parent over cutting articles from the morning newspaper (in the pre-pop tart era, when breakfast was more likely to be a familial activity than
today)? Those who were successful in this contest usually bored the rest of us with summaries of stories about which no one gave a tinker’s damn. My inclination was to punt, but then I would violate district social studies policies; my tenure already felt too dicey to risk another confrontation. I asked a colleague if we were permitted to spread current events through the week, or whether I had to devote a discrete period to it each week.

“Nobody cares, as long as you do it—but you must be crazy to consider more than a day a week,” was his response. The sub-text to my question was no more than a hunch. Since the pupils had found it challenging and enjoyable to compare textbook accounts of historical events, parallel exercises about contemporary events might elicit similar reactions.

I asked each pupil to choose one newspaper or magazine article about Vietnam and underline any phrases that dealt with the causes of the fighting; meanwhile, I boned up on Fall. At the designated session, we compiled a list of causal factors on the chalkboard. There was little variation among them. I read a few passages from the books I had brought with me, and wrote contradictory factors beside those extracted by the pupils. “Who is this guy, anyway?” someone invariably asked in each class. “What does he know about Vietnam or why the United States must stop communist aggression over there before it spreads to over here?” Were they certain it was that simple, I asked. Why were the Vietnamese divided into northern and southern countries? Why did the North Vietnamese leadership distrust the Chinese as much as the West? Nobody had answers but many were intrigued. So I promised to dig up material about imperialism and the French-Indochina War, whereas they agreed to look through a range of newspapers and magazines for stories about Vietnam for our next current events discussion. Thereafter, enough pupils in each class who made excursions to Brown University and the Providence public library reported to the rest on the varied accounts they had found to set in motion a host of spin-off topics that paralleled the analysis of contradictory accounts we had underway in the civics/history portion.

My announcement that I would not be returning as their teacher in January because of military service actually heightened my pupils’ interest in the topic. For many of them, my departure personalized the impact of war. They asked questions about the draft, and it dawned on some of the boys that they might soon pass through the same pre-military rites of passage as I had. None of them, however, articulated the fear that I began to feel that December of 1966—not any longer about my own safety, but about what would surely happen to some of these boys whom I had grown to know and care for after several months together in the crucible of learning. Our collective study of Vietnam had transformed my own fear of death at an overseas posting into anger at United States policy and its lethal consequences for everyone concerned (although I was still a half-step from the resolute refusal to participate directly that complicated my months at O.C.S. and Supply Corps School). The mission that obsessed me during the last few weeks I taught at Hope High was to find ways to prevent my pupils from being duped about the glory and purpose of war. I pleaded with them to reflect on what participants in past wars have written, rather than listen to authority figures who sacrifice youth for purposes that all too often turn out to have been vainglorious, self-interested, and pointless. We compared Rupert Brooke’s ardent poems on the eve of World War I with Wilfred Owen’s grim portrayals of life and death in trench warfare. And then I was off—not to “the War College,” as a student reporter wrote in the school newspaper, but to mind-numbing regimentation and regurgitative schooling that some military positivist must have modeled on the utilitarian vision of Gradgrind and M’Choakumchild.11
Three years later—one year in fact-grinding mills, nearly two as a "Pork Chop" on a reserve destroyer—I felt very much an outsider when I began graduate studies at Yale in January 1970. I was older than other first-year students, but on the other hand, I could never really close the gap between me and those who matriculated in my original class of 1966. Their concerns (finishing dissertations and finding jobs) were a distant future to me, and my experiences (truncated medical school and military service) made me an oddity to them.

One afternoon in the spring of 1970, I met some of the older regulars for vending-machine coffee in the Law School lounge (Bill Clinton could have been at a neighboring table, for all I know). Since we frequently discussed each other's work, I read aloud a short passage from a memoir by a World War II participant. Then I started to talk about the parallel with my own feelings as a veteran and the desperation I had felt earlier to teach critical evaluation skills to my civics pupils. But I stopped when I realized that the other history graduate students did not comprehend the personal dimension of my story. They were not rude, and I was not resentful. Unless I intellectualized the topic, they could not relate to it. Tacitly, I have known since that day that Vietnam meant something different to academics whose lives were directly interrupted by it than to those who were more fortunate. But it took my departmental chairperson's suggestion, fifteen years later, to yank me into the realm of understanding that Vietnam was the primary matrix of my teaching philosophy.  

Jack Hexter my first semester at Yale. At the first meeting, Hexter passed out the packet of primary-source documents on the Goodwin-Fortescue controversy that I now use in my own history workshop. Hexter's instructions were laconic: "Interpret the events herein," tapping his fingers against a packet. I was still riveted on his long fingernails when someone asked what this assignment had to do with historiography. Mistake, I thought to myself. After dismissing the Herodotus-to-Hexter, "Varieties of History" approach to historiography (essentially, that mere exposure to ostensibly great historians does not teach an aspirant how to become one), Hexter dismissed us with a marching order to "do some history ourselves."

Did I listen to my inner voice or recall my own instructions to Hope High students about the relativity of history? Of course not. I was now in graduate school, and I was going to blow Hexter away with the range of my erudition on Elizabethan parliaments. Was I dissuaded by the fact that I knew virtually nothing about Tudor-Stuart history? Of course not. I had a couple of weeks to work up the context necessary to explain the minor controversy focused on in the packet. When I finished my first essay in graduate school, over half its fifteen pages was a review of the literature that evinced in a speculative explanation of the actual controversy. I handed in the essay a couple of days early, pleased with my efforts and conclusions.

The three of us still enrolled in the course arrived early on the day Hexter promised to return our essays; the chap who had queried Hexter's methodology at the first meeting had not returned. Hexter arrived punctiliously (one of his trademarks, I was to learn). In addition to our individual essay, Hexter passed around a xerox copy of the first page of my paper, including his markings. He then proceeded to go through it line by line, first pointing out problems in my syntax and diction, then noting that there was no mention—let alone discussion—of the primary sources until the
second half of the essay (which surprised no one since we had exchanged copies of our essays). When I attempted to defend the significance of context, Hexter pulled his head into safety between his shoulders and waited me out. Then his head reemerged, his eyes glistened, and he returned to the task at hand—listing deficiencies in my essay. I took Hexter’s cue and slumped into a defensive posture of my own. I was embarrassed. I felt picked on. But the most uncomfortable moment came when it dawned on me that every criticism was well-founded. So I stopped resisting this draught of bitters, served by a master craftsman who sincerely believed I needed such a potent constitutional so early in my training. Eventually, we moved on to the other papers, although in a more cursory fashion. “Everyone can apply to themselves what is relevant from my critique of Vinten-Johansen’s paragraph,” said Hexter. Thanks a lot, Jack, thought I. I had already vowed to write a revision that would satisfy “the tortoise”—his surreptitious nickname among the graduate students I knew. My view that evening was that “snapping turtle” was more fitting.

I kept doggedly to my quest of writing something that would evoke praise from Hexter, but I never succeeded. My revision was also unbalanced, but the mirror image of the original. This time, I painstakingly constructed a comprehensive narrative of the Goodwin-Fortescue controversy, providing little context and no interpretation. Fortunately, revisions were due after the last class meeting, so I was spared a communal evaluation. Had there been one, however, I would have been my harshest critic; while I had realized on my own that my approach was problematical, it came too late to correct it in this essay. Hexter would never see in my coursework the fruition of his pedagogical method, but I knew within myself that he had readied me for a transmutation. The act itself began when I became a grader in Baumer’s intellectual history course, and it has continued to the present day—although Hexter’s ex post facto teaching style and shock therapy are not congenial to my personality.

My organization of the history workshop I teach at MSU is also influenced by Jack Hexter’s reverence for the historical narratives written by Garrett Mattingly. This influence was very subtle, taking the form of an occasional reference that we were expected to follow up on our own when we found the time. It was after my course with Hexter that I came across his essays on “doing history,” including a tribute to Mattingly. At first I wondered why Hexter had not assigned us to read the pieces that were in print in 1970; but self-promotion is not his style, and thankfully so since his impact on me (at least) would be less had he hawked his own stuff. When I had some distance on my graduate experiences and the responsibility of developing my own historiography course, I returned to Hexter’s essays, read again in Mattingly’s writings, and decided to make hands-on training in writing narrative history the methodological objective of the course.

Since I was remiss in not stressing this objective more forcefully in my conversations with Bill McDiarmid, I will discuss it briefly here. When I first formulated a syllabus, the catalogue description for History 201 informed prospective students that they would be introduced to the work of one major historian, as well as a range of methodologies utilized by other practicing historians. My decision to stress narrative history does not entirely reflect personal experiences and research predictions; Lawrence Stone’s essay on “The Revival of Narrative” made a case for its role in contemporary professional discourse. I use Mattingly’s book, The Armada, as the example of narrative history on which the students will model their own forays as interpreters of the past. That is, I want them (as
Hexter had expected me) to "do" some history of their own, rather than focus their introduction to historiography on a study of what has already been done by professional historians. Given this objective, some may wonder if I undercut it from the outset by withholding the Goodwin-Fortescue documents packet until after the students have read *The Armada* and a counterpoint book. My purpose is to force university students (as the Hope High pupils reminded me) to recognize that esteemed historians frequently offer contradictory approaches and interpretations of the same events—depending on the contexts in which they are writing, the perspectives they wish to reconstruct, and the sources they have chosen to use (or to which they are limited). The subtext for our discussion of "the Armada" enterprise is that historical interpretation differs from individual opinion; while opinions are simply proffered, interpretations are evaluated on the basis of how persuasively they explain the available evidence.

Once students understand that they are expected to model (rather than clone) Mattingly's method in their own research paper, we tackle Hexter's packet containing primary sources. Granted, this is an artificial research situation; among other things, students never struggle to find a topic that suits available resources. But limiting the topic to the Goodwin-Fortescue controversy and handing them their primary data provides a collective matrix and additional time to spend on the process involved in historical interpretation. If decidedly artificial, there is nothing formulaic about the process. The documents are simple transcriptions (with the exception of a few translations) of what one could find on the topic in a major research library; the students must cut up the packet and organize the material (chronologically and substantively) before they can begin to reconstruct what happened, why it happened, and decide if the controversy had historical significance. Internally, the documents are messy, often contradictory, and frequently puzzling. Often the Diary notes of proceedings in the House of Commons differ, in tone and substance, from the smooth copy entered into the record titled *The Parliamentary or Constitutional History of England*. Recollections by the protagonists differ, as do comments by those further removed from the fray. The packet preserves the original diction (including Latin phraseology) and spellings.

Individually, the students are usually so overwhelmed after a first reading that they willingly submit to reorganization of the seminar into primary support groups (in which I attempt to balance learning styles, as evidenced in class discussion and the review essays). The first group task is to reach consensus on the chronological order of events; when each group of four students has put together a working calendar of what happened on what days, we work through any disagreements as a seminar. Problematic matters are noted as they emerge. Then we cluster related problems and uncertainties under discrete rubrics, and the primary groups assign one person to shuffle into temporary groups for resolving what is listed under each rubric. Such resolution frequently requires library research (about parliamentary procedures, legal terms, biographical data, et cetera), which each shuffle group organizes with advice from me. Meanwhile, the primary groups continue to function as the place to discuss each student's emerging narrative of the controversy. As more problematical issues emerge, existing shuffle groups manage those that fall into their bailiwicks; others may require the creation of a new shuffle group (although there is a limit to what can be managed in this fashion). Periodically, members of each shuffle group report to their primary groups on the material they have gathered; some issues are resolved, others cannot be—given constraints such as available time, extant resources, and limited expertise.

While both primary and shuffle groups are geared to suggest the value of collective problem solving, the research paper (two or more drafts) provides each student opportunities to be a (his)storyteller. While there is no single,
“objectively true” explanation imbedded in the documents, each narrative must provide an interpretation of events, motives, and significance that is sustainable by the evidence available to the seminar as a collectivity. In future offerings, I intend to correct a past deficiency—the absence of a collective dimension in evaluating the narratives as they emerged from the group/seminar process. My experience in other classes is that students learn a great deal about their own writing when they are given opportunities to engage in constructive criticism of another student’s writing. Henceforth, peer reviews will complement my comments on various drafts of the research papers.

This long tangent that spun off my initial reading of Bill McDiarmid’s evaluation of the history workshop has suffi- ciently tried the patience of most readers to make me hesitate to launch another one about myself as an “idealist” historian. Bill’s attempt at fixing me within an historical tradition is creative and often in the ballpark I might imagine for myself. But Bill’s bench of veteran players often differs significantly from those on whom I consciously modeled myself. No matter. It is as important for my evaluator to clarify his own frame of reference (albeit through me) as it is for me to explain the genesis of mine. Moreover, Bill’s major point in this section of his case study is indisputable—that all historians have their own stories which explain what they do, how they do it, and why they bother to do it at all.

If my story has relevance for anyone else, it may be as validation of the principle of historical contingency. Like every teacher, unexpected obstacles in my established pedagogical path have caused me considerable worry and confusion; change any significant obstacle or event on my “life’s tape,” and the outcome would have been significantly different from what I have narrated here. For my attitudes about teaching and the methods I employ evolve from moments of uncertainty, as I sort out whether to continue what I have begun or to explore other pedagogical alternatives that suit my personality and sense of social responsibility.

Notes


2. Since both men remain my closest friends (aside from my wife, Betty), who have already heard some—and shaped much—of what follows during our runs together, I mention their names without assuming agreement on every point: Richard White (now at the University of Washington) and Peter Levine (at Michigan State University).


5. In the history workshop that Bill McDiarmid evaluated, I compressed into four weeks the gist of the structured writing assignments on the analytical essay that span an entire quarter in the intellectual history sequence. I dispensed with the ungraded diagnostic essay (to gauge where the students “are” as a preliminary to formulating the weekly assignments); instead, I summarized the model essay in establishing my expectations for the first writing assignment—an analytical book review. I evaluated these reviews as an initial effort at achieving my writing expectations and used comments (individually and in class) to focus attention on deficiencies that should be addressed on the second assignment—a comparative book review. While reading the first set of reviews, I felt that this particular class would be better served by a revision than anteating up to a comparative review. But I stuck to the syllabus, with the result that composing a comparative review created new problems instead of resolving structural deficiencies in their first essays. It was a catch-up situation from then on, at least with respect to teaching the rudiments of analytical writing. By the end of the course, only half of the students had made up for my misjudgment. I am still troubled by those I lost.
6. My first team-teaching occurred with Joseph Spielberg (Anthropology), in a course we developed to provide future teachers an interdisciplinary grounding in ethnohistory and global studies. Since 1986, I have taught an Overseas Study course, "Medical Ethics and History of Health Care in London," during five summers with Martin Benjamin (Philosophy), Howard Brody (Center for Ethics and Humanities in the Life Sciences), and Tom Tomlinson (also at the Center). I cannot overstate the constructive influence of such collegiality on my teaching methods and philosophy. When else does an instructor have occasion to rehash classroom activities with someone who has a parallel role but a different perspective on the material, the students, and the multiplicity of interactions that occurs in every session? In this context, I wish to acknowledge as well my indebtedness to Peter Levine, David LoRomer (History), and Richard White. David, Richard, and I met regularly for several years to discuss teaching strategies, recent articles and books, and other topics of interest to three junior faculty members. As running partners, Peter and I use each other as sounding boards and counselors on many matters, including teaching problematics.

7. Instructors of History 201 are expected to focus on the work of one major historian and introduce the students to contemporary varieties of historical methodology. My usage of the expression, historical workshop, reflects the influence of the late Steve Botein, for whom the workshop approach meant (in its strictest form) that all students read, discussed, and wrote essays on a common body of documents. There are, of course, other ways of structuring an historical workshop.

8. A couple of people who read an early draft of this essay assumed that I considered information dispensers synonymous with lecturers. Not necessarily. I know many instructors who combine a lecture style with process goals. I also know some instructors for whom an interactive approach is a means to elicit information on which students are later evaluated. In my view, the chief distinguishing characteristic of the two types is what an instructor wants done with the material covered in class, not how it is delivered or obtained. My view, therefore, acknowledges that there many instructors who share my goals without necessarily employing my techniques.

9. Don Juan says to the devil, "To be in Hell is to drift: to be in Heaven is to steer." George Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman. (New York: Penguin, 1946 [1903]), 169.


11. Charles Dickens, Hard Times for These Times (New York: Praeger, 1969 [1854]).

12. I cannot recall the memoir I was reading. This spring, however, I came across a parallel passage while preparing for a class discussion of Vera Brittain’s memoir about "The Great War":

After the first dismayed sense of isolation in an alien peace-time world, such rationality as I still possessed reasserted itself in a desire to understand how the whole calamity [WWI] had happened, to know why it had been possible for me and my contemporaries, through our own ignorance and others' ingenuity, to be used, hypnotised and slaughtered.


17. Common readings during this stage are designed to provide additional contextual explanation, as well as suggesting historical methodologies other than the narrative form. The workshop evaluated by Bill McDiarmid included the following: G. R. Elton, England Under the Tudors, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1974) and Joyce Youngs, Sixteenth-Century England (New York: Penguin, 1984). The shuffle groups first tried to resolve contextual and definitional problems by consulting these books, then looking in the library if they were unsuccessful.