The History Survey Project: Improving Introductory History Courses

By all appearances, history teaching in Texas is under attack. State legislators responded to budget shortfalls produced by the economic crisis of 2008–2009 by laying off more than 100,000 school teachers. The elected members of the Texas State Board of Education spent two years in 2009–2010 revising the standards for K–12 social studies by relying on the “expert” testimony of pastors to produce, in the words of a politically conservative watchdog group, “a politicized distortion of history” that is “unwieldy and troubling” and contains “misrepresentations at every turn.” Standardized testing has reduced classroom time for subjects not tested for, prompting school districts to attempt to jettison history altogether. (1)

And yet, paradoxically, the history survey course finds its most welcoming home in the Lone Star State. During the Cold War, when Americans added “In God We Trust” to our money, Texans added a legislatively mandated requirement for six credit hours of American history at the university level. That mandate continues to govern all public universities and community colleges in the state, long after other institutions throughout the country have reduced the number of required hours or allowed any history course to substitute for traditional surveys. As one college-level survey textbook publisher put it to me, in any given semester there are more students taking history survey courses in the Houston metro area than on the entire Eastern Seaboard. (2)

My colleagues at the university level are tempted to see a distinction between college courses and high school crises, but the landscape in Texas is not so easily compartmentalized. Increasing costs of higher education have prompted new options for high school students to earn college credit at greatly reduced rates. The traditional Advanced Placement (AP) course is now supplemented in Texas with dual-credit history courses that are taught in high schools by teachers who are overseen by community college faculty and thereby fulfill both the requirement for high school graduation and the requirement for college-level history hours. An enhanced version of this approach moves students to an early-college high school where all of the courses meet these criteria and students complete high school with an associate’s degree in hand. Thus, the history survey course now thrives in Texas in at least five different educational settings, from universities and community colleges to dual-credit and AP classrooms to early-college high schools. Additional variation derives from the fact that the courses are taught in face-to-face, online, and hybrid instructional venues. Furthermore, there is virtually no coordination across the different settings and venues in relation to such crucial elements as course design, student expectations, teacher training, or instructional methods. (3)

The breadth of options for the history survey in Texas prompted the creation of the History Survey Project (HSP) at the Center for History Teaching & Learning at the University of Texas at El Paso. This eighteen-month project set out to explore the varieties of history survey experiences in the state of Texas, to understand how to provide meaningful professional development for teachers of history surveys in the various settings, and to construct a model for improving both teacher training and history teaching in survey classrooms. The project’s design was grounded in an awareness of the challenges facing teachers, in dissatisfaction with existing teacher-training models, and in recent scholarship on history teaching and learning. As we move toward the final phase of the project, we can report on the differences in instructional settings and on the process of rebuilding the survey course with the scholarship of history teaching and learning.

The History Survey Project was inspired, in part, by an awareness of the place of history teaching in American society. Concerns over history teaching have long prompted handwringing from students, policy makers, and teachers. A survey of Americans conducted in the 1990s revealed that the most common words associated with history classrooms were boring and irrelevant. Reformers have likewise long decried the staying power of “traditional” lectures and textbooks. In Texas, the crisis took on a particular urgency when a state-sponsored study revealed that 40 percent of high school graduates were not prepared for college coursework, thereby increasing their time to degree and the cost to taxpayers. For most Texans—especially those who pursue careers in business, science, or politics—these survey courses are the only formal instruction they receive in American history. (4)

In designing the History Survey Project, we also hoped to help with teacher training. The tradition of criticizing colleges of education dates back at least as far as criticisms of history teaching. Online methods courses and generic pedagogical strategies ill-prepare teacher candidates for designing effective instruction and managing a classroom. A host of professional-development schemes work on a one-and-done basis, with presenters dropping in for a day before going on their way. In a Texas twist, history survey courses serve as the primary, comprehensive training that future high school teachers receive in preparation to teach U.S. history in eighth (to 1877) or eleventh (since 1877) grades. Thus, a student who completes a dual credit history course and then goes on to become a teacher was effectively trained to teach the class simply by taking it several years before.

The History Survey Project aims to explore and improve the teaching of U.S. history survey courses by uniting practical experience with recent findings from the scholarship of teaching and learning. We
looked to the recent revolution in cognitive science and to the particular uses that historians have put those findings to emphasize historical thinking and a “signature pedagogy” created by and for historians. To be effective, history teaching and teacher training benefit by articulating and practicing explicit and routine processes. (5)

The result was a professional-development model that combined long-term commitment with current scholarship. (6) Six History Survey Project Fellows were selected from a pool of applicants based on desire for improving the survey course and a commitment to revise and teach the course over eighteen months. As organizers, we sought to include teachers from all five of the survey’s instructional settings. To guide the revision process, we invited three historians who have been active in the scholarship of history teaching and learning. Part of the arrangement with the visiting scholars was that they would prepare by reviewing the fellows’ current course materials and their planned plans for redesigning the course. In May, Lendol Calder helped fellows articulate the big goals for their courses to work backward toward “uncovering” important historical thinking skills. (7) Two months later, David Pace brought his “decoding the disciplines” model to bear on the most common “bottlenecks” encountered by history teachers. (8) Front-end assistance on course design combined with nuts-and-bolts level bottleneck clearing helped fellows redesign courses to teach in August. In October, Alan Booth helped troubleshoot all of the unforeseen issues that arise in redesigning a course and teaching it for the first time. (9) Throughout the eighteen-month period fellows communicated regularly with each other and with the visiting scholars in a longer-term relationship forged on a shared commitment to improve survey courses.

The History Survey Project identified much incongruence in the very idea of a history survey course. University-level course sequences divide the story at 1865, whereas the high school courses do so at 1877. AP courses attempt to teach the second half of U.S. history to prepare for Texas’s standardized end-of-course exam while at the same time teaching all of U.S. history to prepare for the AP exam. Dual-credit courses had to follow a unit structure defined by community college overseers. Fellows also worked within a range of freedom for course revision. University faculty controlled content choices and assessments and could therefore align both to meet designed course outcomes. At the community college, the campus discipline defined the course’s unit structure but left the instructor free to design assessments. Advanced Placement teachers had in-class freedom coupled with support in the form of a course description, advice, sample syllabi, FAQs, and resources. The dual-credit and early college courses proved to have the most contradictory restrictions, with content dictated by school districts, assessments coming from state standards, and course administration policies from community college oversight.

In terms of design, fellows went in numerous directions suited to their particular needs and situations. A university fellow redesigned his course to focus on big questions about the meaning of historical narratives. An AP fellow began to introduce a greater variety of primary sources and to engage them in a greater variety of ways. The dual-credit fellow moved toward a flipped course model, providing podcasts of lectures for use at home and using class time to analyze and write together. All changed the way that textbooks were used. In the words of one fellow, the textbook shifted from being “the instructor” in the classroom to becoming “a participant” in the debate. One designed the course entirely around historical thinking concepts—change, context, interpretation, and connections—while others maintained a chronological focus. In one high school, class time was reduced from 87 to 43 minutes and the fellow took the change in stride. In another setting, class time was doubled so the fellow instituted a history lab approach that emphasizes historical thinking skills of sourcing, interpretation, and making judgments. One fellow noted the differences: “I have fundamentally transformed my course since embarking on the History Survey Project journey. The way in which I now teach history bears almost no resemblance to the way I went about it prior to beginning this fellowship.”

Fellows found the idea of bottlenecks particularly illuminating and useful. About the process one fellow observed: “I knew there were problems with several areas of my teaching but lacking the vocabulary I lacked any way to really target the problems.” The concept of bottlenecks was “like the missing piece to a puzzle.” Some identified bottlenecks related to historical thinking, such as students possessing the false notion that history is about a body of facts to be memorized. Others realized that students did intuitively comprehend historical sources and worked to uncover what students did understand, to model effective approaches to historical reading and analysis, and to guide students to move beyond summarizing sources to interrogating them. One fellow worked to help students take responsibility for their work by reflecting and making their own meaning.

The results of the History Survey Project are available in a variety of forms. An online bibliography of scholarship of history teaching and learning is being compiled. The fellows’ original and revised syllabi are posted online along with self-assessments of course effectiveness before and after working with the visiting scholars. Final analyses will be completed throughout 2013. One fellow has already been observed by his principal who noted, with some surprise, “Students were provided with opportunities to think and write. Students are 100 percent engaged.” The results of that kind of engagement will play out over the students’ lifetimes.

The History Survey Project has taken an important first step in examining the varieties of history survey course options in the state of Texas. It has also brought the scholarship of history teaching and learning to bear on the professional development of teachers of survey courses. Among the fellows, the experience has forged a sense of common cause among faculty at university, community college, and secondary levels. Other questions remain: How do the differences in instructional experience play out as students move forward in their college careers? Are eighteen-year old history major juniors ready for upper-level history courses? Can a course taken in ninth grade reliably aid a teacher candidate who faces the state certification exam at least six years later? One question has been definitively answered: In Texas at least, U.S. history survey courses are crucial for the success of all college students, for the training of future secondary teachers, and for the education of informed citizens.

Endnotes

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