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History as a Humanity: Reading and Literacy in the History Classroom

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COLLEGE HISTORY TEACHERS daily face the task of presenting their subject to students who come from many different educational backgrounds and who often have deficiencies such as poor literacy and a pathetic lack of interest in school. Teachers are expected to provide students with a historical perspective through analysis and interpretation of historical facts. All this must fit into the larger framework of the liberal arts tradition on which most colleges and universities are built. This article renews the argument that history should be regarded as a humanity and that an effective way to teach it as such and at the same time encourage greater literacy among college students is through the use of a variety of books such as biographies, monographs, personal narratives and other primary sources, and novels.

There are few historians who would disagree with the proposition that history is a humanistic discipline. However, before discussing the role of reading and literacy, it is worth reviewing the arguments in favor of viewing history as a humanity to see their implication for teaching. *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, a recent book published as a result of the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, contains several essays that address these issues. In the essay, "Why Study History? Three Historians Respond," William H. McNeill

defines history and gives reasons why it should be taught stating, "Historical knowledge is no more and no less than carefully and critically constructed collective memory. As such, it can make us wiser in our public choices and more richly human in our private lives."[1] Gordon A. Craig, in his essay "History as a Humanistic Discipline," shares McNeill's focus on the humanity of history. He adds that "history must focus its attention, both in research and classroom instruction, upon the role, not only of the movers and shakers in history, but upon that of men and women of every class and condition, including racial and ethnic minorities in society." There is no excuse to do otherwise, as today "there are no insuperable obstacles to assigning to these formerly forgotten groups their proper place in the historical record."[2] Gordon Craig calls history humanism, defining this as "any system of thought or action that assigns a predominant interest to the affairs of men as compared with the supernatural or the abstract."[3]

Between McNeill and Craig, we have a picture of history as a collective memory of the past, a past that includes everyday men and women as well as the famous. McNeill suggests that knowledge of the past will help people make better decisions that involve and affect everyone, especially in relation to "outsiders, whether the outsiders are another nation, another civilization, or some distinctive group within our national borders."[4] Elsewhere he states that "only an acquaintance with the entire human adventure on earth allows us to understand [the far reaching] dimensions of contemporary reality" and he asserts that "institutions that govern a great deal of our everyday behavior took shape hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Having been preserved and altered across the generations in our own time, they are sure to continue into the future."[5] In McNeill's opinion, no one can escape the continuing relevance history plays in everyone's life. The other thing that history does for us, according to McNeill, is to enrich us as individual people. Craig makes a similar point; he states that history "provides you with an extension of your own life and a connectedness that gives it a greater significance in the stream of history, making you a vital link in the great process that connects the remotest past with the most distant future."[6]

These ideas strongly support the argument that history belongs in any curriculum which emphasizes the humanities, such as the liberal arts curriculum at many colleges and universities. This should come as no surprise, since history is usually a mainstay in the graduation requirements of these schools. But perhaps it is not enough to say that history belongs there. Perhaps one has to go a step further and ask "What are the role and the goals of history courses as part of a liberal arts curriculum?"

Obviously, a history class has to teach history. In the past, this was limited to teaching about great men, important dates, significant events—

those things stressed by the so-called political and diplomatic historians. McNeill and Craig would no doubt suggest that people, whether traditionally considered important or otherwise, should also be stressed. But what about history as part of the liberal arts curriculum? Should the history class do something different than this? Should it do something more? It seems to me that history courses exist not only to teach students about history or give them a historical perspective, but to build the broader liberal arts perspective that humanities courses are meant to build. This means, among other things, that history classes must invest students with the skills and interests necessary to make their liberal arts education a lifelong process.

One skill necessary for lifelong learning is literacy. Students in college should already have the fundamental abilities that basic literacy demands. But a college education is supposed to develop those abilities into special skills that set its graduates apart from those who have not earned a college degree. If everyone should have basic literacy, then college graduates should have something more. Students who graduate from college but who have not increased their ability to read or write or communicate from the level attained at the secondary school are unable to compete with those that have gained a full liberal arts education. They are further disadvantaged because their lack of advanced literacy hinders them from the continued learning that is the goal of a liberal arts education. They cannot fully enjoy art, history, literature, or science. Nor can they engage in critical or analytical thought and discussion.

Lifelong learning is being threatened, however, by something called *aliteracy*, a term recently coined to describe literate individuals who do not like to or desire to read. Many people in the United States, both with and without college educations, are becoming increasing aliterate. Citing the quickening pace of American life as one reason, a recent article in *The New York Times* described the decreasing interest in reading by children as they grew older. For example, The National Assessment of Educational Progress, a branch of the Federal Education Department, found that while 45.7 percent of fourth graders read for pleasure, only 24.4 percent of twelfth graders did. Apparently, this trend is not necessarily broken by attending college. According to the same article, a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania fell into the category of being aliterate. He hadn't read a book in over a year and said, "'half my friends don't read either.'" Perhaps the most shocking part of this story is that he planned to enter graduate school.[7]

A disinterest in reading is not the entire problem, for there is increasing evidence that students entering college are lacking even the basic skills necessary to perform well there. In 1989, a report by the Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, cited in a *Washington Post* editorial, stated that

"three out of four faculty members nationwide, and 65 percent of those at liberal arts schools, think undergraduates are seriously underprepared in basic skills." In this editorial, however, the writer pointed out that other evidence suggests that the problem may not just be a lack of skills, but rather that some acquired "skills" prohibit more substantial learning. For instance, students were becoming so well trained in getting to the point of a passage assigned for reading, that they were not being impacted in a broader or more fundamental way by the material.[8] Among other things, they were probably not learning to enjoy reading. In any case, the evidence suggests that students coming into college may be poorly literate or increasingly aliterate. This, in the words of *The New York Times* writer, may mean that "generations of Americans are in danger of losing any taste for books or sense of their value."[9]

The job of the history teacher, then, has many dimensions. First, the historian must convey to students both information about the past and historical perspective. Second, the participation of history in the liberal arts education requires further work on the part of the historian to provide the student with a humanities perspective. Last, teachers of history must advance literacy. This complex task is not impossible. In fact, the simple approach of requiring students to read extensively will go a long way towards meeting all the goals of the history teacher. It should not be a new idea that reading is an important way of learning. Nor is it surprising that a manual for college educators such as *Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher* also made this claim. The author, Wilbert J. McKeachie, cited studies from the 1920s and 1960s as evidence and claimed that students learned more, or learned more efficiently, from reading than from listening to lectures.[10]

The problem of teaching aliterate or poorly literate students is also faced by grade school teachers and it is to that arena that college professors can turn to find possible solutions for their similar difficulties. In 1966, Daniel Fader, English professor at the University of Michigan, published *Hooked on Books*, revised and republished in 1976 as *The New Hooked on Books*. This book was intended as a guide for teachers to "teach reading and writing with pleasure" through the approach of "English in Every Classroom."[11] Though Fader began developing his theories of teaching literacy while he worked with juvenile delinquents, his ideas were later applied to students in regular educational facilities, and it is not implausible to suggest that they could be constructively applied to the college level as well.

A program such as "English in Every Classroom" urges that teachers of all disciplines should teach good reading and writing skills in their own classes. While placing responsibility for the students' literacy on all the

teachers, a program of this kind also promises benefits to each teacher in his or her field. As Fader put it, "every teacher will be helping each child to become a better student in the teacher's own subject area."[12] According to Fader, this is important because "the student who can't or won't read and write or listen well cannot be educated in any other subject in the school curriculum."[13]

At the tertiary level, college professors of all disciplines have been becoming more and more aware of their responsibility in teaching and promoting literacy. As evidence of this, Fader describes the surprise of one observer of the University of Michigan's Graduation Requirements Commission hearings.

> For the first time in his long career in this and other schools, [the observer] said, he had actually heard teaching scientists declare that undergraduate literacy had to be everybody's business because nobody's students could read or write well enough to satisfy even themselves, much less the teachers. *That*, he said from the mouths of chemists, physicists, mathematicians, scientists, and humanists, was a mouthful.[14]

If teaching literacy is this important, what materials should the history teacher use? Can textbooks be used? Textbooks survey the events that the course covers and are usually chronologically organized. Each chapter may have summaries at either the beginning or end to help introduce the reader to the material and to reinforce it. Chapters often conclude with questions for discussion or study and a list of books for further reading. They usually include pictures, maps, charts, and timelines — all useful learning aids. They may, however, over generalize or be bogged down with too much detail and often emphasize things that the instructor does not want to or omit something the instructor feels is important.[15]

These virtues and defects, however, pale when compared to their more fundamental and harmful effects. Textbooks may teach students something which most historians don't want them to learn — that history is a single story larded with a pile of facts. A history textbook by its very nature confirms to the student that history, as they have been taught in grade school and high school, is a long list of dates that are difficult to remember, names that are difficult to spell, and battles that are difficult to keep straight. If the stress in college education today is on "development of student capacities for judgement, fact gathering, analysis, and synthesis," as one college educator has suggested,[16] then the textbook does not belong in the college history classroom.

Moreover, textbooks tend to dehumanize their subjects, thus working against the goal of teaching history as a humanity. How can a student get a feel for the world of the Native Americans if they are simply dealt with

in terms of wars and agreements with European settlers? Or how can anyone understand who John Brown was by one or two paragraphs of coverage in a textbook? True, the student doesn't have the time to read a separate book on each person or each event, but on the other hand, the limited experience of reading a textbook leaves the student with a one- or two-dimensional view of the past, and consequently, of the present as well.

Textbooks also discourage good reading and writing habits. If history teachers are supposed to teach liberal arts literacy through history, they need to provide students with books that are meaningful and that represent the kind of books they will come into contact with the rest of their lives. Textbooks do not represent these kinds of books. They are like nothing the student will read the rest of his or her life. Learning to read a textbook does very little to encourage lifelong reading. Furthermore, if textbooks are poor reading material they are often also examples of poor writing. Their lack of footnotes reinforces an already present tendency in students to plagiarize, either innocently or purposely, because as examples of historical writing textbooks rarely give direct credit to the sources upon which they rely.

An article published a few years ago in *The History Teacher* addressed the problems with textbooks. In their article "College Textbooks in American History: Brickbats and Bouquets," Carrie Foster and Connie Rickert-Epstein suggested that there are three significant problems with today's history textbooks. First, textbook quality is "deteriorating" due to the effort of publishers to produce texts that are more acceptable to an increasingly less-than-literate student body. Second, there is an "implicit censorship in the inadequate treatment of certain historical issues around which much controversy still swirls." Third, there is a lack of "thematic structure" which they feel is necessary to bind the "numerous and apparently discrete facts" of American history.[17] Finding none of the texts which they reviewed adequate, they suggested only that textbooks should be written with greater thematic development. However, they also observe that "students do not read, cannot write, and seem only concerned with certification to 'get a good job'"[18] Moreover, they stated that "with our students less inclined to read than ever before, supplementing the basic textbook with additional readings only compounds our problem rather than ameliorating or solving it."[19]

Why not, then, drop the textbook entirely? If college students are illiterate or aliterate, textbooks are not going to help. Again, the work of Daniel Fader, though done with grade school children, can be applied to the college classroom. Because Fader saw the teacher's task of helping children develop everyday literacy, he felt it best to move away from reading material that is strictly written for classroom use toward material

that children would be facing in the real world. This approach, "SATURATION," meant surrounding or saturating the students with a variety of reading materials — primarily newspapers, magazines, and the like — which represent the reading material of that world which their literacy was supposed to help them understand. Furthermore, these students found this kind of reading interesting and were attracted to it. Stated Fader: "Since popular magazines and newspapers are not part of the school world that such students often view with hostility, these materials greatly recommend themselves for use in this approach."[20]

Though history teachers certainly don't need to teach college students to read newspapers and magazines, Fader's SATURATION program is instructive in theory. First, it is important to realize that college students are not attracted to textbooks, which no doubt represent "the school world that ... students often view with hostility" and probably won't read. Nor do textbooks help college students learn to read materials of their real world — the non-school world of liberal arts graduates. For students to prepare for that world, their professors need to provide them with interesting and challenging reading material. The history teacher has several choices which include historical monographs, biographies, personal narratives, primary sources, and novels.

Here is one example of how these kinds of books can be used in a ten-week introductory American history survey. A professor could assign five books, about a book every two weeks, which correspond chronologically and topically with the lectures. For instance, William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* could be used to introduce students to both the world of Native Americans and the interaction between Native Americans and Europeans, a major theme of colonial history. A second book might be *Tobacco Culture* by Timothy Breen, which would give students a glimpse of life in pre-Revolutionary Virginia and suggest one way of looking at the coming of the Revolution. Paul Johnson's *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* could provide students with a perspective on workers and urban life in preindustrial America, while a book such as Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* would do the same for slaves and the rural South on the eve of the Civil War. Last, students could be introduced to a variety of themes in antebellum American history by Stephen Oates' *To Purge This Land With Blood*; themes which include abolition, sectionalism, entrepreneurism, and the coming of the Civil War.[21]

There are several other ways in which reading can be incorporated into the classroom. Some teachers may like to use all biographies for their classes, or all novels. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often used to supplement lectures on slavery and abolition. Some professors might use photocopies of primary documents that they have

been examining in their own research as a way to introduce students to the historian's task. A teacher might also use published primary material. For example, William Bradford's journal, the journals of Lewis and Clark, and any one of a number of slave narratives could be nicely incorporated into a history class.

Once teachers choose material for their students to read, there are a variety of ways to use it in the classroom. One would be to have the students read the book by a certain date on which they will be quizzed and then have an opportunity to discuss it in a group setting. The discussion aspect is perhaps most important, because it would give students an opportunity to verbalize their feelings and ideas about the book. Another way for them to respond to the book might be to write a review of it. Perhaps the professor might provide a theme which the student could use in writing a substantive response to the book. Also, books that are well chosen touching on broader themes of the course provide good material for examination questions which require students to draw on both lecture and reading material to answer.

There are many advantages to teaching through reading. Well chosen books are sure to keep students interested in a way textbooks cannot. The greatest advantage to replacing a textbook with a variety of other books is that students exposed to diverse readings will learn the true nature of history, that history is about understanding people, ideas, and institutions of the past, and that part of their identity is wrapped up in the past. They will learn that history is a humanity and begin to develop an appreciation for that. One student at the University of Mississippi, after reading *To Purge This Land With Blood*, said "this book changed my life!"[22] Perhaps this is what Gordon Craig, in his essay "History as a Humanistic Discipline," meant when he stated: "A humanistic discipline deserves to be presented in a humane way, as a story about human beings in circumstances, told with grace and energy, its analytic rigor heightened by clarity and logic, its argument persuasive rather than strident and bullying."[23]

The right kinds of books can display men and women in both their greatness and fallibility. A textbook cannot begin to describe, for example, the details of a person like Martin Luther King, Jr., with his triumphs and downfalls, pride and shame. Only a well-written biography can do that. But students continue to meet these people in a few lines of a textbook, where their importance is not only confined to those lines, but also the student's experience or memory of them depends on these few lines. Another thing that well-chosen readings can do is expose students to material that they may not ever pick up and read on their own, whether or not they are literate. For example, what chance is there that an adult in today's society will peruse the shelves of the public library and bring home a description of

slave life in the South or pick up one of Frederick Douglass's autobiographies to read? Introducing students to such materials may change this trend. Lastly, good reading material will help sharpen students' minds, encouraging them to think critically and analytically. Monographs and other respected works offer excellent examples of quality scholarship, unlike textbooks which often offer the most flagrant examples of plagiarism and other scholarly deficiencies.

There is little doubt that history is a humanity or that it has a place in a liberal arts education. Its continued existence in these contexts gives proof of that. Poor literacy is a problem which seems to plague college campuses throughout the United States, and addressing this problem in history classes is necessary. But the connection between reading and history goes deeper than the object of teaching history as a humanity and solving illiteracy at the college level. In a sense, history only exists because we have a way to record it. In Western culture, that record is contained in books. To remove books from the teaching of history is to remove a vital aspect of the true nature of history itself.

Notes

1. William H. McNeill, Michael Kammen, and Gordon A. Craig, "Why Study History? Three Historians Respond," in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, ed. Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in Schools (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), p. 103.
2. Gordon A. Craig, "History as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Historical Literacy*, p. 127.
3. Ibid., p. 125.
4. McNeill, "Why Study History," p. 104.
5. Ibid.
6. Craig, "Humanistic Discipline," p. 137.
7. Roger Cohen, "The Lost Book Generation," *The New York Times*, 6 January 1991, Sec 4A, 34(N) and 34(L).
8. "Unready Undergraduates," (editorial), *The Washington Post*, 21 August 1989, A12.
9. Roger Cohen, "The Lost Book Generation," 34(L).
10. Wilbert J. McKeachie, *Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher*, 8th ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1986), pp. 12, 148, 150.
11. Daniel Fader with James Huggins, Tom Finn, and Elton McNeil, *The New Hooked on Books* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1976), p. ix, *passim.*
12. Ibid., p. 97.
13. Ibid., p. 69.
14. Ibid., pp. 23-4.

15. McKeachie, *Teaching Tips*, pp. 11, 23.

16. Ibid., p. 149.

17. Carrie Foster and Connie Rickert-Epstein, "College Textbooks in American History: Brickbats and Bouquets," *The History Teacher*, 22 (November 1988), 39-40.

18. Ibid., p. 39.

19. Ibid., p. 47.

20. Fader, *Hooked on Books*, pp. 25, 63-5, 98.

21. This example comes directly from my experience as a teaching assistant working for Alan Gallay at Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington. Professor Gallay's example of incorporating reading such as this in the classroom inspired me to think more deeply about how to educate undergraduates and has resulted in the present essay.

22. Alan Gallay, personal communication.

23. Craig, "Humanistic Discipline," p. 133.