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I Hate History Papers

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Students often tell me that they like history, but that they hated the history courses they had to take in high school. The only thing they often remember about those courses is that they dealt with one darn thing after another, and that those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat the eleventh grade. Unlike other instructors, history professors frequently feel lucky when their students enter college underprepared, because, as the historian James Loewen remarked, "history is the only field in which the more courses [high school] students take, the stupider they become." He may be dramatizing the point, but many colleagues will agree that he is not far from the mark.

What accounts for this malaise? Bad teaching? It certainly plays a large part, but it is not the whole story. High school teaching, much more than college teaching, is textbook driven, and many studies show that the bulk of the texts is mind-numbing. Teachers either have to ignore them or deliver good teaching in spite of them. A very daunting task. Most of these history texts portray the past,

particularly the American past, as a simple-minded morality play, that repeats itself over and over again. The basic outlines of plots, characters and outcomes are familiar and therefore predictable. Students are to be reassured rather than challenged. Hence, the past appears to be chiseled in stone, containing all the lessons anyone ever needed to know for building a successful future. Yes, "mistakes were made," but "the right lessons were learned." There seems to be little room for adding anything of significance. All that students may hope for is to repeat what's been done before, albeit with better tools. Where people once traveled by horse, they now travel by car, and where they once "conquered the west" they now "conquer space." History papers are little more than exercises showing "how they did it then." Boooring, many of my students tell me. "I hate history papers" is a statement I have heard more than once, especially after returning papers with disappointingly low grades.

What is to be done? Our faculty currently looks at ways to revise the general education requirements for students. I know that I'll be laughed out of the room with my proposal to replace our course *Introduction to the Academic Community* with a course called *Iconoclasm of Western Civilization*, though I think such a course would go a long way in reviving students' zest for learning. I teach iconoclasm in my history courses already, mostly with excellent results. Students learn that history is topsy-turvy. For example, Edward VIII, an open Nazi sympathizer, is remembered as a noble king who gave up his crown for the love of a gay divorcee. Hirohito, an ally of the Japanese militarists, is thought of as a shy marine biologist in glasses who hated war. Woodrow Wilson, an imperialistic sympathizer of the KKK, is revered as a global peacemaker. Students may not care much about foreign heads of state, but they generally care about the image of American presidents. When I give them the opportunity to check what their high school teacher told them about someone like Wilson against what I told them about him, they usually take it. The resulting term papers usually are among the more interesting ones I get to read. Students write with a purpose and like the required detective work to boot. It manifests itself

in clearer writing.

Last term I taught *History and Historians*, a lower division course required for all history majors. I made sure that the students had enough controversial topics from which to choose a class presentation and a term paper. Listening to each other's presentations, students learned many things their high school teachers probably never dared to mention. They learned, for instance, that Helen Keller was not merely "the little engine that could," but also a very independent person who went against the grain of her time. She joined the Socialist Party, the International Workers of the World, and became an ardent supporter of Lenin and Trotsky. Remember the Alamo? It was a fight for slavery against a Mexican society that had outlawed slavery in 1823. Slavery won, freedom lost. How about an example closer to home. In 1970, the Massachusetts' Department of Commerce invited the Wampanoag Indians to join the celebration of the British landing 350 years earlier. The Department asked the Indians for a copy of their speaker's remarks beforehand. It included the following statement: "The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cap Cod four days before they robbed the graves of my ancestors, and stole their corn, wheat, and beans." The Department forbade the speaker to address the celebrants. It therewith censored not some inflammatory falsehood but historical truth.

According to the historian Marc Ferro, the United States has the greatest gap of any Western country between what historians know and what students are taught. I call it Ferro's Gap. When I bring it up in class, I always encounter predictable skepticism. Most students, in fact, think it is the other way around. They attribute my statement, no doubt, to my German accent. But I give them plenty of opportunity to prove me wrong. In their effort to do so, they produce much better papers than they would otherwise. Therewith they also help narrow Ferro's Gap. The point I am trying to make is obvious. Students learn more, and they definitely write better papers, when challenged, especially when challenged individually. This requires skill, patience and is not without risk. Challenging a stu-

dent to write the best paper he or she is capable of can be interpreted as exerting undue pressure. To avoid such pressure, I have seen instructors feel tempted to lower the bar, to make life easier for teacher and student alike. But this is precisely what created Farro's Gap. My own experience tells me that bucking the trend will not only help the students, but in the long run everybody.

"But," I have been asked, "how do you challenge students individually?" Generally students do not mind being challenged. Many, in fact, welcome it. But they also like to receive good grades. To be challenged to them often means to be able to meet the particular expectations of their professors and therewith improve their chances for an A. The odds are in their favor if they stick to the tried-and-true. Hence they write papers that show, often for the umpteenth time, that the Magna Carta was a democratic document, that Columbus discovered America, that George Washington couldn't tell a lie, and that Fidel Castro is a crazy man. That has worked in the past, why shouldn't it work now? Some students even manage to recycle old high school papers in college, sometimes with considerable success. To break the cycle, professors will have to tell students, individually, that they should know better, and prove it. This may involve a number of personal discussions, during which the professor will have to replace the individual student's initial reservations with a sense of trust—trust that the student's efforts to show that he or she knows better will be assessed fairly, no matter the results. This is the area where students can, and often do, challenge their professors. What if a student produces material that suggests that Thomas Jefferson was a racist, Adolf Hitler a genius, or Fidel Castro a humanist? If the student feels that this will not compromise his or her grade, chances are he or she will produce a paper far superior to the one he or she would produce trying to play it safe. I have seen it work to the students' advantage many times, and again in my course *History and Historians*.

For instance, one student, whom I had challenged to go beyond the familiar high school tale of Christopher Columbus, wrote a paper showing, on the basis of indisputable evidence, that Colum-

bus was not the first explorer to discover America, but the last. That prompted his question, "Why is Columbus given all the credit for the discovery of America if indeed he was the last one to find it?" He then proceeded to suggest a number of plausible explanations: Columbus was not the first discoverer, but the first conqueror of America; the invention of the printing press spread his fantastic stories quickly all across Europe; Europeans were unwilling to give credit to non-Europeans who went there earlier. Noticing that Columbus' picture as the first "true" discoverer survives for the most part untarnished in school texts, he asked, "What purpose could teaching this inaccurate information serve? What price does society pay for instructing its students in such a fashion?" Another student, writing about American leaders, observed, "though the Teapot Dome Scandal was taught in my high school history courses, it was never mentioned that the Secretary of the Interior went to jail, much less that he was brought back from Russia to face the charges against him. There was never any mention of the head of the Veterans Affairs Bureau facing charges of corruption for sending construction contracts to his friends. These things I discovered for myself when I began researching this paper." Yet another student corrected the mythical picture given of Thomas Jefferson in his high school texts thus: "Thomas Jefferson is world famous for saying that everyone has an equal right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' However, he owned more than 175 slaves when he wrote that speech, and on average he owned 270 slaves. Most of our history books never mention that he owned slaves, and if they do, it is in a little blurb that tries to downplay the fact." He then concluded, "again, this is an example of how we fabricate reality to suit our needs."

I do not challenge students to dig up dirt. When they feel free, and when they feel personally challenged, to find as much of the real story as possible behind the myths propagated especially in high school texts, their first findings seem mostly negative, often accompanied by a sense of disappointment in what they have found and that they hadn't known about it earlier. But for many this is a necessary first step in liberating themselves from the mind-numbing cli-

ches of the past, and in developing a more realistic sense of their own possibilities to help create a better future. It encourages clear and creative thinking, manifested in clear and creative writing. Students could do worse. They could continue to lament: "I hate history papers."