

The Pedagogical Strengths of Teaching History Backwards

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Several semesters ago I was pressed into service to teach a section of world civ. II. One of the things that working up a new prep does is to free you from doing things like they have always been done. I asked myself the perennial question we all ask: *what is it that I want my students to carry with them after taking this single history class?* Following 9/11 and the dismal level of historical understanding news reporters and commentators showed about the Middle East, I decided that I would much rather have them know something about Afghanistan and Iraq than remembering when the Spanish invaded South America. That led me to teaching this course backwards. In brief my syllabus was as follows:

- 3-4 weeks on the history of a single civilization -- Afghanistan (Middle East), China, Rwanda (Africa), Costa Rica (Central America). (I preferred to take core samples of several key civilizations than attempt a superficial survey of every one. I discovered that insights gained in understanding these four in greater depth enabled them to understand others not studied more quickly.)
- they read a book on the contemporary situation in each civilization, e.g. Rashid on the Taliban.
- my first lecture on each civ. set up the historical context of the post-WWII period in each civilization; it ended with the question: *what do we need to know about the earlier history of this civ. to better understand the present?* -- always lots of good questions from them -- I then assigned them to find answers to those questions and bring them to the next class. There was always plenty of discussion and lots of good connections being made.
- each subsequent lecture went further back in time until we reached the 16th c., the 'beginning' of the course.

Most students loved this approach, even those who said they had 'hated' history in the past. It finally made sense to them. I found that there were many pedagogical advantages to this approach.

- It is a cardinal rule of teaching that we ought to go from the known to the unknown; start with what students currently understand and use that as a basis for introducing new concepts and material to them. Yet history teachers violate that principle all of the time. We assume that the place to 'begin' is with the chronologically prior. But that is surely questionable since students are the least familiar with the distant past -- as are we. Why not 'begin' a history course with the present, the period of history most students at least think they know something about?

- Moving from present to the past is quite common in our experience. Counselors offer their clients help in resolving current difficulties in their life by uncovering the roots of their problems buried in their past. Those of us who keep journals find perspective in our lives by reflecting on our entries, from present to past. This is exactly how the police solve crimes and lawyers build their cases: start with the current crime or law suit and work backward to collect the evidence and piece it together. Who doesn't enjoy a good PBS mystery -- Adam Dalgliesh, Hetty Winthrop, Inspector Morse, Miss Marple, Perot, Sherlock Holmes, or my favorite, Brother Cadfael? They keep our interest by proceeding slowly from known to unknown. Most of us professional historians, I suspect, discovered our primary research areas in the same way. We 'began' with a problem that intrigued us, and then probed and dug deeper and deeper into the history of that problem to untangle its complexities. It only makes sense to teach history in the same way.
- I have discovered to my pleasant surprise that students grasped complex patterns and causal relationships with this approach that they have rarely done with the traditional approach. We say that we want students to understand causal patterns, but these are very difficult for students to identify in the traditional format. Students have told me that everything seems so cut and dried by marching forward -- this happened, then that happened -- that it was difficult to conceive history happening in any other way.
- In teaching history backwards, on the other hand, we are constantly asking "what must have happened in the past to have gotten to this point?" Students are shocked by a country with the highest percentage of Christians in Africa plunging into genocidal mayhem in Rwanda; coffee farmers eeking out a living for generations in South America; the repressive Taliban regime coming to power years after their liberation from the Russians; and the conflagration of the Civil War and the failed promises of Reconstruction. It is natural to ask *why*. Their curiosity is piqued and they start probing and digging. They have a puzzle to piece together.
- Students are much more likely to ask 'why' when pressed to account for the current state of affairs than they are to ask what is likely to have happened in the future. I have found that in the traditional approach, students rarely ask "What happened next?", whereas, in this approach they are more likely to ask "hmm, I wonder what must have happened earlier to bring this about?" Students told me that they were much more likely to read the earlier chapter in a textbook (since we 'began' with the last chapter) in this approach than they were to read the next chapter in the traditional approach.
- This approach encourages students to understand that history has very deep roots or long tentacles, exactly what we want them to grasp. In the traditional approach students are not knowledgeable enough of the past to identify or appreciate significant factors for the future. They have no context. In this approach they know about catastrophic events in the present; this gives them essential context

for probing the past with heightened sensitivities for possible clues in the past that would shed light on the present. I find they spot these clues more quickly than they ever had done in the traditional approach.

- The great majority of students are not confused by examining history in reverse order; chronology rarely becomes an issue for them -- although, to be fair, a few students are confused. Most students are able to distinguish the order of discovery from the order of chronology.

Since then I have taught the U.S. history survey with the same format. The first semester 'begins' with the Civil War and Reconstruction and works back to the colonial founding; the second semester 'begins' with the present and works back to Reconstruction. While I don't believe that all American history prior to the Civil War is prelude or that everything leads to the Civil War, it is nevertheless true that a great deal of that history emerges in sharp relief when viewed against the backdrop of the Civil War. Students can at least identify multiple factors in the coming of the Civil War by viewing that history in reverse.

I see no reason why this same format would not work for any other history course. It is particularly suitable for broad survey courses. If you are looking for ways to shake up your teaching -- and to get beyond Vietnam in your U.S. survey, try teaching backwards.