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On Batting .667: Three Courses for the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

Robin W. Winks

Despite a widely-held public stereotype, New York City's taxi drivers are not more talkative than drivers in any other city: they all ask silent, single passengers some equivalent of the question, "What do you do for a living, buddy?" Even when it was not the whole truth, I have invariably replied that I teach history. In London, New York, and all points east and west, a moment of silence follows, and then: "I studied history once in school. Hated it. It was my worst subject." The rest of the journey is in silence, followed by an over-generous tip in compensation for belonging to a guilty fraternity.

Why do so many people hate, or at best react with boredom, to History? Possibly because the subject is too frequently poorly taught, because many people assume that History is simply a collection of facts about the past and may, therefore, be handed to the coach to teach in spare time, since the teacher need only be a book ahead of the students. Perhaps because it is a boring subject. Perhaps because American students have been lobotomized by television and expect the instant gratification of a definitive answer to every complex question, which the wise teacher will not provide. Perhaps because history is book-intensive and requires the application of a skill not invariably well learned in school. Perhaps none of this is true.

What is true is that History is taught very differently in college than before college, that the gap between the two levels of instruction is enormous as it relates to content (though not necessarily even present when it relates to the talent of the teacher), and that we have too long misunderstood what students have meant when they have asked that History be made "relevant." The impression is strong, though perhaps not quantified, that high school students who come to college expecting to major in History soon shift to another subject, and that History gains its largest number of majors from those who did not consider the subject as central to their interests in high school. If this is so, why should it be so? By indirection

and perhaps without intent, the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute has, through allowing me three times to teach in its program, provided me with some guesses.

The easy answer is one teachers have known all along: History in the high or middle school is taught largely as a body of facts to be memorized while at the university level History is taught as a body of thought over which one argues. Such a view draws an excessive and therefore false division, of course: all well-taught high school courses in History try to induce argument and originality on the part of students, and all college-level courses must contain an irreducible commitment to retaining factual data before beginning the argument. Still, the popular view is too close to the truth.

What ought History to teach, without regard to the level at which it is taught? Minimally the following ought to be involved:

Leading students to see that ideas and actions have consequences in four arenas. These are the arenas of economics, politics, society, and ideas broadly (sometimes called “intellectual history” and embracing, of course, religion and popular culture). There is no question one may ask that does not require that a portion of its answer derive from each of these arenas. There is no social problem that develops and cries out for a solution that has not arisen in part from conditions best analyzed in one of these arenas. That the simplest of actions have consequences is a truism to any adult, though few adolescents grasp the point without examples.

Spending my days in an environment filled with the young, I entertain in my mind a series of experiences which I label “Close Encounters on the Campus.” Two of these are illustrative. One day some years ago I was struck from behind by a bicyclist riding the wrong way on a one-way street, pinned against a car, and had two ribs broken. This was a few weeks after returning from a year in Southeast Asia during which, among other excitements, I and my family had been evacuated from the Saigon airport while it was under fire and had spent the night in a downtown Saigon hotel the day before it was fire-bombed. My only injury that year came on the safety of the Yale campus, because a graduate student did not think that one-way signs applied to him, and because I thought myself back in an orderly society.

Two years later, ribs mended, I rounded a great cabinet in the University’s library, in hot pursuit of more citations from the card catalogue, and ran at full-speed into a simple wooden tray that had been left thrust out by another researcher equally concerned with his time, his ego, and his pace. Hitting the tray, I broke again the same ribs and this time was hospitalized. The student (or faculty member?) who had no time to thrust the tray back into its niche also had no time apparently to think about the

simplest consequence of that action. Perhaps in the end President Carter's ill-advised rescue mission to the hostages of Iran failed because one mechanic aboard an aircraft carrier failed to properly adjust one sand screen on one helicopter. Here, surely, the four great arenas came home to Americans with a vengeance, enormous consequences arising from the easiest (and least excusable) of mistakes.

Students are, in fact, "doing history" whenever they pause for a moment to think about consequences. If this makes history philosophy teaching by example, why not?

Whenever one asks what History ought to teach, one sounds pompous to the lay audience, for teachers of chemistry, physics, or physical education are presumed to know what they ought to teach. But history teachers ask this question constantly, if often in code language: What good is History? How do we make History relevant? How do we get from our own sense that History is important for the public good to the goal of showing students how this is so? Soon one is reduced to sounding preachy, didactic, egoistic, as I have just done, because for most teachers of History the subject is deeply internalized while most taxi drivers reasonably enough think of the subject as the most objective, external, unpersonalized subject there is. Chemistry, they know, kills; History does too, but how?

Thus, one is in fact teaching values, and once this is admitted, an even more ponderous subject has escaped from Pandora's box. Ought one to teach values? Of course, we do it all the time. Then whose values and for what end? The historian's values. And what are they?

History does, of course, also teach certain skills, though too often teachers at all levels are reluctant to illustrate the genuine utility of these skills. The student of history can learn how to recognize sequences of cause and effect, to see that cause A led to effect B, and that cause C is more remote, though not unimportant. That is to say, History teaches logic, clear-thinking, and an awareness not only of consequences but of responsibility. Here too is a trap most teachers see, and in seeing it may prefer to avoid the course entirely: for in the minds of many, cause equates with responsibility and responsibility equates with guilt, until History becomes a mere vehicle for grievance collecting by a self-aware group with its own program for the future. Yet can we afford not to play the course merely because it contains many traps?

History may also help young people to understand that causality has its own priorities: that A is more important than B, though B may be more proximate in time to effect C. Slowly a student may be led to see the interrelatedness of all things, to truly understand what John Donne meant by the statement so many like to quote, though they so often mean nothing more than a simple social affirmation against personal loneliness. Seeing themselves and their environment whole, acquiring the skills by which

they may decode that environment, these are among the goals of History. Even an awareness that all human beings act under time constraints—that History is, in the final analysis, about Time in action—is valuable, as in the set examination in which the student must not only make choices within minutes but is also reflecting choices made over days and weeks before: to study or not to study. Educators say that they seek subjects that will give students a sense of cohesion, of their relationship to the past and therefore to the future, of how school provides skills in abstract thought, even a sense of duty to community, to something outside oneself. Surely History does this.

Of course, we must not oversell the social utility of History. In college it is easy enough to demonstrate that the History major is the commonest path to law school, or that the ability to detect cause and effect relationships is indispensable in business or government, or that an emotional adaptation to the reality of time constraints is essential to excellence in virtually all sports. But in the high or middle school, it may be only in metaphor that History leads the student to dig a deeper furrow.

It was with these convictions, concerns, and large areas of ignorance that I constructed three courses over two years for the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. To these presumptuous notions about History were added the expectation that I would act essentially as a resource person, working with individuals far more knowledgeable than I about the realities of the classroom—that is, that I should provide insights into subject matter while my colleagues, the Fellows of the Institute, would instruct me and each other in the methods of teaching: in translating “insight” into reality. This proved to be true, for I gained new insights into my own material just as the teachers found, in their interaction, new ways to present familiar materials as well as new materials for the presenting. Genuine collegiality, a sense of learning together, with no dominant figure summing up “what is really true” at the end of the day, meant that the learning process left the seminar room with the teachers, and this teacher, after every meeting. As with a final examination, which should never look backwards over work done but should propel the student forward into new thought, as an extension rather than a recapitulation of a course of study, the seminar experience, when it worked, demonstrated that the classroom provides only one of many strategies to learning. The experience worked, I thought, two times out of three.

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The three seminars which I taught deliberately took three different approaches to knowledge, to teaching, and to the sociology of learning.

The first, which was on new trends in British history and literature, sought to demonstrate that a comparative approach to a body of knowledge was especially productive and exciting. The second, on the use of the modern detective and spy novel in history and literature classrooms, sought to explore the methods of the historian in a novel context. The third, on the widespread notion found in modern history and literature that the West is in decline, attempted to use an area studies approach to explore a specific problem in Western thought. *Inter alia*, the three seminars were meant to see how comparative studies, methodological inquiry, and “post-holing” (to use now outdated terminology) of a “relevant issue” would lead to reshaped lesson plans, more excited teachers, and more enthusiastic students. The participants would have their own views as to success; for myself, the first two succeeded and the third did not. Exploring why may be instructive.

“An Interdisciplinary Approach to British Studies” was designed to provide teachers in various disciplines with ammunition when a student complained that the teacher was straying outside the bounds of the discipline. How many history students complain when a teacher corrects their grammar, that This isn’t an English course? How many students of literature complain, having indulged their fancies in creative writing techniques, and been corrected by a teacher for an error in historical logic, that This isn’t History? We read a novel, therefore, though as History: John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. We read History, therefore, but as Literature, to recognize truly great writing: G.M. Young’s *Portrait of an Age*. We constantly compared British literature and history to American history and literature to ask, what is different about this material? What characteristics does it have, other than having been written by a citizen of one country, that makes it distinctly British as opposed to American? What elements in such history and literature relate to the modern adolescent’s concerns? The individual projects range from pop art and the mass media, through the industrial revolution that induced both, to a re-examination of a classic set piece of British literature, Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*.

For myself, two imperatives guided the course. The first was that a comparative approach to any study of cultures, whether through history, literature, art, or indeed manual training, was more productive of true understanding than an isolated study could possibly be. To study only American history and literature is not to know American history or literature, for to understand a national culture one must grasp its elements of uniqueness. Yet how can one know what is unique without comparing one culture with another? Thus whenever the subject was most clearly British, I sought in discussion to make it most consciously American. In what

different ways did literatures perceive of and explain World War II? How did British and American engineering interact in the specific case study of the development of a more powerful cannon? What romantic visions arise in either society from the notion of “the pirate”?—the pirate of the South Seas, the pirate of Robert Louis Stevenson, the pirate and robber baron of finance? In what ways did two Western societies respond to a common encounter with a non-Western culture, China?

Too often our curricula, in college as well as high school, have been organized around national identities, as though the rise of the nation state was the singular purpose of the historical process. This unconscious acceptance of the materialistic dialectic is writ large in our school catalogues: a History of England, a History of Russia, a History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Civil War, a History of the United States in the Twentieth Century, and more recently, a History of Africa or a History of the Middle East. Even in these titles rests a Western bias of which students are seldom made aware, for anyone who speaks of the history of the Near East, Middle East, or Far East, is using a nineteenth century conception of a globe dominated from England. After all, these great world regions are near, middle, and far only in relation to western Europe: the Far East is, in fact, due west of most Americans, and it is for most Australians (even as they continue to use the European terminology) actually the Near North. More subtly, behind the notion that the nation state is the best receptacle for the collecting and analyzing of historical data rests a crippling fallacy: that historical problems must be conceived of within the political confines of a single nation and that those problems may best be solved within the same confines. When stated in this way the premise is obviously nonsense. One can understand the history of one country only when it is compared and contrasted with that of another. Students may understand History as a process that affects their lives only if the history taught them is not simply a recitation of national triumphs (or national tragedies), if it is not a vehicle for either grievance collection or the attribution of all guilt to others.

The second imperative was that to study History one must read literature. The reverse proposition seemed less urgent, since few high schools have been more than brushed by the isolating tendencies of the structuralists. Rather, comparing novels that seemed unready for comparison was a better path to this imperative. Thus we discussed how Melville’s *Moby Dick* had done for American literature what Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain* would do for German, and we explored how Walter van Tilberg Clark’s allegedly more minor novel, *The Track of the Cat*, was a clear transference of Melville’s themes to a Rocky Mountain landscape. We could then discuss whether students “should” read *Moby Dick* because it would

enlarge a few while being incomprehensible to most, or because, quite simply, it was a crowning point of American literature, an American icon at which all should worship, or whether it would teach style in writing and subtlety in reading, or whether—because at base it is a rattling good yarn—it ought to be taught for pure pleasure. We concluded, of course, that for different levels any one of these justifications was appropriate. We also concluded that most of these “shoulds” could be equally well fulfilled by *Track of the Cat*, with a virtually exponential increase in the odds that students would actually read it to the end. And thus we were brought to a discussion of “standards” in education.

The seminar served its purpose, perhaps because there were no hidden agendas. We sought to discover again the seamless web while realizing once more that in the end all of human life is also utterly unique. We discovered that we each knew something the other needed to know. And we discovered new ways by which we could let our students in on this secret.

The second seminar was both more ambitious and more direct, as it sought to examine “Society and the Detective Novel.” It began with the premise that our society had not endowed detective novels with the merit badges of the established “classics”—that *Silas Marner* was still thought, perhaps for valid reasons, to be a “better” book than *Roger Ackroyd*—and that in part for this reason good readers devoured them by the thousands. Those taxi drivers speak to me of Robert Ludlum while I wait for the child in the cradle to lisp in Greek. The course set out to find detective, mystery, and spy novels with contemporary settings which could be brought into the classroom and be demonstrated to possess the same elements that had rendered the classics worthy of study. We also often discussed whether a detective novel might enable the teacher to bring into the open in classroom discussion a subject otherwise thought taboo. We concluded that on the whole it could not, but in reaching this conclusion we all learned something more about how society constrains open discussion.

The second premise was more directly mine: that one could teach students the actual methods of the historian, and thus appreciation for history as a subject of complex study based on reasoning rather than memorization, by showing how the historian functioned as a detective. To this end, novels were chosen which illustrated the basic methods of the historian as imposed on a fictional detective. We all agreed that this worked well.

To take the second premise first, what are the steps imposed upon the historian by the constraints of his method and by the demand for honesty? First, one must define the subject: is it the coming of war? the abolition

of slavery? the role of George Washington in founding the nation? the influence of the frontier movement in American life? Having defined the subject, one must learn how to ask the Right Question: that is, a question capable of receiving an answer, and in itself interesting, significant, and open to genuine investigation. Historical questions must be capable of interpretation, not be limited to a statement of fact, not be tendentious, and be open to an answer within the lifetime of the researcher (or the time given the student for writing a paper). Knowing how to ask the question one actually wishes to ask is difficult for most people, and it is especially so for adolescents whose questions arise as much from emotion as from reason. What, then, is a Right Question? One capable of an answer, though not necessarily only one answer.

The historian must then find the evidence on which to base an answer. This requires an understanding of what logic, society, and one's intuition take "evidence" to be. This requires legwork, imagination, persistence, and sometimes good fortune. Having found the evidence, one must evaluate it, to find within the body of data its variety of meanings, the operable truths that arise from the data, the relevant meaning for the question asked. And then the historian, as teacher or writer, must go on to organize the evidence in a coherent manner for presentation to others, and convey that evidence through article, book, lecture, seminar. In the end one may have set the record straight on a matter of some importance; one may have decoded the environment just that bit more; one may have even, though usually by implication, showed someone what to do in a given situation, how to confront a moral dilemma, how actions and ideas have consequences beyond the expected and wanted. One will, in fact, have revealed the healthy tension that influences us all as we move between the exact and the unknown. We will also have learned that order, factual accuracy, a sense of cause and effect, and an eye for detail matter in our daily lives.

These are not inconsequential matters to learn. Disciplines other than History can teach them. History must teach them if it is to have the relevance so often granted to the melange of courses bearing titles, all of which are variations on "Some Things You Should Know about How the World Works before You Go Out into It" (or, Creek and Paddle 101a: Civics and Social Responsibility). These are matters that assuredly can be learned by application through a well-wrought urn of a detective novel, for the mystery is "solved," the clues are "decoded," through precisely the same steps. *Clue*, after all, is simply an ancient Greek word for the ball of twine which the Athenian prince Theseus carried with him as he descended into the great Cretan Labyrinth, in search of the Minotaur. Tying one end of the thread (or *clue*) to the doorpost of the Labyrinth,

Theseus played it out behind him as he went into the depths. After killing the Minotaur, he followed the twine back to the surface to claim Ariadne in triumph. When we “prepare” students for life, when we seek to help our students acquire skills, when we speak of decoding the environment, are we not referring to just such a clue?

Thus the seminar read twenty-three books. All agreed that at least four of these were “classics” of literature as the conventional wisdom would define the term, except for the element of age. All agreed that they taught the methodology of history by example. All found how, through the trends so apparent in such fiction, one could read the shifting paranoia of society. All found at least three books they were determined to take into the classroom. For the developmental reader, some found books that would excite them with the act of reading itself. For the relatively sophisticated reader, others found additional good fare on which they could feed. For the historian, one found how the textbook itself was an artifact of culture and suggested means by which students might interrogate the text. For the teacher of a foreign language, one found another door into the acute problems of understanding a culture through translation. All had a good time, the instructor most of all.

What problem might one examine in detective fiction? In consultation, the group chose eleven. We began with an attempt to define what it is in life and literature that frightens, mystifies, and instructs. We all read one novel, Geoffrey Household’s *Dance of the Dwarfs*, which was found universally applicable in the classroom: compelling, well-written, thoughtful, and above all, forcing the reader to think again about conventional definitions of literature. We moved on to categorization: that is, what is a mystery? a detective novel? a spy story? a thriller? And then we explored forbidden territory: ethnicity, sexuality, even homosexuality in American life. In P.D. James’s *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* we explored why society assumes that the work of a detective is unsuitable for a woman. Was society speaking to its conventional concept of a woman’s work? or of the detective? or of crime? or of modes of thought? James, we concluded, was a major novelist, not “merely” a writer of detective novels. This was week four, and the seminar never looked back.

In the end we tangled with the hardest question of all: What is justice? Civics courses teach about justice; truly able detective fiction will demonstrate justice in all its ambiguities. To young people in our society, wishing to identify a “hero,” the complex way in which the heroic differs from time to time and from culture to culture is one of the most frustrating moral challenges a teacher may perceive. Is the person who sees justice done a “hero”? What then is the hero? We ended our inquiry aware of a body of untapped literature which may better serve the *literary* as well as

the moral ends once served by asking our students to read *Silas Marner*, as we discovered how Dorothy Sayers, Dante scholar, could combine *Marner* and *Mill on the Floss* in a far more compelling, indeed far more complex, moral allegory about human responsibility, guilt, and cause, the dangerous triumvirate associated by the lay reader with History. In *The Nine Tailors*, as in the wit and irony of Rex Stout, we found the purposes of both history and literature served.

“Relevance” is, I have concluded, best demonstrated through the comparative approach to knowledge, and through the presentation of the methods of historian and literary critic in a context that will demonstrate the elements of skill and practical application that arise. The third seminar, “An Unstable World: The West in Decline?,” produced papers no less good, contained Fellows no less committed, and gave rise to discussions no less lively, than the two seminars that preceded it. Nonetheless, it did not achieve its purpose, for in the end we had no fuller understanding of what it is that we mean when we say that the “West is in decline,” no more far-ranging ammunition with which to combat such a view, and no greater awareness of how history, literature, or the industrial arts may interact in pursuit of the same goals. The fault was mine, and it arose, I think, from the decision to focus on “a problem.” Unless students perceive “a problem” to be *their* problem, it is no problem. Unless students recognize that acid rain poses a problem for them, their interest in the environment, for example, is likely to be academic in the truest sense of the word. What was found to be true in the first seminar defeated the third: too many students still think in the context of national identities, in terms of OPEC-inspired hostilities, Japanese competition, Soviet intransigence. These perceptions are not incorrect, but if one caters to them as a teaching strategy one has defeated the goals demonstrated (and achieved) in the first two seminars: one does not provide students with an understanding of general principles, so that unhappily they may conclude, as the taxi driver did conclude, that History seemed to be but “one damn thing after another.”

Of course, the notion of “decline” is itself rooted in Western culture. It partakes of the biological fallacy: that nations are like organisms, that they are born, mature, decline, and die. Cultures that assume such a sequence to be true of nations must also believe that the society either grows or decays: that one must be expanding or shrinking, aggressor or aggressed-upon, exploiter or exploited, in an economy of growth or of recession. Such an assumption feeds upon the conventional wisdom derived from the four arenas in which the historian operates: the economic, political, social, and intellectual. The very notion that a society may be in decline is more untouchable in the publicly supported classroom than

a discussion of sexuality may be. The notion of decline, for any society, is based on a nineteenth century convention of thought so deeply rooted (to retain the biological metaphor) that it may not be approached through interdisciplinary inquiry. It was not, in the end, at this time and for the purposes of energizing and exciting the students to new inquiries about themselves, the Right Question. Thus seminar two taught seminar three, and all taught the instructor, the truth of a long-recognized historical position: since people are motivated by what they believe to be true, the most important study for the historian, the most significant subject for the teacher, and the most enjoyable subject for the student, is about what people *believe* to be true.

The third seminar, then, was not a failure: indeed, it was a success, for it returned all its participants back upon the most fundamental of historical and literary inquiries—how do we come to believe what we believe? The instructor batted no home runs, though there was many a three-base hit among the curriculum units prepared by the Fellows. One reminded us of the problem of the modern mercenary in society (and by extension, of the presence of the terrorist), for *soldier*, after all, derives from *solidus*, Latin for “piece of money.” Another reminded us of how African literature in English may open up the continent of Africa to American students. Two others examined the visual arts, and how students might be taught to see, not merely to look. And the instructor learned how to give the taxi driver a better answer: not “I teach history” but “I teach historians”—for every teacher, whether of art, shop, or literature, was his or her own historian.

Batting .667 seemed alright, once we realized this.