The History Learning Project: A Department "Decodes" Its Students

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It is a story replicated in many history classrooms during the course of a semester. Students have once again done poorly on an assignment or exam. Their essays are the sites of massive, undifferentiated data dumps. They have paraphrased primary sources instead of analyzing them, ignored argumentation, confused past and present, and failed completely to grasp the "otherness" of a different era. A few students, as always, have done extremely well, but many have done poorly. What is wrong with these students? How can a teacher help them understand history?

These sorts of poor performance often result from a mismatch between what college history teachers expect of their students and what those students imagine their task to be. Most college professors learned how to be historians more or less by osmosis, without explicit instruction on how to perform many of the operations necessary to produce historical knowledge. They, like the minority of students who seem to perform historical tasks effortlessly, are naturals who have not had to reflect consciously on what they do automatically. As a result, professors often do not model for their students some of the most basic—and most essential—steps in historical analysis. As Sam Wineburg has noted, it is so habitual for historians to check the author and date of a passage before they begin reading it that they do not realize that such procedures are not natural for many of their students.[1] Such intellectual maneuvers, unmarked by the professor and as invisible to the

[1] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, 2002), 17–22.

students as the sleight of hand of a magician, often leave students with the "facts" of history, but no idea of how they were created.

Yet, such mismatches between instructors and their students can become occasions for some very productive exploration. Once the fundamental misunderstandings that lurk beneath the surface of so many classroom disasters are submitted to systematic analysis through the scholarship of teaching and learning, such problems can serve as a starting point for studies that not only explore what must be explicitly taught to increase learning in history courses, but also what the faculty perception of bottlenecks to learning tells us about the students themselves.[2] The History Learning Project (HLP) is leading the history department at Indiana University through an analysis of such obstacles to learning, and in the process we are learning much about the students who inhabit our classrooms. Using the "decoding the disciplines" process, developed in Indiana University's Freshman Learning Project (FLP), we are working to make explicit the basic operations students must master to succeed in history courses.[3]

In the summer of 2006 the four authors (three historians and an educational developer) conducted and videotaped seventeen ninety-minute interviews with faculty in the history department, in which they defined bottlenecks, places where significant numbers of students are unable to grasp basic concepts or successfully complete important tasks. The interviewers worked with each historian to define as precisely as possible what an expert in the field would do to get past the obstacle that interrupted student learning. The result was the definition of a series of basic operations students must master to succeed in particular kinds of history courses.[4]

Learning about Students through Bottlenecks

In the process of defining bottlenecks, we discovered that we were also creating new knowledge about the students themselves. The analysis of the interviews helped delineate a picture of what many students bring to history classrooms. An instructor's description of classroom difficulties suggested the absence of certain skills among his or her students. Thus, what began as an effort to improve teaching also became a means to understand students. This investigation has told us much about undergraduates at a large state research university and may provide insights about students in history classes at other institutions.

A central bottleneck cited in almost all the interviews involved students' misconceptions about history as a discipline. Students and professors bring different ideas and ex-

[2] On the scholarship of teaching and learning in history, see, for example, Randy Bass, "The Scholarship of Teaching: What's the Problem?," *Inventio: Creative Thinking about Teaching and Learning,* 1 (no. 1, 1999), http://www.doiit.gmu.edu/archives/feb98/randybass.htm; Lendol Calder, William W. Cutler III, and T. Mills Kelly, "History Lessons: Historians and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," in *Disciplinary Styles in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Exploring Common Ground,* ed. Mary Taylor Huber and Sherwyn P. Morreale (Washington, 2002), 51–52; M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford, eds., *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom* (Washington, 2005), 31–215; and David Pace, "The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *American Historical Review,* 109 (Oct. 2004), 1171–92. For the Web site, electronic newsletter, and bibliography of HistorySoTL: An International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in History, a new organization open to historians interested in research in the pedagogy of our field, see http://www.indiana.edu/~histsotl/blog/.

[3] David Pace and Joan Middendorf, eds., *Decoding the Disciplines: Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking, New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco, 2004).

[4] Following Indiana University's policy on research involving human subjects, these interviews will not become publicly accessible.

pectations about history to the classroom, and this disconnect affects the teaching and learning of history.[5] From the perspective of many students, "facts" speak by themselves, and thus "The Story" of the past has an objective quality in which "truth" is found. They believe that their job in history courses is to regurgitate the dates and events they have memorized. Students who hold such notions of history may be overwhelmed in a classroom where instruction revolves around such unfamiliar mental operations as analysis, interrogation, interpretation, subjectivity, and argumentation. Behind those words lies a practice of history that is new to students, but so obvious to the instructor that it rarely merits discussion. For most historians, researching a historical problem means using multiple theories, methods, and tools borrowed from different disciplines and interrogating and analyzing texts, images, and other artifacts. In addition, the arguments and evidence put forward by other scholars must be evaluated and taken into account. Hence written history is not only about bringing new perspectives and knowledge to a subject, but also about connecting it with relevant similar issues others have studied.

Believing that those practices are as interesting and transparent for everyone as they are for historians, we ask our students to accomplish similar tasks in essay exams and papers. Many cannot. This should not be surprising, since, as one of our colleagues put it, "History may be a foreign country to our students, but our students are a foreign people to us." This cultural confrontation can lead to "student bashing" as faculty mistake students' inability to "decode the discipline" of history for a moral failing.[6]

The mismatch between student and faculty expectations was apparent in our interviews. Faculty reported that in lectures students often anticipate a straightforward story, not a complicated history with multiple perspectives and ambiguities, and they find it difficult to distinguish broad themes, evidence/examples, and interpretations/arguments. Students, particularly those close to the first stage of William Perry's scale of ethical and cognitive development (such students are prone to taking a dualist stance, in which answers are either right or wrong), may view the textbook as the central source from which all factual answers for the exam emanate, while professors often conceive of textbooks as secondary tools providing students with a general (sometimes uncritical) narrative that must be compared to more scholarly writings, course lectures, and documentary sources.[7]

Students, who are taught to memorize and replay historical narratives, tend to think of sources as mostly "objective" writings produced by members of the cultural elite. The distance between such expectations and what students encounter in our classes is often breathtaking. One interviewee, for example, wanted to help his students to consider what the decision to put fingernail polish on Rosie the Riveter could tell us about the conflicted

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[5] See Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano, "'Famous Americans': The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes," *Journal of American History,* 94 (March 2008), 1186–1202; Linda S. Levstik, "Articulating the Silences: Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of Historical Significance," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives,* ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York, 2000), 287–90; and Peter Seixas, "*Schweigen! die Kinder!* or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools?," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History,* ed. Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg, 21.

[6] On student bashing, see Joan Middendorf and David Pace, "Overcoming Cultural Obstacles to New Ways of Teaching: The Lilly Freshman Learning Project at Indiana University," in *To Improve the Academy: Resources for Faculty, Instructional, and Organizational Development,* ed. Devorah Lieberman and Catherine Wehlburg (Bolton, 2002), 210, 216–18. Professor J., Indiana University, Aug. 24, 2007.

[7] William Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York, 1970). Sam Wineburg notes that when asked to rate the trustworthiness of various documents, including a textbook excerpt, historians in a study he conducted rated the textbook least trustworthy, and the students rated it most trustworthy. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts,* 67.

values of World War II propagandists. Others wanted their students to think about the significance of centering a map on a particular country or the ideological biases implicit in a Jacob Riis photograph of an immigrant family. The difficulties in bridging the chasm were captured in an interview with a colleague about his efforts to teach an African epic story:

> The students are overwhelmed by the otherness of the tale. . . . First are the students who are just bored by it; who maybe are just interested in civil war history and the lining up of battles and they come to this story and it's just so obviously non-historical. . . . But the other kind of student gets wrapped up in the details. They're so interested in the story, they don't ask questions about it. And so I see the bottle-neck sort of in two ways as trying to convince those that don't think it's history at all that there might be some historical meaning in it and those who are engaged by it to think and probe more deeply.[8]

This experience was far from unique. Students who have been led to see history as the chronicle of elites and of world-altering events have difficulty in conceiving of literary sources, pictures, maps, diaries, or songs as legitimate sources for studying history. For these students, analyzing an "illegitimate" primary source is neither easy (they do not know how) nor intellectually pertinent (they do not know why they should).

Students also must accept that sources are created by human beings and are as compli-cated as life itself. Faculty expect students to re-create imaginatively the cultural context in which such artifacts were produced and to re-create the meanings and perspectives of the people who produced them. As one of our interviewees said, "with a historical source, we want to know who created it, why they created it, what the context was when they cre-ated it . . . primary sources don't just drop from the sky . . . human beings create them."[9] We expect our students to know that the bias of a source does not necessarily disqualify it from usefulness. They may be asked to use the same primary source as a locus of infor-mation about what "really" happened in an era and also about the subjective perspectives that particular individuals brought to their experience. For students expecting a different kind of discussion this may seem like a walk into a confusing twilight zone.

Adding intention and argument into the mix renders history even more slippery and subjective. Students who read for the story and the facts, not for the argument and its validity, often experience a task such as identifying and evaluating thesis statements or arguments from sources as a major challenge. As one of our interviewees pointed out, many students "do not feel that they are qualified to critique someone who has written a book because automatically this person obviously knows much more than they do."[10] Such students do not expect to evaluate texts critically, and they are uncomfortable with inserting themselves into an ongoing dialogue about an event or issue of the past or with disagreeing with experts.

Not surprisingly, when such students write papers they have difficulty generating argu-ments or thesis statements of their own and supporting them with evidence. They tend to describe or summarize the readings rather than evaluate them, or they attempt to narrate "what happened." In the words of one of the professors:

[8] Professor L., Indiana University, interview by David Pace and Joan Middendorf, July 26, 2006.
[9] Professor J., Indiana University, interview by Pace and Middendorf, July 2, 2006.
[10] Professor H., Indiana University, interview by Middendorf and Arlene Díaz, Aug. 4, 2006.

> There's a group that just wants to summarize the book, but there is another group that has actually gone a step further than that, that has actually read the book fairly critically . . . they can show that. What they don't do is . . . actually *make* the argument. They don't take you through the parts; they don't show you where the evidence is. Their assumption is there is a right answer that I'm looking for and all they have to do is say the right answer *somewhere* in that 3 to 5 pages and they're off the hook. . . . What you *don't* have to explain is what happened. And ironically that's what they think is the core of what they should be learning in the class.[11]

As the interviews progressed we were increasingly struck by the extent to which the bottlenecks described by our colleagues involved affective as well as cognitive difficulties. Our colleagues were telling us about our students' hearts as well as their minds. It soon became obvious that we needed to explore the complex and often subtle emotional landscape on which instruction unfolds.[12]

Faculty repeatedly described students' emotional difficulties in suspending judgment while exploring a historical phenomenon. One interviewee, when asked what he would do if faced with the kinds of analyses required of his students, spoke of "a willingness to read for awhile without result, willingness to just get a sense of tone as opposed to looking for information that can be extracted. And so just spend some time just sitting in a document as opposed to looking for something specific that can be used."[13] But he and other interviewees reported that students have difficulty slowing down enough to allow a complex explanation to emerge.

The tendency of students to rush to judgment can easily be dismissed as a weakness of a generation raised to expect instant gratification. But comments in the interviews suggest that the desire of students to move quickly to a conclusion may also arise from insecurities generated by their situation as novice learners in the discipline. As the faculty member quoted above noted, interpreting a set of documents from another era can be very threatening for a student who has never done so before: "Yes, that's a frightening moment, of course—finally to put your eggs in the basket and to offer the basket—that's always a frightening moment because that's when you are out on the limb."[14] Lacking both the experience and the confidence of their instructors, many history students are understandably nervous about claiming to understand the meaning in the words or actions of someone in a very different era.

Such insecurities may well be exacerbated by the intrinsic ambiguities involved in contemporary historiography. History students today are asked to operate in a complex world with few moral certainties and multiple interpretations of the most basic conditions of life, to an extent that was probably not matched in earlier generations. As one colleague

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[11] Professor M., Indiana University, interview by Leah Shopkow and Pace, Aug. 22, 2006.
[12] For some of the limited work that has been done on the role of emotions in learning, see Michalinos Zembylas, "Emotional Ecology: The Intersection of Emotional Knowledge and Pedagogical Content Knowledge in Teaching," *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies,* 23 (May 2007), 355. For a work that discusses this topic and also notes that since emotions are considered a female domain, attention to student emotions may further lower the status of teaching, see Jerry Rosiek, "Emotional Scaffolding: An Exploration of Teacher Knowledge at the Intersection of Student Emotion and the Subject Matter," *Journal of Teacher Education,* 54 (Nov. 2003), 399–412, esp. 411. In an issue of *Educational Psychologist* devoted to the emotions in education, the editors Paul A. Schulz and Sonja L. Lanehart note that "in terms of our understanding of emotions in education, the game is just getting started." Paul A. Schulz and Sonja L. Lanehart, "Introduction: Emotions in Education," *Educational Psychologist,* 37 (Summer 2002), 68.
[13] Professor O., Indiana University, interview by Díaz and George Rehrey, July 28, 2006.
[14] *Ibid.*

put it, "Many students or people in general are uncomfortable with ambiguity, but fundamentally, that's what history is." If, as was suggested by William Perry in his classic study *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years,* most students arrive in college without the cognitive ability to process complex issues of perspective, it is not surprising that many recoil from the complex forms of analysis required in many of our courses.[15]

The interviews also revealed many situations in which the content, as well as the process, of contemporary historiography is threatening to students. Problems that might seem to be caused by cognitive deficits may instead be rooted in students' fear of exploring areas that are ideologically charged. A colleague teaching the history of the nineteenth-century American family noted that her students generally mastered the basic skills she was teaching, but "sometimes, when something literally hits home for them or really resonates with them, they lose that ability. . . . They are emotionally committed to these dominant notions of home, and they don't want to challenge them."[16] The emotional charge that interrupted the learning process often seemed to emerge from students' over-identification with groups in the past and the fear that dealing with the ideas and actions of these groups will morally compromise themselves or their families. As one of our sources put it, for many students "changing their understanding of history is complicated by the fact that they believe that if they do this, that they are somehow being disrespectful to their own families, their own histories, their own sense of identity of who they are."[17] A colleague teaching Latino history indicated that his students could engage with the history of the dominant Anglo culture only to the extent that they were able to separate themselves from moral guilt about actions of the past. Similar observations were made independently by interviewees teaching about the history of African Americans, Africa, and Asia.

Not surprisingly, when students believe that they are faced with a stark moral choice between their families and the stories told by a history professor who will soon disappear from their lives, many defend those close to them by withdrawing from the intellectual process. This should certainly not serve as an excuse for avoiding controversial topics; controversy is intrinsic to history. But the experience of our interviewees suggests that it may be worth helping students gain enough distance from the past that they can encounter potentially threatening material in a manner that allows them to expand their perspectives on both the past and the present.[18] This requires both structure and sensitivity, but it seems well worth the effort.

For many students, the alien nature of historical reasoning makes the demands of our courses threatening. Their desire for success in college can seem to be endangered by expectations that may appear arbitrary or nonsensical, especially when the portions of the course that they do comprehend seem like an assault on their own or their families' moral validity. This situation has all the components of a classic collision between cultures: radically different conceptions of basic rules of interaction, anxiety about possible outcomes, and the perception of a threat to what one holds dear. This can—and sometimes does—result in a collapse of communication and a shutting down of the learning process. The

[15] Professor A., Indiana University, interview by Pace and Rehrey, Aug. 2, 2006. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years.*

[16] Professor N., Indiana University, interview by Shopkow and Rehrey.

[17] Professor H. interview.

[18] David Pace, "Controlled Fission: Teaching Supercharged Subjects," *College Teaching,* 51 (Spring 2003), 42–45.

failure of students to grasp the nature of the demands of a history course can appear as an unwillingness to work, and an instructor's insistence on certain forms of historical reasoning can seem vindictive and capricious.

But while the interviews made us more aware of the cultural divide that often separates student and instructor in history classes, they also gave us hope. All seventeen interviewees showed a deep desire to share their passion for history with their students. And, as historians who spend our professional lives studying just this sort of cultural confrontation, we should have intellectual tools for facilitating communication across the divide. We need only to be conscious of the process of teaching as a negotiation with a cultural "other."

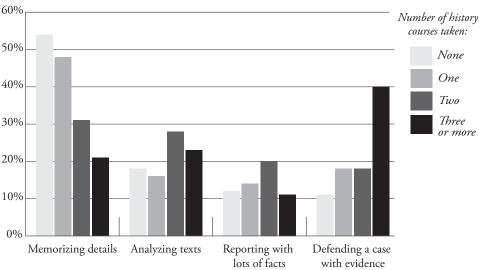## Learning from an Assessment of Students

Our interviews provided us with a good picture of faculty perspectives on the cultural and intellectual encounter between professional historians and the undergraduates in the classroom. But did the perceptions of the faculty who participated in the interviews correspond to what was occurring in the minds of their students? Early in the fall of 2007 we conducted a survey of students' attitudes to history and of their ability to perform basic tasks. What we found confirmed the experiences of the professors and brought new perspectives from which to understand our classroom audience.

For our assessment, we surveyed 842 students in thirteen history courses at Indiana University, a midwestern school with 30,000 undergraduate students and 401 history majors. We sought to determine their understanding of what professional historians do, their sense of how to prepare for history exams, and their ability to read and answer history exam questions.[19] The surveys were conducted in a mix of large introductory classes (150–250 students), intermediate classes (70–90 students), and small upper-division writing and research classes (20 students), including one advanced Honors seminar. Also included in the survey were two small (fewer than 20 students) history study skills courses for primarily first-generation college students. Our sample was pretty evenly divided across the four years of college; 86% of the first year students had never taken a college history course before. The percentage of students who had previously taken history courses increased as years in college increased, until among seniors, 48% had taken three or more history courses. This assessment established a baseline, and we intend to re-administer these questions in the future.

We asked the students what best describes what historians do: develop interpretations; evaluate ideas and decisions of earlier eras; record major events (wars, political struggles, etc.); or tell stories about the past. Thirty-eight percent of the students chose the answer we felt was most appropriate, "develop interpretations." Thirty percent chose "evaluate ideas and decisions of earlier eras," with smaller groups selecting the other answers. Students who had never taken a college history course were most likely to choose an answer other than "develop interpretations," and those with three or more history courses chose this answer most often. The number of history courses students had taken was a more important determinant of the choice than was class rank.

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[19] The questionnaire and more of the data are available at *The History Learning Project,* http://www.iub .edu/~hlp/.

Students' attitudes about what studying for a history exam entails

Figure 1. The results of the History Learning Project survey, conducted at Indiana University in August 2007, reflect the attitudes of 842 undergraduate students who were asked what they thought preparing for a history exam entailed. The students surveyed were enrolled in thirteen history courses, which included large introductory classes, intermediate classes, small upper-division and advanced classes, and study skills classes. Source: History Learning Project survey, Indiana University, August 2007.

When asked how they should study for history, 48% selected memorizing (an answer we considered wrong). This was particularly the case among students who had never taken a college history course before (54%, or 256 students). Students who had taken one or two courses remained confused about the best answer (defending a position with evidence), and it was only the students who had taken three or more history courses who got this answer more often than not.

Several questions asked students to read a paragraph from a history textbook in order to answer several questions. Almost everyone could identify the main idea in the paragraph and the evidence that would be useful in answering a specific essay exam question. For both of those questions, students who had taken two or more college history courses were slightly more likely to get the correct answer than students who had taken fewer than two.

Our questionnaire seemed to confirm our interviewees' perception that the majority of our students (62%) do not have an accurate understanding of what historians do, but the students were better at reading a passage than one would have expected from the interviews. Being able to do this for a short questionnaire, where individual tasks are isolated, does not necessarily mean that students could apply those skills consistently over a long reading or an entire semester, but it does show that they have foundational abilities. When faculty express concern about the inability of students to do the work in a history class, the problem may not be a lack of the component skills, but rather that most of our students do not understand what historians do. As one of the interviewees said, "I think it's often that they *can* do it, but it's not the natural thing for them to do. They don't quite know yet that is what they *ought* to be doing, because they haven't had enough experience

doing it. Because, [for many students] history, again, comes in 'yes and no,' 'true and false' answers, and simple, little 'facts.'"[20] This, along with the fact that 21% of the students who have taken three or more history classes still thought that the best way to prepare for a history exam was to memorize a lot of details, suggest that we still need to develop new ways to introduce students to the process of doing history.

Understanding the Audience for a Primary Source

The faculty interviews and the student surveys would have been of little importance had they not led to attempts to increase the learning of history in our classrooms. In the two semesters following the completion of the interviews, ten faculty and four graduate students in the Indiana University Department of History set out to teach explicitly the historical skills defined in the interviews and to assess what difference this instruction made in student understanding. They focused on skills ranging from note taking and historical argumentation to the ability to deal productively with emotionally charged subjects. We cannot give a full account of this rich program of pedagogical research, but we can provide a detailed account of one such experiment.[21]

The history faculty interviewed by the HLP referred repeatedly to the challenges primary sources pose for students. Students must learn to question the source, to see it as a message sent by an individual or group to others, and to decode that message.[22] They must concern themselves with the recipients of the message and how the intended audience for a source is implicated in its form. And they must learn to move back and forth from audience to context.

In a medieval history class taught by one of the authors of this article and shaped by operations that emerged in the interviews, student response to an assignment revealed that most students were unable to think historically about the audiences of narrative primary sources. Presented with a saint's life written in the ninth century, *The Life of Leoba,* students were asked to identify one specific audience for the biography, to explain what about the biography would have attracted that group, to find three places in the text where this appeal was visible, and to explain the nature of the appeal.[23] By this point in the semester (about a third of the way through) students were relatively comfortable reading narrative primary sources and pulling evidence to illustrate points or positions enunciated by the teacher, but many were floored by the assignment. This is an illustration of a point implied by our survey: students may be able to apply one historical skill in isolation without being able to mobilize that skill in combination with others.

In a typical response one student wrote that "One audience for the *Life of Leoba* might have been devout Catholic Christians." Since it was a Christian text, naturally the audience had to be Christian. The student had difficulty narrowing the audience further, although this student did specify that the audience would have to be able to read. This last point represented a sort of understanding about audience, although not about the medieval audience, since many people "read" books by listening to someone else read the

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[20] Professor J. interview.

[21] For a list of these projects, see *History Learning Project,* http://www.iub.edu/~hlp/.

[22] On Lendol Calder's experience in getting students to do "think alouds" as they read primary sources, see Lendol Calder, "Looking for Learning in the History Survey," *Perspectives,* 40 (March 2002), 43–45.

[23] Rudolf of Fulda, *The Life of Leoba* in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Sturm, Leoba and Lebuin Together with the Hodoepericon of St. Willibald and a Selection from the Correspondence of St. Boniface,* ed. and trans. C. H. Talbot (New York, 1954).

books aloud. Another student suggested that "One audience for *The Life of Leoba* could be those people who wished to model their lives off of Leoba but did not know her personally." The student could come no closer to defining what such a group of people might look like and how they might have come to know of the saint. Some students more successfully identified a potential audience, but could not explain the appeal of the text for that group. One student suggested that one audience might have been students of monastic schools (a very good possibility), but could not explain why the text might have been used in monastic schools. Evidently, many students were not yet prepared to use the audience of the text to promote their own historical understanding.

Using the "decoding the disciplines" model the instructor sought to define what steps students would need to take to relate a medieval text to its audience. First, they would have to differentiate among groups in a past society and be sure that the pastness of those people did not render them indistinguishable from one another. They then had to think about the characteristics of each group and how those characteristics might attract them (or even expose them) to some cultural experiences and forms and not to others. Students had to take into account the possibility that the same cultural product might appeal to different groups for different reasons.

To help students master those steps, the teacher designed a lesson for the teaching assistants to use in discussion sections. The students were to identify a specific cultural product they liked in any medium and explain as specifically as they could why they liked it. They were then asked to discuss what in their lives had prepared them to like it, who might not care for this product and the reasons why someone else might not respond as they did. Not surprisingly, most students chose entertainment media—television shows, Web sites, music; only one group chose a written text. The teacher hypothesized that if students could be more conscious of themselves as an audience, then they would be able to apply their new understanding to their reading of primary sources.

The students proved to be quite reflective. One student, discussing *The Simpsons,* commented that while non-Americans might enjoy the program, they would not enjoy it in the same way as Americans because they would not understand the cultural references. After the students had discussed themselves as an audience for a while, the teaching assistants directed them to the historical reading for the week. As the students mostly did not care for the reading, the teaching assistants began by asking the students to analyze why they did not like it and to point to the features of the text that did not please them. The students were then directed to reflect on those features to see if they could figure what sort of people might find it appealing. The students were able to be more articulate about who would enjoy this formal imperial biography, suggesting as an audience people in the emperor's court who might wish to see themselves as allied to imperial interests.

The next written assignment revisited the question of audience, and this time students received more direction in the assignment's instructions. They were asked to consider the ways a twelfth-century audience might encounter the vernacular text *The Life of St. Alexis* (sung in the street or at a court, read in private, or borrowed for a sermon).[24] They were then asked to describe the audience who would encounter the text in one of those ways. Students were specifically directed to the textbook to find information about these

[24] *The Life of St. Alexis,* trans. Leah Shopkow from V. L. Dedeck-Héry, *The Life of St. Alexis, an Old French Poem of the Eleventh Century* (New York, 1931), http://www.courseportfolio.org/peer/potfolioFiles/anonF/shopkow-l-2003-1/alexis.htm.

groups. A student who could only identify "pious Christians" as a potential audience for the life of Leoba was now able to identify "young monks or young nuns learning about the holiness of celibacy" as a possible audience. The student referred to the growth of cities around monasteries and correctly portrayed nuns and monks as having some contact with the outside world.

An assignment toward the end of the semester returned to the issue of audience. The students were asked to think about how the changes experienced by a group over time might change its expectations and desires. The students, who were reading a fourteenth-century biography of an exemplary military hero from Castile, were asked to think about what nobles from the twelfth century would not have understood or liked in this biography had they read it. In other words, students were supposed to figure out how the noble class had changed over the last two hundred years and to see the new characteristics of the nobility in the text they were reading. The students did moderately well at this complicated task, but none had fully mastered every aspect.[25] One student recognized the importance of courtliness to the nobility, but did not look sufficiently at economic and social changes. Another described in some detail the many ways that the nobility had changed but was only moderately successful in linking those changes to what appeared in the biography. Across the semester, no student went from not understanding how to think about audience to shining mastery of the skill, but all showed incremental improvements that with further practice could lead them to mastery. Moreover, the focus on specific historical operations at the beginning of the process made it possible to assess the success of teaching strategies that were employed.

A New Curriculum and a Department's Teaching Culture

As Tom Angelo has remarked, one semester may not be enough to produce the changes of practice and understanding we would like to see in our students. Therefore, if we want more students to learn these skills by the time they graduate, any serious attempt to model historical thinking needs to be integrated into a systematic curriculum. But the creation of such a broad skills-based vision of a department's offerings requires a shared space and a common language. The creation of such a shared "teaching commons" is particularly difficult in humanities disciplines such as history, where there is little tradition for collaborative scholarship.[26]

For the last four years our department's director of undergraduate studies, one of the authors of this article, has been slowly laying the foundations for such a community of teaching through round tables and presentations in which faculty share their classroom experiments. But we found that the History Learning Project gave a great impetus to this effort. Although the decoding the disciplines model was originally designed to help faculty discover new strategies for teaching, we discovered that it became a bridge to col-

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[25] That the students had not yet developed the habit of researching the group in the textbook was not an entirely unexpected outcome, because students introduced to new strategies do not immediately consistently employ them. See Marilla D. Svinicki, "New Directions in Learning and Motivation," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (no. 80, Winter 1999), 13; and Michael Pressley et al., "The Challenges of Classroom Strategy Instruction," *Elementary School Journal,* 89 (Jan. 1989), 301–42.

[26] Tom Angelo, "Seven Promising Pathways, Seven Perilous Pitfalls: Helping Aspiring Teacher-Scholars Succeed," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Sydney, Australia, July 5, 2007 (in Leah Shopkow's possession). Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings, *The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons* (Stanford, 2005).

Table 1
Historical skills in a possible developmental history curriculum:
The example of primary sources

Analytical Skills	100 Level [Comprehend/Recognize]	200 Level [Interpret/Apply]	300 Level [Explain/Evaluate]	400 Level [Create]
Dealing with evidence: Primary sources	Discriminate between a primary and a secondary source and their uses in research. Learn how to analyze/question a primary source: Who wrote it, when, why, its audience, its historical context, inferences that can be drawn from it, etc. In other words, students will comprehend how to extract information from artifacts and relate it to broader course themes. Recognize the place, time, and human agency behind the production of a primary source.	Interpret human agency in the context of how an artifact from the past was produced and of the times in which it was produced.	Evaluate the trustworthiness of sources. Compare and contrast diverse and potentially conflicting primary sources for a single historical problem.	Develop relationships among multiple sources and synthesize the major connecting issues among them.
Bottlenecks and difficulties for students in acquiring those skills	• *Recognizing the variety of primary sources and interpreting them.* • *Re-creating historical context and connecting it to a document. Beginning to empathize with people from another place and time.*	• *Re-creating historical context and connecting it to a document.* • *Identifying and empathizing with people from another place and time.*	• *Dealing with ambiguity and contradiction in historical sources.*	• *Recognizing major points in primary and secondary sources.* • *Producing some sense through connecting multiple sources.*

Table 1. This table shows primary-source analysis skills that history instructors can teach their undergraduate students and the difficulties that students encounter when learning them. Instructors gradually teach students more difficult skills as they progress from introductory to advanced courses. SOURCE: Developmental curriculum created by Arlene Diaz, Joan Middendorf, David Pace, and Leah Shopkow for the Indiana University Department of History, fall 2007, based on Lorin W. Anderson and David R. Krathohl, eds., *A Taxonomy of Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York, 2001).

laboration, because it created occasions for further discussion and a language with which to talk about teaching. As we interviewed faculty, they reflected on their teaching in new ways. Some were inspired to change aspects of their syllabi and lectures. One of our colleagues literally went straight from his interview to his office where he began to produce an "owner's manual" for his class in an effort to make his expectations about history as a

discipline explicit. Almost half of the department's faculty participated in the interview process or created lessons to model explicitly some historical skill, and fifty-eight faculty and graduate students from the department participated in a one-day workshop in August 2007 in which the results of the project were shared.

This collective energy made possible the first steps toward the creation of a developmental curriculum in history. Content analysis of the interviews had revealed a number of bottlenecks to learning history, such as: 1) the nature of the historical discipline and historical analysis; 2) drawing evidence from primary sources, secondary sources, and textbooks; 3) recognizing and producing arguments; 4) learning how to use library resources for research; and 5) writing historically.[27] At a departmental retreat groups of faculty and graduate students were asked to take a set of related bottlenecks and to specify how they might be addressed across the four levels of undergraduate courses. Table 1 shows how we seek to help students overcome the bottleneck of analyzing primary sources from first year to senior history courses.

As a result of the workshop, we now have a prototype with which to begin departmental discussions for reforming our curriculum, based not on geography or period but on the historical skills students need to learn. We do not envision that faculty will be required to teach these skills in any particular way, or that all faculty will focus on all of the skills. We hope instead that each faculty member will choose at least one skill pertinent to the class content and course level, and explicitly model it in a way with which he or she feels comfortable. Because many of these skills are interrelated and used in many different historical tasks, we believe that if each professor explicitly teaches and provides practice for one or more of these during each semester, more of our students will be better equipped to improve their performance in history courses. Ideally, by the time a student gets to his or her senior research course, the professor will not have to teach that student how to analyze a primary source or recognize an argument or compile a bibliography. Thus, not only is the department opening the codes of its discipline to its students, but its faculty are becoming part of a culture where teaching and learning is an area of intellectual inquiry, research, and sharing.

Conclusion

The History Learning Project, like this article, began with a problem: a difficulty in communicating some of the most basic skills and ways of thinking that we as historians have to pass on to future generations. By reframing this problem, not as a misfortune to be endured, but rather as an opportunity to gain knowledge about our students and how we can teach them, new strategies for teaching evolved quite naturally. We have created inventories of basic ways of thinking that need to be explicitly modeled for history students, undertaken surveys of student understanding of history, developed new sensitivity to students' emotional experience of history, begun numerous projects exploring new ways to model basic operations in particular courses, and fostered a new sense of departmental collegiality and shared purpose in teaching. All of those steps have emerged from viewing the bottlenecks to learning in our classrooms as intellectual challenges, which we can address with the same kinds of mental tools we employ in traditional historical research.

[27] Joan Middendorf, David Pace, Leah Shopkow, and Arlene Díaz, "Making Thinking Explicit: Decoding History Teaching," *National Teaching and Learning Forum,* 16 (Feb. 2007), 1–4.

And this is barely the beginning of the process. We wish to continue to define and refine the basic operations that students must master to succeed in our courses. We hope to challenge colleagues at other institutions to compare our findings with the implicit demands of their classes and the profiles of their students in order to widen our understanding of teaching and learning history in higher education. We hope to initiate a dialogue with secondary social studies teachers, to foster a seamless and efficient process that stretches across many years of education. And, finally, we would like to bring students into the conversation, finding a place for their voices, their perceptions, and their energy in the shared task of making the past available to future generations.

We have been struck throughout by the power and the possibilities of the scholarship of teaching and learning. We have seen colleagues reenergized and empowered by the experience of encountering the problems in their classrooms as intellectual challenges to be solved. We have seen the act of teaching transformed from a solitary struggle to a shared project. And we have seen students learn ways of thinking that were in the past denied to them. Have we reached an educational millennium? Far from it. There remain many intellectual and institutional obstacles to systematically increasing student learning of history. But there seems to be a new possibility for collective gain, for drawing ever more historians into a conversation about teaching and learning, for building on each semester's victories in the next.

In listening to colleagues struggle with the bottlenecks to learning in their courses, it became increasingly clear how very much it matters whether students do or do not master the ways of thinking that they are being taught. A survey of undergraduate history alumni taken in 2000 by Peter Guardino, the Department of History's director of undergraduate studies, indicated that only 2% had become college or university faculty, whereas 34% were in business, 23% had become attorneys, 9% had gone into primary or secondary teaching, and 4% had become librarians or archivists. While it is possible that some of these individuals found direct applications for the content knowledge of history in their jobs and lives, it is more likely that the study of history added value in its skills and modes of thought. Thinking historically will be crucial to all of our students, not just to those who feel comfortable with these ways of operating at the beginning of their college careers. We need citizens who can parse the political rhetoric and consumers who can read the subtexts of the advertisements aimed at them. We need planners who can situate the communities they plan for in their historical context, so as better to serve them. We need politicians and diplomats who understand why the use of the word "crusade" might produce undesirable historical flashbacks in some audiences. Our students need to be able to integrate what they know in a world where they are surrounded with microtrends and niche marketing and the associative leaps of the hypertext world. It is these ways of thinking that we must pass on to our students, and modeling the basic skills in individual courses and in the departmental curriculum can give us a great advantage in our effort.

There is nothing trivial about the lessons that today's historians have to teach. There is wisdom accumulated in our monographs, wisdom about change and permanence, about the clash of cultural realities and the need to encounter the "other," about the stories that we tell ourselves and the stories others would have us believe. It is our duty to make this wisdom available to a new generation of students. But, as we have often seen during this project, it can also be our joy.