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Challenges of the large survey subject: teaching and learning how to read history

Georgine Clarsen

University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia
georgine@uow.edu.au

The large survey subject is a challenge to all humanities teachers, but many of the problems it poses are specific to each discipline. This paper tracks the difficulties of teaching a first year university history subject, as class sizes increase and the traditional tutorial delivery mode is placed under pressure through financial constraints and administrative policy. It utilises the emerging literature on teaching and learning history, History SoTL, which reflects a new interest in disciplinary-specific pedagogical practices. This paper outlines the moves I have made - in keeping with recent the historiographical emphasis on developing students' historical consciousness, rather than simply expecting students to acquire knowledge of past events – to give students a better understanding of how historians think, read and write.

Keywords: decoding the disciplines, HistorySoTL, reading tools

Introduction

Teaching a large survey subject in history, especially at first year level, is not the task of choice for most academics. 'Soul-destroying' is the only half-joking term most of us use when we face a theatre full of intake students, knowing that ahead of us lies thirteen weeks of struggling to deliver a subject that does some justice to the complexities of our subject matter, at the same time as engaging the students at their current level of historical knowledge and interest (Sears, 2005). As academics, we have gone through a long, structured process to end up behind the lectern, a cognitive apprenticeship of sorts (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989; Calder, Cutler and Kelly, 2002), but sadly that work rarely prepared us for undergraduate teaching.

The silence reflects an unspoken assumption that teaching is a less valued professional activity than historical research and should come naturally to the good historian (Sherry 1993; Calder 2006). Universities increasingly require instruction in academic teaching but for the historian that generic instruction is often not sufficiently finely grained to speak the language and culture of our 'tribe' and address the specific challenges we experience in the classroom (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Shulman, 1987). Recently, those of us who are seeking a more discipline-focussed teaching practice have become intrigued by the analysis of 'signature pedagogies', developed in professions such as law and medicine (Shulman 2005).

The result has been the emergence of a scholarship of teaching and learning, HistorySoTL, in the United States and Britain that is specific to the discipline of history (Stearns, Seixas and Wineburg, 2000; Booth, 2004; Cutler, 2006). In Australia, public debates on that research are only just beginning to be heard (Brawley, 2007a and 2007b). The underlying assumption of History SoTL is that teaching history is a cultural act that conveys not only explicit content about the past, but even more importantly carries with it implicit messages about what the

enterprise of history itself is all about. As a number of prominent historiographers have put it, 'a great deal of content is embedded in the form' (Stearns, Seixas and Wineburg, 2000, 3).

This paper traces the changes in my thinking about my first year history survey subject as I encountered the growing body of HistorySoTL literature. In particular, it focuses on the discrepancy between the professional expectation that history students understand the practice of reading - and the reality that most students struggle with the task.

Teaching undergraduate history

Australian Studies 101: Cultures and Identities, is a foundational history subject that looks like many others across the country. It is a reading-intensive subject characterised by theoretical complexity (the deceptively simple concept of national identity is key); a delivery mode of large lecture and tutorial sizes taught by postgraduate students; a diverse student body from a range of national contexts and pedagogical backgrounds; a wide range of prior knowledge of Australian history; a large proportion of students in transition from secondary study; and a significant number of students, both international and domestic, with poor English language skills. As in other Australian universities, most domestic students are dependent on part-time employment, often only coming onto campus to attend classes (Krause, 2006). AUST101 was first designed when class sizes were smaller and students could expect considerable individual help, but without that support students experience the reading and assessment tasks as confusing and anxiety-provoking.

The result is that many of our undergraduates struggle with the demands of this traditional model of history teaching, which takes elite, full-time study to be the norm. They usually arrive wanting to believe that history is the study of facts about the past and that professional historians are equipped to settle doubts and controversies about what really happened. First year students, who usually attend classes in a number of disciplinary fields where the difference between them are not immediately apparent, often express frustration and bewilderment when they encounter attempts to have them reflect on the complexities, uncertainties and contingencies of historical thinking. Yet these are precisely the elements of the historical project that professional historians take as central to their discipline. For historians, the key to historical literacy is not the ability to recite authoritative knowledge about the past, but its power to teach us 'how to make choices, to balance opinions, to tell stories, and to become uneasy - when necessary - about the stories we tell' (Wineburg, 2001, p.ix).

This lack of fit between students' desires for unambiguous instruction and our insistence on nuance and complexity in historical debate (Anderson et al, 2001, Olwell, 2002), suggests that if we want history to continue to flourish at university level, we need to be more reflexive about what we are doing. We need to carefully analyse the disciplinary-specific qualities of good history teaching and consider how we can go about delivering it in ways that will meet the needs of students.

Large survey subjects

As the very term 'survey' suggests, with its overtones of a comprehensive mapping of a large tract of land, survey subjects are designed to traverse a wide domain and chart the significant features of a disciplinary area. In a related metaphor, 'coverage' of content is usually what preoccupies us as we design a survey subject. As we worry about coverage, we focus on the

bleak task of deciding what to include and what to disregard, and for the first three years I taught AUST101, my efforts were directed at trying to make sure that students were 'exposed' to the broadest possible range of historical events that have impacted on ideas of Australian national identity. It was clear, however, that the result of this teaching approach was less than spectacular. Student debate in tutorials and essays was generally depressingly simplistic and less than enthusiastic or insightful. Students were finding it hard to get beyond the 'what' of national identity (trying to accurately describe what it is - mateship, egalitarianism, 'fair go') in order to think in more sophisticated ways about the 'how'. That is, students were continuing to accept the politically expedient version of national identity as a *thing* that can be known (a noun), and were not inclined to think more critically about the formation of national identities in terms of *process* (a verb).

For historians, however, the *choices* that are made in constructing various elements of the past into a particular story about national identity in the present is key to understanding national identity (Booth, 2003, 24-27). We emphasise the *contingency* of the notion (it could be otherwise if we foreground other elements of Australia's past); the *contestation* that various elements of society engage in to have their version heard and accepted (the power to shape national debates); and the ways that the notion is historically *specific* (it changes over time and circumstance). The pressure for coverage, which assumes a 'tabula rasa' theory of teaching and learning that has long been discredited, focuses on selecting and then attempting to transfer subject content that students need to absorb, rather than opening out questions of how to foster active learning that allows students to begin to think like historians - that is, to develop an historical consciousness and acquire historical literacy (Bain, 2000). I came to be convinced that the assumption that we need to 'fill' undergraduates with substantive, factual knowledge and only then in senior and postgraduate years - could we expect them to think as historians was a flawed approach.

Coverage and uncoverage

Recent HistorySoTL research has argued that the survey subject can work to hide, rather than reveal, what good history is about. Some writers have posited the term *uncoverage* as the key to revitalising the dreaded survey subject (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006, 228-230; Calder, 2002 and 2006). They have proposed the term as an antidote to the impulse toward coverage and to encourage us rethink our teaching practice in fresh ways. Instead of focussing primarily on content, they suggest that history teachers should be thinking more about how to uncover disciplinary 'secrets' for undergraduate students who arrive at university 'uneducated' in them - secrets that are so much second nature to professional historians that we are barely aware of them (Pace, 2004a). Uncoverage deliberately sets out to expose for students the theoretical assumptions, methods of inquiry and mental habits by which academic historians turn facts about the past into historical knowledge. It asks students to think about the epistemological status of historical facts and to grapple with forms of historical inquiry that are not obvious or easy to understand. As I came to believe that my obsession with content was missing the point, my challenge became to bring that messier form of expertise into the classroom (Wineburg, 2003, 31) in ways that can effectively challenge students' expectations of objective and uncontroversial historical knowledge.

Decoding the disciplines

'Decoding the Disciplines' is a program that has been developed to analyse the specific characteristics of thinking and learning in each disciplinary field. It is a practical seven-step

program, initially devised at Indiana University but now being taken up at universities in many countries, which is intended to bridge the gap between generic educational research and the classroom experiences of university teachers struggling to help undergraduates master specific course material in particular disciplines (<http://www.indiana.edu/~sotl/index.shtml>). Decoding the Disciplines offers an experimental framework that helps teachers develop practical strategies to introduce students to the kind of thinking goes on in their discipline, so helping those students who have not had the privilege to arrive 'pre-educated' in the discipline to grasp what is often unspoken, implicit or assumed in each disciplinary culture. The seven steps act as a logical sequence of questions to open out the culture of each academic discipline and guide teachers into developing effective strategies to help students to acquire those skilled ways of thinking (Middendorf and Pace, 2004, 4-10).

In brief, the steps are:

- Step 1. What is the bottleneck to learning in this class?
- Step 2. How does an expert in the field do these things?
- Step 3. How can these tasks be explicitly modelled?
- Step 4. How will students practice these skills and get feedback?
- Step 5. What will motivate the students?
- Step 6. How well are students mastering these learning tasks?
- Step 7. How can the resulting knowledge about learning be shared and expanded with colleagues?

In my weekly conversations with students about the set readings, as well as in the feedback provided by teaching surveys, students repeatedly identified reading as a major problem for their engagement with this subject. In part the issue lies in some students' lack of time or motivation to engage with the texts and I am reminded to not overload the subject with required reading. But for the historian, active reading is a foundational skill - one that is essential to developing good writing, the major assessable task for this subject - so I believe it should remain as the central activity of AUST101. My role as a teacher is to find ways to help students want to - and be able to - read material appropriate to their status as first year undergraduates. This conviction has been strengthened by observing the dramatic change in students' engagement with the subject when they begin to 'get it', and the pleasure they express in their new reading skills.

When I pressed my students to describe their problems with the readings, most told me that they wanted to engage with the set readings, but they were unsure of how to do so. They frequently characterised the texts as 'complicated', 'hard', 'long-winded' and 'repetitive', even though I carefully selected what I believed to be exemplary historical writing. Rather than seeing important new points that build a convincing argument, or a creative and nuanced contemplation of the issues, or a careful layering of evidence, the students were telling me that what they perceive is the author making the same point over and over. Almost all were unable to identify different elements of the article, follow its development, or distinguish between essential and non-essential components of the argument. My encounter with the Decoding the Disciplines methodology has helped me to think through this bottleneck to student learning and begin to frame a practical response to the impasse (Step 1).

Reading historical texts

If students do not know how to approach the set readings, then the challenge for me is to reconstruct what expert historians do when they read these sources in ways that can help the student develop those skills. By asking myself 'how does an expert in the field do these things?' (Step 2) I have set off to unpack the cognitive processes that I employ in my own disciplinary practice - processes that I should not assume my students will automatically know. When I re-read the material I set for my students, I began to be aware of a silent commentary inside my head, which helped me to structure and organise the material I saw on the page.

It was a surprisingly complicated and multi-layered commentary, much of which had very to do with the substantive arguments of the text. I found myself constructing a broad context for the text itself: *Where was it published? When? Who was it intended for? What broader debates was it addressing?* Then I had some questions about the author: *Who was s/he? What can I find out about him/her? What else have they written?*

Next I found myself looking at the broad structure of the article itself: I checked out the footnotes (*Where there any? What kind of material and authors does s/he cite?*); I pondered over the title (*What did that suggest about the content or intention of the author?*); I looked at the way the argument was organised (*Subheadings or section breaks which could indicate the flow of the writing?*); and I checked out the language and the tone (*Personal? Dispassionate? Angry? Scholarly? Informal?*)

When I began reading the text, I noticed that I moved through another series of steps. I first skimmed it quickly to get a sense of the overall point the author was making: I highlighted any signposts the author placed throughout the article (*This paper argues that...*); I read the introductory and concluding paragraphs; I skimmed the body of the chapter and tried to separate out the arguments that the author put forward from the evidence s/he advanced to support those arguments; I looked for any asides or diversions from the main point of the article that I could safely ignore; and I looked up words I did not understand.

Finally, as I sat down to read the article from beginning to end (the first step taken by most of my students), I took brief notes, which distilled the article into a series of dot points that could help me memorise the arguments and review them at a later time. The process of capturing my thoughts and habits as I read, made me aware of how thoroughly trained I was and gave me a new appreciation of my students' difficulties.

David Pace identified that the key problem students face when they read history is that of *selectivity* (Pace, 2004b). Students who are unable to bring into play criteria for deciding what is key to understanding the text and what may be safely placed in the background, he suggests, will be overwhelmed and confused by the readings we set. If they assume that all statements are of equal worth and each need to be committed to memory, then they will feel inundated with detail and are unlikely to grasp the central thesis of the article.

Designing tools to enhance historical reading

Deciding what is important to a historical narrative involves developing a methodology for identifying the underlying structure of a piece of writing that elevates some statements as crucial and downplays others as subsidiary. Pace devised a web-based teaching tool to help

students differentiate between statements in a historical text, assign hierarchies of weight to them and identify the overall argument (Step 3). He posted a passage of set text throughout which he inserted icons that, when clicked on, delivered a recording of what Pace was thinking as he read each section. Through this technique Pace was able to demonstrate exactly *how* he established a hierarchy of each statement's importance to the text.

Since my teaching is largely based on ereadings, Pace's solution suggested an eminently practical way to model skilled historical reading to my students. In a small pilot program for a third-year subject, I developed a teaching tool with the help of teaching and learning specialists, which we called VARs (Voice Annotated Readings). VARS allows students to click on underlined text to hear my informal commentary or musings on that section of the article. A survey indicated that the students found the tool very helpful, with all negative feedback relating to the large file size that made it difficult for some students to access the readings on their home computers.

From my point of view, the major drawbacks were that it was a labour-intensive process to produce the VARs (about 4 hours per reading to record and insert the hyperlinks); and that the copyright issues were not straightforward, though VARs was cleared by the library copyright officer for a single download for study purposes. I was left feeling that VARs were a potentially very useful and student-friendly teaching tool, but that we needed to find better software for producing, compressing and downloading the readings. I also began to wonder how I could reinforce that active reading by devising a series of assessment tasks based on VARs in which students could practice active reading skills and receive immediate feedback on it.

The pilot study provided an excellent basis for gaining internal funding to further develop VARs as a more refined and accessible teaching tool, for use in AUST101. I currently have funding to employ a project manager and specialist IT help to produce one annotated reading for each week of the session and to better assess the value of the innovation. Using qualitative data from student and tutor surveys, student 'think alouds' (Calder and Carlson, n.d.), interviews and focus groups; as well as quantitative data on student hits and downloads on VARs across the session and a comparative analysis of retention rates and grades for the cohort, I hope to establish whether this teaching tool can help students engage with the subject in a more effective way.

Hearing my comments on the readings is, of course, only a passive learning experience for the students and Decoding the Disciplines suggests I take the next step (Step 4) of devising weekly small-scale exercises as they prepare for tutorials, that can help students to similarly uncover for themselves the routines of historical thought. It will give students the opportunity to sharpen their skills by recurring performances of active reading that can be done in classroom groups and as individual journal tasks (Calder 2002). Like Pace (2004b), I hope that my students might be motivated to engage with VARs by the benefits that they will gain in achieving maximum returns for the effort they expend in reading as well as the pleasures of mastering an intellectually challenging discipline (Step 5).

To build on the small-scale weekly exercises based on VARs, I have redesigned assessment tasks for AUST101, so that more emphasis is given to building students' reading skills *before* they are required to submit a formal essay. Pace (2004b) reported that his classroom experience demonstrated that repeated, focussed exercises helped to reinforce patterns of historical reading and assisted teachers to pinpoint difficulties before students floundered with

the major assessment tasks (Step 6). Given the increasing pressure on teaching time, it is important that the major assessment tasks reduce rather than increase the time required for marking assignments, so I have replaced the first of two essays on national identity (a mid-session task in which students generally perform badly and is consequently very time-consuming to grade and give feedback on) with a simpler exercise that asks them to demonstrate their active reading skills. Students will be asked to compile VARs-style annotations, though in textual form, by attaching their comments as footnotes to a hard copy of a reading they have chosen from a set selection. Rather than attempting to put forward their own historical arguments in an essay, they will be required to produce a detailed annotated reading of their choice based on a series of headings supplied to them. These headings will be designed to test their ability to unpack not only *what* the author says, but also *how* they go about structuring their argument and convincing their readers, as well as the broader *context* of the piece of writing.

I hope that this more thorough and carefully structured introduction to historical reading and reasoning will help more of my students to enjoy good historical writing and that it will give them a stronger basis for producing their own writing in the final essay assessment task. If VARs can work to reinforce and illustrate our lessons in good historical writing by equipping students to analyse how historical writing ‘works’ (or does not), then it may help them to produce quality writing of their own.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the steps that have led me to develop a teaching tool for a large first year survey subject that seeks to address students’ inexperience with the disciplinary conventions of history. Teaching and learning history has undergone considerable change in recent years, propelled in part by the ‘history wars’. Contemporary history has been characterised by a return to questions about the nature of history, as much as ‘covering’ the facts of the past. Students, however, tend to arrive at undergraduate history subjects with assumptions that derive from older, positivist notions of history and are poorly equipped to engage with contemporary historiography. A burgeoning HistorySoTL literature has helped me to think through the difficulties I have experienced in taking over a large history survey subject and led me to set in train a series of experimental responses to the disjunction between contemporary historiography and first year undergraduates’ ability to engage with historical texts. I adapted an interactive teaching tool, called Voice Annotated Readings, which focus on developing student’s capacity for active historical reading. I am using a range of evaluative measures to provide me with feedback about whether the new tools and assessment tasks I am developing will be experienced as helpful by my students.

These measures are part of a collective project to better understand the core cultural practices of teaching history (Stearns, Seixas and Wineburg, 2000, 13). At the same time, by inviting other historians to comment on my moves and to sharpen this discussion by elaborating on their own experiences (as I do with my historical research) this paper has fulfilled to the last injunction of the Decoding the Disciplines schema (Step 7), Sharing the Knowledge.

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