By Jeffrey P. Shepherd

Thoughts on Creative Teaching in the Undergraduate Classroom

The tenth generation Texan from the State Historical Association bellowed out the reasons for retaining the teaching standards for schools in the Lone Star State. “I’m a Texan and an American, speak English, and go to church,” he said. “Kids these days don’t know their history. The history keeps us all together: It’s what keeps this country from going to hell in a handbasket.”

A group of MEChA students interrupted him before he continued with more “Hyper-patriotic rants about Texas history.” The students disliked his suggestions for the curriculum because they were “one-sided representations of a multicultural state by the people who make the textbooks.” “We want,” protested the group, “books about our heritage that analyze the Alamo and the United States–Mexico War. We want brown faces in the books, and not just the illegal immigrants, or whatever you call them.”

The representatives from the Texas Historical Association and MEChA were not really meeting to discuss history. These were students reenacting a scenario I created in my survey course on American history at the University of Texas at El Paso. In this classroom debate, I divided students into several groups (parents, teachers, principals, school board members, students, politicians, and so on) and told them to revise the curriculum for Texas history, and in particular, units on the Alamo, Texas independence, and the United States–Mexico War. They discussed their strategies for 20 minutes in small groups, and then convened to present their proposals in a mock meeting sponsored by the Texas State Secretary for Education (myself) and the members of the El Paso Independent School District Board (another student group). We then had a “Question-and-Answer” period for reporters (another student group) to interrogate each faction. At the end of the debate the groups worked cooperatively in an attempt to devise a curriculum for the Texas public school system.

I use such methods because most college freshmen think that history is boring. When I ask my students about their feelings toward history, they tend to say something like this: “It’s just a bunch of boring facts about white men, presidents and war, and besides, it will not help me get a job.” The fact that I teach at a university where 76 percent of the students are Latino may explain part of the statement, but the overall tone of such replies should push us to rethink our approach to American history, especially in the survey course. I understand that historians seem locked in a perennial struggle to change (or not) how we teach, but I think that one solution lies in an experience we have all probably had. Because students consistently say that history is boring, I ask that we all remember what made us initially interested in history. Most of us would say that a specific teacher “brought history to life” or made it personally relevant. Bringing history to life and making it relevant are experiences that we can all relate to, and they do not require complex teaching strategies or space-age technology. I believe we can get students interested in history by using the following teaching approaches: focus on historical debates and arguments, get students personally involved with the contingency and indeterminacy of history, and stress that the present is in conversation with the past.

By meeting students half way between high educational expectations and creative pedagogy, I argue that students are fully capable of understanding why history is relevant, important, and interesting. With this in mind, I introduce students to what some scholars of teaching refer to as “historical literacy.” In the context of American history that means acquiring a basic grasp of some “standard” events and issues: contact and conquest, European empires and native peoples, colonial America, the Revolution, the Declaration and Constitution, westward expansion, slavery and the civil war, industrialization and reform, immigration, the Depression and New Deal, world wars, cold war, civil rights, Vietnam, multiculturalism, the Reagan years, and so on. I also want students to leave my class with the following things: reading and writing skills; the ability to analyze primary documents; understand different perspectives; have

Department Evaluators Needed

From time to time, history departments call the AHA to request names of faculty who would be willing to evaluate their department. The AHA would like to hear from faculty members with experience in doing such evaluations. If you would be willing to have your name referred to departments, please send your c.v. by e-mail (and not by mail) to Noralee Frankel, AHA’s assistant director for women, minorities, and teaching. Her e-mail address is:

nfrankel@historians.org

Departments as well as evaluators may find it useful to consult the article by Elisabeth Israels and Lewis Perry: “How to Organize an Outside Review,” Perspectives, October 2002, and available online at www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2002/0210/0210not1.cfm.
a sense that people and groups make history; that justice and democracy require educated human beings, not just educated citizens of a nation; and that solving problems through dialogue and cooperation is necessary for survival in a postindustrial world.

College teachers can address facts and content, investigate the processes of historical change, and at the same time make history interesting and relevant. To demonstrate this, I have summarized exercises and assignments that have been effective in my undergraduate classes. These exercises and assignments are not products of my personal or professional ingenuity; they are ideas that I selectively took from other teachers and adapted, altered, and adjusted to students and classes at my university.

1. Land, Culture, and Race in Northern New Mexico

In one post-1865 U.S. history survey course, I combined several historical events into a situation located in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico during the 1890s. The problem the students debated centered on how to settle a dispute over land that was claimed by the government, the Taos Pueblo, Hispano settlers, Anglo miners, and the railroad. I divided the students into groups representing the territorial governor, Hispanic farmers, Hispanic sheep herders, Hispanic elites, Anglo businessmen, representatives of the railroad and mining industries, Las Gorras Blancas, miners of various ethnicities, and leaders of the Taos Pueblo. A week before the debate, I gave each group a generic set of instructions. I also gave each group a specific (and secret) set of instructions that included a description of the interests, motivations, and goals of the group. Students came into the class and debated the use of the land, and then devised a solution incorporating the competing ethnic, religious, cultural, and economic agendas. They also submitted an assessment of the debate and their suggestions for resolving the dispute.

2. Harriet Jacobs: The Movie

This is an assignment based on Harriet Jacobs’s Life of a Slave Girl, which I frequently use in my pre-1865 U.S. survey class. I divided the class into groups of four to six students and gave them five weeks to work on a screenplay adapting the autobiography into a movie. They had to construct a visual representation and a written report based on three scenes from their proposed movie, both of which they presented to the class. Groups decided on a genre for their screenplay, chose actors and a movie score, adapted the dialogue, and then wrote a justification for why they thought the public would find the movie interesting. Students submitted video reenactments, storyboards, computer presentations, movie trailers, and acted out the scenes in class. I even had one group use characters made of clay for a cartoon aimed at children to teach them about women and racism.

3. Museum Exhibit: “Famous, Infamous, and Not-So-Famous People in the American West”

In my upper-division course on the American West, we repeatedly discuss the tension between popular images of the West and the “reality” of life in the West. To investigate these tensions, I planned a two-semester project focusing on museums. Part one of the project began in the regular upper-division course on the West, and required students to plan and design a museum exhibit on western history that would appear in the El Paso History Museum. I divided the class into small groups and they worked on mock exhibits that they presented to the class. During the 12th week of class I announced that I would teach an individual study course for a few students interested in building a real museum exhibit. Five volunteers and began the project the following semester. Part two of the project required the group to conduct research into a variety of people in the American West, write biographies on them, and then create a standard museum exhibit for the university student union. Students raised money for the project, publicized it in local media outlets, spoke on the radio, and even went on television. They organized an opening night with music and refreshments, and then managed the exhibit for three weeks. In the process, they learned how to present complex histories to the public, much like professional public historians.

These are a few of the exercises I have used in my classes. Others, such as debating a national park monument to the Navajo imprisonment at Bosque Rendondo, New Mexico, and their Long Walk back to the Four Corners; and a reenactment of the Cuban Missile Crisis, have also proven effective. The Long Walk assignment worked well in my upper-division American Indian history class, and the Cuban Missile Crisis reenactment in my survey course helped to highlight Americans’ fears during the Cold War. But ultimately, such projects only work if the students read the materials and participate in the assignment. If they do these things, and if the teacher situates the “fun” exercises within an engaging curriculum and critical pedagogy, then history comes to life. And if this happens, students may see history not just as a string of boring facts to memorize, but as something that shapes them and the world they live in.

Jeffrey P. Shepherd is an assistant professor of history at the University of Texas at El Paso. He teaches graduate and undergraduate classes on U.S., western, American Indian, Borderlands, and public history.

Guidelines for authors are online at
www.historians.org/perspectives