

A Philosophy of Teaching History
And
The Roles of Teacher and Textbook in the College Classroom
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Most history instructors will agree that history is not an exact science. Certainly there are provable facts, i.e. dates, census records, names of people, etc. However, most of history is, at best, a matter of perspective and the collection of interpretations of what happened and why based on non-provable sources. No reputable historian bases his or her presentation in the classroom on a single interpretation.

Textbooks are a collection of provable facts and non-provable interpretations gathered and melded by the authors. Except, perhaps, for the authors, no instructor agrees with everything presented in a particular textbook. All one needs to do is witness the internecine struggles for text adoption. Not only can they divide friends, but the outcomes have great political impact and are economically important to publishers. Can, and should, an instructor use a text with which he or she are in disagreement? The answer is YES, but in the college classroom it, and all textbooks, must be used in a very special way. One probably should not teach history in college in the same way it is usually taught in elementary school. And, as Shakespeare said, “-ay, there’s the rub.”

Part of the “rub” lies with the educational system. Psychologists seem to agree that children begin developing critical thinking skills at a very early age. And yet, few elementary textbooks, especially those in the social sciences, offer side-by-side presentations of different interpretations and fewer still are those teachers who will risk censure by the politically correct by offering interpretations not included in the “approved” text. The result is that at a time when students should be learning to evaluate differing interpretations and beginning to develop their own, they are “taught by the book”. Unfortunately, most high schools do little to improve the situation. It is almost a cliché in Texas that the social sciences are most often taught by the football coach.

One of the results of this failure to present at an early age a variety of logical (or illogical) interpretations or perspectives is that, when the student reaches college age, he or she doesn’t really know that “the book”, or “what I was taught” isn’t always correct and that they need to verify and evaluate a number of perspectives before reaching a personal conclusion. This makes the job of the teacher more difficult because, given less time for presentation, he or she must still try to present a variety of material to a student body who see it as only a mass of contradictions, not options to be evaluated.

So, I see it as the responsibility of the student to read and digest the perspectives presented in the textbook and any other assigned sources and the responsibility of the teacher to present material NOT found in the textbook which may offer different perspectives OR illustrate those in the textbook from a different point of view.