Constructing the Syllabus: Devising a Framework for Helping Students Learn to Think Like Historians

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IN HIS FASCINATING PORTRAIT of college life, *Alma Mater: A College Homecoming*, P. F. Kluge quotes a professor who says of teaching and its effect on students: "Sure, teaching is method and information, but it's something else, a gift, an enrichment of your life, a transformation that you spend the rest of your life discovering....[You continue to learn that what students] got from [their mentor] wasn't mainly stuff he said in class about *Moby-Dick*. It was a posture about books and living, new categories, relations to larger realities and questions." In a similar vein, writer and literature professor Jay Parini writes: "It is much safer to rely on [teaching] 'content,' to believe that if students have studied a certain sequence of texts...that they have somehow moved closer to being educated. In truth, it is having a stance toward this material, a tone, a manner of address, that matters more." Exemplifying such an approach, Parini suggests, was the teaching of Robert Frost. "Frost gave the class something they could take with them out into the world after they left college: an approach to reading and thinking that was radically skeptical.... He gave them a way of being in the world, too, that involved making endless connections, of drawing things into comparison."[1] 1

While I have no illusions that I am able to achieve anything like these transformations in my own students, I also make no apologies for *trying* to effect those changes with each class and in every semester. These ideas form a starting point for my teaching. And a crucial part of the way I try to do so involves, from the first day of class, laying out an approach—a tone—to how I teach the course and the course materials that I hope will last through the entire semester and beyond. 2

I begin planning my United States history survey courses with a particular conceit. My conceit is that I want my students to be historians, to practice history—not merely to take a history class. I want them to read and think and ask questions the way historians do. I tell my students on the first day of class (and in the syllabus) that although they may not be history majors and may never take another history class in college, they will be historians in my class three times a week for an hour at a time. I explain that regardless of their majors or their level of interest in the subject, I want students to immerse themselves in the culture of history and to learn to become comfortable with argument and interpretation and frames of reference. I will expect them to shape 3

important and meaningful historical questions they ask of the material being studied, and to always ask the "so what?" question about everything they read. In other words, I want my students to buy into the idea that for at least one semester they will be approaching history the way we historians do.[2]

But how can I get them to do this? How can I convince a room of fifty-five students, many deeply skeptical or even hostile to the notion that history has value? A key device that aids this process, I've found, is the course syllabus which I've designed to introduce students to this approach. It contains important information about the way historians work and think along with descriptions of the reading materials we will use to further their practice of history. (See Appendix) 4

I have come to see the syllabus as a crucial document for conveying an approach and a mindset to my class and, more broadly, to the study of history. Most importantly, the syllabus in my course is an extension of both the books we read and the lectures and discussions, and provides a connection between them all. The syllabus also functions as an invitation to learning, one that places the rationale for the work we do in front of students from the outset of the semester and keeps it there for reminders. By discussing the larger ways we will be working in the class it can help students move from whatever level they are on as students of history—and the variety of levels of preparation and ability in the survey courses can be dramatic—to the level I want them to attain. By using the syllabus to invite students into the world of history and the practices of historians, I can, as one historian puts it, "draw the novice learner into the world of the expert." And finally, by describing the kind of work historians do and the kind of thinking students will have to do to participate in that particular world of learning, the syllabus reveals most fundamentally the anatomy of the history course itself.[3] 5

I find that by grounding a discussion of several of the most important themes relating to the "doing" of history in the syllabus, I can effectively emphasize their importance and give students ready access to them later when we discuss the ideas in class. Since I frequently return to key themes—context, perspective, point of view, frame of reference, interpretive positions, argument—discussing such ideas in the syllabus gives students a chance to look over these core concepts every time they check the syllabus for a reading assignment. My goal is to put these ideas in front of them both formally and informally so that they may more easily become immersed in the culture of history and historical thinking. Thus, the syllabus has become far more than simply a list of readings and due dates. It plays an integral role in the class experience by explaining the connections between the books we read in the course and the questions we ask of the past, and it helps me to get them thinking like historians. 6

First, a word about the evolution of my own thinking about the syllabus. When I first started teaching I was a minimalist, at least as far as the syllabus went. Mine typically had only a brief introduction, a list of test or paper dates and required books, with a calendar of readings and lectures. I've incrementally expanded those bare-bones syllabi over the years to include some structural material (on plagiarism and classroom discipline) but mostly to add substantive material in a form that will be in front of students for the entire term. My syllabus for the survey course is now eleven pages 7

long - and the calendar of readings is not the longest part. My syllabus has evolved because I have come to see it as a hugely useful instrument for conveying information and reminders to students. It functions in my class as a mini-text, something which I instruct students to re-read from time to time.[4]

8 This evolution has come about as I have re-thought what I want to communicate to students and how best I might do that. The central point I now want to convey to my United States history survey course from the outset is that history is an interpretive art. Historians read and analyze documents and materials and use them to form interpretations of events and developments in the past, and then to construct an argument or thesis about their research. I stress that each historian interprets the past differently from other historians and that when they do, this leads to differences in the arguments or explanations they put forward for why or how something happened. I have to push against—as we probably all do—the assumption that students often have that there is only one "correct" interpretation or view and that their job is simply to discover what it is and learn it. The idea that there can be multiple perspectives on, for example, the causes of the American Revolution, rather than a single definitive answer, often leaves students confused and uncomfortable. I expect this and I confront it repeatedly in class, especially in the first few weeks of the semester. One of the best vehicles for doing so is the syllabus. No matter how many times I may discuss conflicting interpretations and the historical arguments that result from them, I find that students often grasp this concept better if those verbal reminders are reinforced with a written syllabus that they can read when their minds may be more open and receptive to receiving new information.

9 My syllabus includes a section titled "Why Historians Argue All the Time—And why YOU will be, too, this semester," in which I introduce them to the idea that historians (and the practice of history) exist in a culture of argument in which conflicting interpretations do battle with each other. Students will also, my syllabus informs them, learn to identify conflicting arguments in the writings of historians. Better still, I note that they will be developing in their papers and essays a series of arguments of their own based on their readings of the evidence. I stress that students will be doing exactly what historians do: reading sources and documents and forming arguments and interpretations based on them.

10 I describe in the syllabus the kinds of phrases, both spoken and written, that historians use to signal to their readers and listeners that they are about to state their argument—"I think," "I argue," "My view is," "I believe," "My contention is"—and I encourage students to get in the habit of using such words and phrases themselves. The syllabus also promises that future discussions and handouts that will describe and provide examples of how the argument culture works.[5] My goal here is to get students immersed in the idea of conflicting interpretations that get them used to arguments—how to read them, how to make them, how to write them—from the outset.

11 Placing this discussion of historical interpretation and the argument culture on the syllabus both indicates and reinforces their primacy in my class. In fact, I have become more and more convinced over the years about the need to emphasize what history is (and is not) in my classes. In particular, I regularly remind students that history is not simply a matter of collecting "facts" and then letting those facts speak for themselves. I

try to get students to understand that while the practice of history does require the collection of evidence and materials, that those materials are inert until brought to life by historians who interpret, arrange, and organize them to comprise an argument. Once they grasp this approach to history, I continue to reinforce it through readings assigned for class discussion. I require them to analyze and organize historical source material and to make arguments and interpretations of their own. I consider this kind of work to be among the most important we historians can do. Too often, students come to class with misconceptions about what history is and what historians do. One misconception, fed by popular history books and by television portrayals of historical events, is that history is mostly about great men and warfare. This notion is not wholly wrong, of course, but, as an understanding of what history is all about, it is woefully incomplete. One object of my course is to correct this notion.[6] An even larger and far more common problem, however, is the notion that history is merely about the collection of facts which support a single, unchanged and unchanging story about the past "as it really was." Too many students come to my class believing that history is about facts, not interpretations, and they fail to understand—largely because they have never been taught—the relationship between facts, questions, and interpretations, and the ways in which these relate to each other in the study of the past.

12 By locating this material designed to combat these misconceptions in the syllabus, my intent is to place it within easy reach of students. I remind students at several points in the semester to go back and read again key pages of the document. I always do this when making a written assignment, telling them that re-reading this section of the syllabus is an important part of their preparation in writing any paper. This is one of the ways that the syllabus functions as a mini-text in my class. Just as the textbook provides a way for students to quickly look up a name or event or learn more about something mentioned in class, the syllabus becomes a ready resource as they read and write throughout the semester.

13 In her Presidential Address before the American Historical Association several years ago, Joyce Appleby insightfully addressed many of the concerns I address in my syllabus about the relationship between questions, facts, and interpretations. Noting the mistaken assumptions that many in the public held about the workings of history, she called on historians "to do what historians do very well—act as translators" and communicate to the public the way history works. Specifically, she urged historians to explain that the past must be reconstructed, that it is not simply a comforting and familiar and unchanging story never in need of revision and reinterpretation. Instead, it is not until historians ask questions about the past that the material sources of history come to life. She noted that these traces of the past ("like litter from a picnic" in her pithy phrase) say nothing by themselves. Not until someone asks a question do those pieces turn into evidence, and it is that act of questioning—of curiosity itself—that Appleby emphasized and urged historians to discuss. The importance of curiosity as a spur to research is central to Appleby's argument that chunks of the past will be unknown until some historian asks a question that leads to that particular bit of material. She called on historians to help their students give up the erroneous idea "that historians operate like vacuum cleaners, sucking up scraps from the past for later assembling." Contrary to critics and much of the public that decries "revisionist" history filled with interpretations, Appleby urged that historians make it clear that historical

work *must* involve interpretation. Since interpretations are always being revised by new questions (driven by curiosity) and new research, history will always be (and has always been) revisionist. "If we can close the door on the popular view of history as an uninterpreted body of facts," Appleby argued, "we can open it to the infinitely more interesting issue of how questions lead to knowledge through the mediating filter of culture."[7]

I have discussed Appleby's points at length because, in a sense, I am trying to answer her call to act as a translator through my syllabi. I try to teach students the vital roles that curiosity, questions, inquiry, and research play. I stress in the syllabus that facts do not speak for themselves but can (and must) be arranged and rearranged to construct historical interpretations. By embedding a discussion of how historians work in my syllabus and by having students read and discuss that section in class, I emphasize to them the importance of questions and curiosity and how history depends on lots of both. Furthermore, by placing that discussion in the syllabus, I make it possible for students to re-read that material as a visual reinforcement of the oral reminders they hear from me everyday in class about the centrality of questions, curiosity, research, and interpretation as being the very stuff of history. 14

My syllabus also adds to its annotated list of assigned readings, a short paragraph on each book that primarily emphasizes how each of them—whether they are documents, interpretive essays, or a wide array of different kinds of sources—contributes to our study of history and the practices of history that I emphasize. I have chosen the books for the survey course with the usual goals of overall balance in mind, but each one does something different and illuminates the variety of ways that historians work as well as the array of tools we use.[8] 15

I have gone to a brief edition of the text—I use Mary Beth Norton et. al. *A People and a Nation* but others might work just as well.[9] I use the text for background reading and emphasize that it is essential that they turn first to this book since I cannot cover everything (and certainly not in detail) in lectures. The text, I tell them, provides a comprehensive overview of the material and I stress that they should read it first and then refer to it again later for review and supplementation. If anything I try to de-center the textbook in my class. It plays a vital role, but I want students to focus on the other readings, chiefly primary sources, and the classroom lectures and discussions and to treat the text as a resource to help them make more sense of it all. 16

I am a strong believer in the *Major Problems* series—readers that provide in each chapter a set of primary documents and then at the end, paired essays by historians that reach opposite (or at least very different) conclusions about the topic under study.[10] Our weekly reading assignments in this volume expose students directly to differing, clashing interpretations based on different readings of the same document base. The essays by historians further make it clear to students how the argument culture looks and works in practice. While the titles assigned to these excerpts from secondary works are contrived and perhaps oversimplified (e.g. "Indians Utilizing a Strategy of Armed Resistance," "Indians Utilizing a Strategy of Accommodation"), this is a pedagogically sound practice since it signals to students the very different, opposing arguments that each essay will make. These essays form the bases for our class discussions where I start by asking simple questions about what each essay argues, 17

and then work back to the primary source record as we try to unravel why historians disagree about the cause, meaning, or significance of these fundamental historical problems.

I also use the *Going to the Source* reader, a collection in which each chapter uses 18
exclusively a different kind of primary source—diaries, court records, newspapers, photographs – and discusses the advantages and disadvantages to historians of working with that particular kind of source.[11] This book helps students see how wide ranging and divergent historical sources can be and also nicely illustrates the link between the kinds of sources historians use and the kinds of arguments they make.

Another reader I often use is *Discovering the American Past* in which each chapter 19
focuses on a particular historical issue or problem such as "What Really Happened at the Boston Massacre?" and provides students with an array of primary source records to analyze and to answer the question.[12] This book accomplishes several additional goals. It emphasizes that history is not simply "there," that it is not merely received wisdom written down and stored once and for all. And because no two historians come at those sources with the same frame of reference, this book provides another example to students of the ways historians "discover" different pasts.

My intention in discussing these books on the syllabus is, again, to provide a ready 20
reminder to students about how each book functions and what it does for our purposes. Summarizing these books means that the syllabus serves as a site where students can remind themselves about the purposes of each of these books before they read a chapter, and the summary can also establish links for them between the readings, the lectures, and the broader goals of the class. I nudge students toward seeing that each of these books is mutually reinforcing. That is, they each stress the notion that there are many interpretations of history, not a single "correct" one. They make it clear that primary source records drive historical interpretations and that those interpretations are then put forward as arguments by historians in their articles and books. I expect my student historians to do the same in their papers and exams.

My syllabus might also be termed a "promising syllabus;" that is, it lets students 21
know from the outset how much and what kinds of reading and writing are required and, in turn, what they can expect to gain from the class if they complete all the required work.[13] In other words, it makes clear to students about what they will have to do in the class and what they will get in return for those efforts. The syllabus also makes it clear that these expectations will be adhered to and that the class is demanding, but will also be rewarding. The syllabus emphasizes—as I do on the first day of class—that students have a choice they must make after reading and thinking about the syllabus (which I make required reading for our class discussion at our second class meeting). If they elect to stay enrolled in the course with all it will demand and all they can expect to gain, they must also promise themselves to comply with all the requirements spelled out. In return for their hard work and compliance, I promise them that they will learn history in a very different way from what most of them are probably used to doing.

Since my ultimate goal is to help students learn not only history but also how to 22
learn more generally, my syllabus also includes a discussion of some of the essential pre-conditions of learning. I stress the need for order and good classroom citizenship,

the need to eliminate or minimize any disruptions in class, and I make abundantly clear what my expectations are for students and what they need to do to succeed in my class. Most importantly, my syllabus tries to make it clear to students that they share a major portion of the responsibility for their education. The terms "active" and "passive" learning are overused, but I want students to know that they must actively work to educate themselves and that learning history—indeed, learning anything—cannot be simply a matter of them opening their notebooks and brains so that teachers can pour in material with the assumption that after x-number of such encounters they will have "learned" whatever it is that they are studying.

In these respects, my syllabus makes it clear that students bear responsibility for 23
learning and that they will learn, or not, and earn a good grade, or not, based on the quality of their work. In short, I want them to know that their education is in their own hands. But I also tell them how they can shoulder that responsibility and take charge of their own learning. I stress the indispensability of class attendance and of doing all the reading. I require participation in class discussions and make that component of class a full ten percent of their final grade to suggest how much I value it. I also emphasize the importance of asking questions of me in class, of their fellow students in discussions, and of the documents and materials as they read. I note the overwhelming importance of the "so what?" question to historians and include a paragraph wherein I tell them that they should always ask this question of each document, essay, article, or book they read—and of any lecture I give as well.[14]

Thus, I aim for transparency on my syllabus. I want to make it absolutely clear what I 24
expect of students and what they can expect from me and from the course. The "promises" my syllabus makes to them and the ones I in turn expect them to make to me are crystal clear. My point is to have them understand that by doing the work and meeting the expectations, they can learn a tremendous amount *and* get a good grade. But the inverse is also true. Responsibility for not learning and a poor grade rests with the students. One effect of this practice is to minimize the number of student complaints about grades both in person and on course evaluations. But far more important is what such transparency about expectations says about my philosophy of teaching. For me, teaching has two components. It is not just my responsibility to fill up students with knowledge, it is simultaneously *their* responsibility to read and think and ask questions and participate in discussions. In fact, participation in the broadest sense is the key to the whole course. While I will actively and cheerfully do my part, students must participate actively (if not always cheerfully) and do their part. A former history department colleague of mine put it best when he said once, with a bemused look in his eye, "Students don't realize that we professors are un-indicted co-conspirators in their efforts to become educated." It is a unique way to phrase it but it is also very apt. I try, through the syllabus, to communicate the point that I am, in a sense, that "un-indicted co-conspirator," providing assistance and modeling an example every step of the way.[15]

On the subject of requirements, I should note that I believe that *most* students will 25
do pretty much what professors expect of them. Thus, an easy class with few requirements will usually produce slothful, indolent, indifferent students, while a demanding one will engender the kind of work and reading and thinking necessary to

stimulate real learning. "It is better to be over-demanding than under-demanding," I say, quoting my favorite basketball coach. My class is not for everyone, and I make that clear. I give students a very generous "out" clause if, once they have read the syllabus and considered the workload, they decide that the class is not for them. I usually lose a few students but I have been consistently surprised and pleased at the number who opt to stay in my classes even though I have provided every opportunity and reason to flee. In short, if I expect serious, dedicated work from the beginning—and make this transparently clear with the syllabus—and then if they see me modeling that same serious, engaged, hardworking approach to teaching the class and showing that the study of history can be both serious and fun, I believe that most students will conform to my expectations. My syllabus helps me set high expectations and also makes it clear that not only can students meet those expectations, but also that the goals themselves are worth attaining.

26 What have students thought of my syllabus and of this approach to teaching? Based on informal conversations with students and course evaluations, they seem to understand and value such an approach—even if it strikes them as new and unfamiliar at the outset. Students have seemed especially grateful to have a detailed, precise syllabus that spelled out exactly what was expected of them during the semester. The comprehensiveness of the syllabus impressed many who noted that it made very clear what I expected on everything from class behavior to writing assignments to in-class discussions. Others, that it let them know "what was expected of us in our roles as 'historians.'" Several students have noted more specifically that the syllabus helped introduce them to an unfamiliar world as "historians," a world in which they would be making arguments and interpreting evidence. "All through school we're taught only to write the facts, not our opinions," noted one. Another observed, "I never really looked at a history class from a historian's point of view. It was always 'here's the facts, study [them] and regurgitate [them].'" Since most students have found my approach unfamiliar and a little discomfiting at first, they appreciated the material on the culture of argument that provided "a good little intro to what could be expected." One wrote, "The most informative part of the syllabus was the 'So What?' portion, which seemed to propel a lot of the class discussions. It explained to us a new way to look at what we're given." While one student commented that the syllabus seemed a bit long at first, "all the info in the syllabus is needed." This person also appreciated that it was written "in a friendly voice" which "helped ease first-day jitters." Lastly, and most rewarding to me, a student stated "I received more from this course than any other history class I have taken." I trust that the syllabus played some essential role in shaping that experience.[16]

27 Some of my thinking about the use of the syllabus has come from my own teaching experiences, from a rigorous re-appraisal of what has worked and what has not and of how things might be improved. Goals and the techniques for reaching them have come gradually, through trial and error, from my own experiments and adaptations. But I have received a lot of help from a variety of excellent books and articles on teaching. These readings have, in some cases, given me new ideas to try; in other cases, they have reinforced my belief in what I was already doing.[17] In nearly all cases, however, the readings have dovetailed with my own growing belief in what I was trying to accomplish in survey courses. My primary goal, the root of all the others, has been to

convey to my students an approach, a way of thinking about history, specifically, but an approach to and way of thinking about learning more broadly as well. I have found some points expressed in writings about teaching that best reflect the approach that I want to demonstrate to students. The first of these is simple enthusiasm for learning. My syllabus promises hard work but it also promises that students will have fun. I try to display in front of my classes an enthusiasm for learning, for ideas, for knowledge. "Teachers," write James Banner and Harold Cannon, "in showing their students how to learn, must seek to be caught *flagrante delicto* with their subject." It is important, they note, "to be seen among papers and books...scurrying toward the library." The modeling of an active, engaged approach to learning can be passed on from teacher to student, and it can prove catching. "It is a teacher's infectious enthusiasm for learning itself, as much as the student's own curiosity about the teacher's subject, that is apt to captivate a student."[18]

28 I also try to provide students with an example of what the act of thinking looks and feels like. This is especially important in history classes because too often, I have found, students in their previous history classes have been told to *memorize* and regurgitate material. They have often never been asked to *think* about what they read. This means not only that I am often asking students to do something at which they have had little or no practice, but I am asking them to do something many of them never knew was even possible, let alone desirable. After all, quite a few of my students have probably done quite well in their "history" classes to this point simply by practicing rote memorization of material.[19] Consequently, they have never had to consider the possibility that history is a subject about which one might "think." To help students with the unfamiliar, I try hard to keep in mind and to practice Jay Parini's elegantly phrased advice to teachers: "Remember that your job," he writes, "is to demonstrate before students the *process* of thinking. Don't just read a script that you have prepared...Think about the material at hand, and make that thought apparent and dramatic." He concludes his thought with a succinct statement of what I try to do for (and with) my students: "Remember that you are trying to provide students with the sensation of thinking as well as the thoughts themselves."[20]

29 Recognizing that my class will require of students not just hard work but, as mentioned above, a type of hard work which may also be unfamiliar, I try to establish at the outset that my class—by requiring them to think actively and deeply about the past—may force them to abandon old conceptions, comfortable myths, and unexamined assumptions. In short, I try to get them to experience what real learning is all about—how it looks and how it feels and what it can do to us and for us. I believe, as Peter Filene has written, that "an effective teacher takes students out of their 'comfort zone'...[and] challenges them with unsettling ideas, sets high standards, demands introspection and hard work—all the while, heeding how students are responding." In the process of my teaching, I try to create an effective triangular relationship between the subject matter of history, my teaching, and the students themselves in which enthusiasm for learning leads to curiosity which leads to reading and investigation which leads to discussion and the gradual development of understanding. I put a great stress on creating what Filene (and many others) call simply "a learning environment."[21]

Finally, I want students to understand that while the process of thinking and of doing history can be fun and enlightening, it is undeniably an effort and requires high standards. I want students to know that serious historical work is hard, but—just as important—I want them to know that it is also *doable*. High standards are attainable with the kind of work I sketch out in the syllabus and talk about and demonstrate in class. I express my faith in my students' abilities to achieve what I set out for them to do. But ultimately, what I hope to achieve in the classroom has less to do with requirements and work loads than it does with the approach and the attitude I try to express. In fact, Ken Bain nicely summarizes several of the most important themes of my approach when he writes that "the best teaching can be found not in particular practices or rules but in the *attitudes* of the teachers, in their *faith* in their students' abilities to achieve, in their *willingness* to take their students seriously and to let them assume control of their own education, and in their *commitment* to let all policies and practices flow from central learning objectives and from a mutual respect and agreement between students and teachers."[22] Again, it all comes down to the approach to history and to learning that I want students to take away from my class. And while approaching my own teaching in the same way that I want my students to approach learning requires hard work on my part, it means that I am no less engaged in their development than they should be. 30

As I have reflected on my own efforts and read about those of others, I have become more and more convinced that the syllabus is a place where I, as a professor, can do important work. The syllabus provides, starting on the first day of class, a regular site to help students understand what we are trying to do in the class and how they might think about their work. It provides not only guidelines to the work they will be doing in the class but it also serves as a means to an end, as one small but not inconsiderable tool for helping them learn to think like historians. More generally—to end this paper where it began—the syllabus can be the first in a long series of experiences that I hope will gradually transform at least some of my students and give them "a posture about books and living," "a way of being in the world," of "making endless connections." In short, the syllabus is a start towards giving students a tone, an approach, a way to think about the work we do as historians that will stay with them long after they leave my classes and long after they have forgotten the specifics of what they have learned. In the quest to help students think like historians, the syllabus is, to my mind, an indispensable element to bringing it all together. 31

Notes

An early version of this article was presented as a paper at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in January 2006 on a panel entitled "Anatomy of a Course: Pedagogy and Higher Education." I thank Cathy Cardno who organized the session, invited me to participate, and chaired the panel, and Kay McAdams, who served as commentator, for their thoughtful advice and suggestions on my presentation. I also thank my fellow panelists Sheila Skemp and Henry Kamerling, as well as my colleagues Karen Miller, Bruce Zellers, and Kathleen Pfeiffer for their comments on an earlier version of this article. Lastly I would like to thank Editor Jane Dabel and the anonymous referees for *The History Teacher* for their advice.

1. P. F. Kluge, *Alma Mater: A College Homecoming* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995), 44; Jay Parini,

The Art of Teaching (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88. Parini elaborates on the effect Frost's teaching had on his students, particularly its long-lasting value: "Frost understood what I suspect all great teachers know instinctively, that *tone* is everything in the classroom: the attitude of the teacher toward the material. This tone is the unique gift of the teacher to the student, and it is what students recall long after the specific subject matter has faded from memory" (p. 86).

2. While my goal in classes is not to convert students into the ranks of professional historians, I do hope that my approach might help uncover the "hidden intellectualism"—a deep knowledge of some non-academic topic or area that might lend itself to various forms of academic inquiry or research—that many students possess, but either hide or fail to recognize in themselves. For a discussion see Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 211–231.

3. I owe this quotation to Kay McAdams who served as commentator at the American Historical Association panel at which a preliminary version of this article was presented.

4. On the matter of classroom discipline and the professor's role in maintaining a structured yet productive learning environment, and for an insightful discussion of the need for, and role of, authority in the classroom, see James M. Banner, Jr. and Harold C. Cannon, *The Elements of Teaching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 21–34. Banner and Cannon are particularly good at delineating the difference between a teacher's legitimate authority on the one hand, and the raw use of power on the other. Especially valuable is their point about how authority can be used to encourage and develop aspirations in students. See also the excellent companion volume for students by Banner and Cannon, *The Elements of Learning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), especially the chapters on "Pleasure," "Curiosity," and "Aspiration," pp. 34–68.

5. An excellent discussion of the tenets and practices as well as the benefits of the culture of argument is found in Graff, *Clueless in Academe*. Discussion of the argument culture runs throughout the work but see especially pp. 1–14; 83–95; 155–172; 275–277.

6. These misconceptions are surely in evidence in most time periods and sub-fields of history. As a specialist in early U.S. history, I am most familiar with the work of that era. For discussions—and a debunking—of this rather narrow "great men-great events" conception of early American history, and the ways popular histories foster this misunderstanding, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Federalist Chic," *Common-Place* (February 2002), online at <http://www.common-place.org/200202shtml>; Sean Wilentz, "America Made Easy: McCullough, Adams, and the Decline of Popular History," New Republic Online (July 2, 2001) at <http://www.tnr.com/070201/wilentz070201>; David Greenberg, "That Barnes and Noble Dream: What's Wrong With the David McCullough's of History," in Slate, available online at <http://www.slate.msn.com> (May 17 and 18, 2005); and David Waldstreicher, "Founder's Chic as Culture War," *Radical History Review* 84 (2002), 185–194. For my own statement on this matter see Todd Estes, "The Unpopularity of Popular History in the Academy: An Academic's Thoughts on David McCullough's Visit to Campus," *Oakland Journal* 10 (2006), 9–26.

7. Joyce Appleby, "The Power of History," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998), 1–14; quotations at p. 11 and p. 12. Appleby's article is reprinted in her collection of essays, *A Restless Past: History and the American Public* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 133–151; see especially pp. 145–147. Appleby also calls for historians to help explain to the public the way that historical revisionism works and that it is a much less sinister practice than some critics make it out to be. "There is much about the past that we do not know and will not know until someone asks a question that leads to that particular patch of material remains. We need to explain that historical knowledge, like all knowledge, is revised because of the new questions driving new research. The same public that hates and fears historical revisions rarely laments revisions in chemistry or medicine, which, like those in history, are the result of further investigations, a point that needs sharpening in public" (p. 12).

8. My thinking on the importance of providing direction to students about the readings has been influenced in part by the discussion in Wilbert J. McKeachie and Marilla Svinicki, *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* 12th edition (Boston:

Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 30–34 in a brief chapter entitled, "Reading as Active Learning."

9. Mary Beth Norton, et. al. *A People and Nation, Brief Sixth Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

10. For the survey course I use Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman and Jon Gjerde, *Major Problems in American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

11. Victoria Bissell Brown and Timothy J. Shannon, *Going to the Source: The Bedford Reader in American History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004).

12. William Bruce Wheeler and Susan D. Becker, *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*, Fifth Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

13. For discussions and examples of "promising" syllabi, see Peter Filene, *The Joy of Teaching: A Practical Guide for New College Instructors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 35–46, and Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 74–75.

14. In this paragraph of my syllabus on the "So what? question, I also borrow a related phrase that comes from the mathematician Donald Saari as quoted in Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, pp. 38–39. Saari invokes in his classes the "WGAD" principle: "Who gives a damn?" He invites students to ask him this question at any point in the course and he promises to stop and explain why that particular piece of material is significant and how it relates to the larger themes and questions of his course. I've placed that on my syllabus as well, and I also invite students to ask me that question—sometimes I ask it rhetorically myself during a lecture—and explain to students on my syllabus that they "need to see the relationship of the material we're learning to the main themes of the course, and if I can't explain [those relationships] clearly, I can't very well expect [my students] to know it."

15. The "un-indicted co-conspirators" line comes from my former Oakland University History department colleague Richard Tucker.

16. These comments are taken from anonymous course evaluations from the Oakland University survey courses I have taught, from e-mail messages from students, and from notes on conversations with former students.

17. In addition to the works cited above, I have found the following books to be of particular benefit in thinking, not only about the syllabus, but about teaching more generally. An excellent discussion of the components of good teaching is Banner and Cannon, *The Elements of Teaching*. On the scholarly life more generally, see James Axtell, *The Pleasures of Academe: A Celebration and Defense of Higher Education* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). Three interesting memoirs of teaching experiences—two by veterans, the other by a novice—are Patrick Allitt, *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Boston: Addison Wesley, 1997); and James M. Lang, *Life on the Tenure Track: Lessons from the First Year* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). Another tremendous resource for college teaching is McKeachie and Svinicki, *McKeachie's Teaching Tips*, now in its 12th edition, which is filled with both practical advice as well as broader, theoretical discussions of teaching. As good as these and other books are, by far the best book I have read about teaching is Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* (cited in note 13 above). This book is unparalleled, to my mind, for its discussion of how to think about teaching on a variety of levels; or, as Bain puts it, his book is an effort to discern how great teachers "think about their own thinking...[and how that] capacity to think metacognitively drives much of what we observed in the best teaching" (p. 16).

18. Banner and Cannon, 11.

19. On the difficulty students often face when confronted with a history class that requires "unnatural"

thinking and analysis rather than rote memorization, see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). Wineburg is one of the leading scholars on the question of how historians think and how they in turn train students to think.

20. Parini, 113.

21. Filene, 3.

22. Bain, 73; 78–79.

Appendix:
Sample Syllabus

EXCERPTS FROM A SYLLABUS
"Introduction to American History since 1877" (4 credits)

Part One - The Overview

This course will be unlike any history class you have ever had. It will require lots of work on your part and a commitment to the class. In return, you will learn not only a lot of information, but more importantly, you will improve your ability to think, read, reason, analyze, and write – skills that transfer to any job or career you might imagine. But remember, you must be committed to doing all the work, coming to class all the time, and adhering to all the requirements. If you do these things you will get a good grade. Of infinitely more importance, however, you will learn and you will enjoy yourself more than you ever thought possible for a history class. Details below.

Introduction and Objectives

This course examines United States history from the era of Reconstruction through the 1970s. It will look at the American past and trace the political, social, economic, cultural, and intellectual developments of the period. I will discuss any number of people, events, and dates, but the emphasis will be decidedly on ideas, processes, and developments. There will be several overarching themes that we will consider, but rather than telling you what they are up front, I'd rather wait and let you see them emerge from the work we do together.

These classes will be primarily lectures. I will put an outline of each lecture on the overhead to guide you. I expect you to listen carefully and take notes on these lectures and to ask me questions about anything you do not understand or need to have clarified. A portion of most class meetings will be devoted to an in-class discussion of the assigned reading material for that day. In these discussions you are strongly encouraged to participate by asking questions, as well as responding to my questions and to the comments of your classmates. In fact, a part of your grade will be determined by the quality of your discussion participation.

It is very important that you complete the reading assignments BEFORE each lecture so that you can make sense of what I talk about. My lectures do not simply repeat the textbook. Instead, they are intended to supplement the reading material. Only by doing the reading ahead of time and then integrating the lecture material with it, can you gain a good understanding of the topics being presented.

This class will place very strong emphasis on written work. Both the midterm and final will be all essay exams – no multiple choice, no matching, no true-false. You will also be writing three short papers for this class. Good writing skills are essential and one of the goals of this class is to help develop your writing ability.

Some final words. Just because this is a general education course at the 100-level does NOT mean that it is easy or watered down. Quite the opposite. I expect you to work hard in this class, do a great deal of reading, writing, thinking, and discussing, and to put in considerable effort outside of class – as I do – to prepare yourself for the time spent in class. I am a hard grader – fair but tough. Again, this is NOT an easy class – it may well be the hardest 100-level course you take at Oakland – but it will be, I hope, interesting, informative, and perhaps even mildly enjoyable despite (perhaps because of the demands placed on you.

Part Two - What You Will Be Doing

Why Historians Argue All The Time – And why YOU will be, too, this semester

This semester, all semester, each of you will be a historian. I know that you are probably not a history major. You may never take another history class at Oakland. Still, your job in this class is to be a historian and, as such, you will learn to read, write, talk, and think like a historian. It won't hurt. It may even be more fun than you expect. My goal is not to turn you into history majors (although that might happen as it has before with other students). Rather, it is to expose you to a way of thinking, a way of understanding the past, and of analyzing and interpreting the materials you read to form your own conclusions. In other words, you will be doing all the things that professional historians (like me) do all the time.

But what exactly is it that historians do? Mostly, they love to argue, to debate, to disagree with others. Historians love a good fight. I don't mean the fistfight kind, I mean they love to argue with each other over their different interpretations of the past. They love to disagree. History, in short, is about interpretation. Historians do just what you will be doing this semester– they read documents, letters, and essays and try to figure out what they mean. Because no two historians read and interpret the evidence of the past in the same way, no two historians have the same views of, say, what caused the Great Depression or whether the Progressive movement succeeded or not. And these different interpretations, pitted against each other, lead to the arguments that historians have with each other about the past.

In short, historians exist in a culture of argument. This semester, you will live in the culture of argument, too. You will learn to identify conflicting arguments in the writings of other

historians. Better still, you will be developing a series of arguments of your own based on your readings of the evidence. And you will be arguing with me (your professor) and your classmates as well as the historians who wrote the books we use. You will learn to begin sentences and paragraphs with the phrases of the argument culture: "I think," "I assert," "My view is," "I believe," "My contention is____."

You may have additional handouts on this topic and much more discussion about it as the course unfolds.

The "So What?" Question; Or, "WGAD"

The first question we should all ask of any book or chapter or essay or article we read is "so what?" Another, less delicate way to phrase that is WGAD – "who gives a damn?" These are also the first things we should ask of lectures – including and especially my lectures in this class. In fact, any student in my class may, at any point in my lectures, stop me and raise the "so what?" question. I won't be offended. Far from it. I will pause and briefly explain the significance of whatever it is I am talking about and its relationship to the larger themes of the day, the week, and the semester. You need to see the relationship of the material we're learning to the main themes of the course and if I can't explain it clearly, I can't very well expect you to know it.

Some Friendly Advice

This class will be fun (no, really, it will be). You will learn to think like a historian, asking questions, looking at things in new ways, considering evidence, debating interpretations, and, in short, you will become a critical thinker, a skill you will take with you throughout life. It will be a semester filled with discovery, discussion, and interaction. This will be fun – I keep saying that – BUT it will also require a classroom setting which is orderly, disciplined, and focused. To help us stay on track and to let you know what I expect of you as students I offer the following pieces of advice to which you are STRONGLY urged to pay close attention.

- It is impossible to do well in this course if you only do the readings and skip the lectures, or if you only come to the lectures and neglect the readings. The exams will be comprised of material from both, and knowing only one or the other is a sure way to fail. If, for some reason, you fall behind in your reading, catch up quickly. If you miss a lecture, get the notes from a friend and check with me if you are unsure of something. ***You and you alone are responsible for any lecture material as well as assignments made in class if you miss class.***
- About cheating. Anyone caught cheating or plagiarizing in any form and found guilty will receive a failing grade ***for the course*** and will be reported to the Dean of Students for further disciplinary action which may include expulsion from the University. Review the relevant pages on "Academic Policies and Procedures" conduct in the Oakland University Undergraduate Catalog.
- Bring the assigned readings with you to each class meeting. We will refer to the books at various points during our lectures and discussions and you will need to have it on hand for class discussions.

- Be punctual: come to class on time and stay for the entire class period (unless you have a reason for leaving early and have discussed it with me beforehand). DO NOT SCHEDULE ANY OTHER REGULAR ACTIVITIES TO OVERLAP WITH CLASS TIME. Occasionally, we may all be late to a class but do not make it a habit. Walking in late to class or leaving early is always disruptive to your classmates and the professor. I reserve the right to lower the grade of any student who is habitually late or who leaves early.
- Do not talk while I am talking in class. Do not talk while your classmates are speaking aloud in class.
- You must complete ALL assignments to pass the class. Late work will be severely penalized.
- I reserve the right to make any changes or additions to the syllabus and assignments as I see fit during the semester.
- Finally, if you have any questions about anything during the semester, ASK ME. If you are uncertain whether you should talk to me about something, it is probably better to be safe and ask. If something comes up during the semester that may affect your class performance, you should tell me immediately. I am ALWAYS willing to help and it is far better to ask me than to be in the dark. So, if you're confused or have a question – stop by, call, leave a voice mail message, or e-mail me. I want to help you.

<u>About the Readings; Or, "What's in All Those Books and How You Can Tell One from Another"</u>

Please purchase the four books listed below. We will use them all this semester and I summarize below what each book helps us do and how we will use it.

*Mary Beth Norton et. al., *A People and a Nation*, Brief 7th edition, Vol. II

This will serve as our textbook and your major resource for learning more information about the names, ideas, concepts, places, and dates mentioned in lecture or discussion. The Norton text will provide essential background reading material to supplement what we cover in lecture and what you read in other books.

*Elizabeth C. Hoffman and Jon Gjerde, *Major Problems in American History*, Vol. II

Historians work from documents or primary sources to reach their interpretations. This book is a collection of various documents organized around critical questions or problems in the American past. It will be central to our class discussions and will enable us to analyze documents from different perspectives in order to reach our own conclusions. Each chapter also includes essays by two historians, each offering conflicting or differing interpretations of the problem, to give us a sense of what "the culture of argument" looks like in practice.

*Victoria Brown and Timothy Shannon, *Going to the Source*, Vol. II

Historians use a variety of sources in piecing together their understanding of the past. Each chapter of this book explores a single kind of source – diaries, court records,

newspapers, photographs – arranged around a single topic, problem, or question. This book, along with *Major Problems*, will be used almost every class meeting for our reading assignments and as the basis for our discussions.

*Tim O'Brien

In addition to being one of my all-time favorite books, this will serve to focus our discussion of the Vietnam war late in the semester. It raises fascinating questions about some of the main themes we discuss this term: point of view, perspective, and, more fundamentally, "what is history?" This book will stay in your mind long after you leave this class.

A Crucial Note about Grading: Know this – I do not grade based on effort or potential; I grade on performance only. In other words, I expect people to work hard and put forth effort. But you will not get points or extra consideration simply for completing and handing in an assignment. I grade only the performance I read on your papers. No one will get credit simply for handing in a paper. You must perform reasonably well on the assignment to get a passing grade. A failing grade (a 0.0) on a paper means that, while you may have turned in the paper, you failed to satisfactorily master the requirements and expectations I set for you.
