

Beyond Stand and Deliver: Assessing the Character and Value of Student-Centered Learning in the World History Survey

Rick Warner
Wabash College

SOTL QUESTION

I began with the following question: How does an interactive classroom impact the content learning of my students? Recognizing that in some sense content knowledge is inextricably tied to other pedagogical goals such as skill development, I have simplified the inquiry to focus on learning in general in the world history survey.

Definitions

By “content” I mean historical information, as distinct from skill development. Both of these are goals in our history classes, though the latter has received more attention of late in our discipline. My teaching is guided by the core goals of the Wabash College History Department, which I reproduce below:

Goals of the History Department

A. Content: to acquire a degree of mastery of both factual and conceptual (or thematic) knowledge in several geographical areas, diverse cultures and different time periods in human history, with particular sensitivity to change over time of a diverse, global society.

B. The Craft of History: to acquire the habit of the many analytical skills which historians use in recovering, researching, and writing about the past.

C. Historical Thinking: to develop habits of thinking like an historian, which means: appreciation for the complexity of both change and continuity over time and in different ages, cultures and areas of the world; an awareness of the inevitability of historical interpretation and of historiographical schools of thought; and an understanding of how events and ideas from the past affect the present.

D. Self-Expression: to become competent and confident in the oral and written skills needed to speak and write about historical questions with facility and sensitivity.

E. Self-Development: to become an independent intellectual inquirer into the past, as well as a lifelong learner of history; and to locate oneself and one’s family, community, and cultural traditions in history.

By interactive classroom I mean exercises that are student-centered or student-driven. This includes simulations, in-class research such as web quests, dramatic presentations such as the reading of a Platonic dialogue.

My reflections on the notion of an interactive classroom stem partly from my work in the Teacher Education department at Wabash College, where I was introduced to the notion of constructivist pedagogy. My commitment to student-centered learning is more deeply rooted in the work of the Brazilian scholar Paolo Freire, who critiqued the “banking system of education” in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Essentially I believe that very little is learned by students when I speak *to* them, and their recall of historical content and theory increases if I speak *with* them. The present project attempts to measure and further describe the value of student-initiated learning in a classroom of forty pupils.

Presumptions

Although student learning varies by individual learning style (as defined by Bloom’s taxonomy for example), in general students remember far more of what they experience than of what they simply read or hear. The unknown variable is just how true this is in a class with finite time limits, that is, how efficient in interactive learning?

I presume that the best practice is adoption of what I call “integrative pedagogy,” which makes use of a variety of teaching and learning styles, often within the same class period. Among these are lecture, interactive lecture, discussion, and interactive exercises as described above. How can these be mixed most effectively?

Assessments

1. Students were given a pre-test on the first day of class. Some of the questions from the pre-test were repeated on the mid-term. Since students did not receive the pre-test back, it is unlikely that many of the questions were remembered. Target questions on the mid-term were tied to specific class sessions that used some, none, or solely interactive exercises. Improvement on these questions will indicate the value of the various approaches. (Two class sessions, start of semester, middle of semester.)
2. Students were assigned in-class minute papers at the end of a class session, or both at the beginning and the end. These can be used to evaluate learning that occurred during the class session.(6 class sessions)
3. Students completed short quizzes, some at the start and some at the close of class, to test for reading comprehension and class experience comprehension. (7 class sessions)

Analysis of Evidence

I reviewed the data for each of these class sessions independently and in comparison. The following analysis represents individual anecdotal evidence somewhat randomly chosen, as well as some attempt to discern patterns in the evidence. There are numerous

uncharted variables that might influence these outcomes, such as previous familiarity with specific subjects, natural rhythms of the semester, and difficulty of material. This would prevent a more scientific view from emerging, but I believe that some helpful tentative conclusions do emerge.

- Multiple Choice Tests

This chart details the differential between performance on identical questions on the pre-test and the midterm exam.

QUES #	2	3	7	8	10	14
Both correct	10	13	9	7	26	19
Both wrong	13	5	12	9	4	2
Improvement	7	17	12	16	9	12
Decline	11	6	8	9	1	8
% improve	35%	77%	50%	64%	69%	86%

Improvement %age based on Improvement/wrong answers.

Teaching strategies for the lesson days attached to these questions:

2. From the textbook, read before class then lecture.
3. From the textbook, read before class then discussed in groups.
7. From the textbook, quizzed at start of class no discussion.
8. From document book, discussed in groups in class then report out.
10. From the textbook, quizzed at end of period after lg. group discussion.
14. Class read portions of Republic as a play and discussed.

From this data it appears that the most effective teaching method was an interactive exercise, the unrehearsed dramatic production of the Republic. The least effective day was devoted more to a lecture by the teacher. Group work within the class produced better results than whole class discussion, mere quizzes on reading or lecture.

Two questions were included on the midterm to test specific skills that were taught on specific days. Question 18 dealt with the concept of “Southernization,” which the classed learned about through reading an American Historical Association pamphlet that is marketed for upper level undergraduates and graduate students. Question 19 tested map reading ability. They were shown an early map constructed by Koreans, which appeared in our textbook but was never discussed in class. This question would test a) reading retention and/or b) critical thinking about mapmaking, since Korea is exaggerated in the image. It would be difficult to know which force was more in play as they answered the question.

All but 4 students answered question 18 correctly, confirming other findings that in-class discussion of readings is widely effective. Scores were somewhat less impressive on question 19, with 9 students marking incorrect answers. Given the other findings

regarding the lack of comprehension from reading alone that are found in this study, I might presume that a significant portion of the students exhibited their critical map-reading skills to identify the Korean perspective.

- Start of Class Assessments

On several occasions we began class with reading assessments. These were generally of two types, either students were asked to answer a brief question in two or three sentences or they were given a 10-question multiple choice quiz. Here are some syntheses of these assessment tools:

Ch. 5 quiz asked “How did geography influence the transmission of culture in the Americas and Africa”? Most were able to come up with the key thesis of the chapter that isolation prevented inter continental cultural contact, and about 20% retained the more subtle point that geographical features such as tropical rainforests, the Sahara desert, and river systems in specific areas had an impact. My conclusion is that reading retention for the author’s main thesis was strong, while content details varied according to learning ability or style. My belief that this particular textbook author is clearer than most about his theses in each chapter was reinforced by this finding as well.

Ch. 7 quiz asked a more specific question about the selection, “which was the empire of Asoka? How did he seek to unify the empire”? About a third of the students missed both of these questions, locating Asoka in other regions such as China. The chapter treats a number of different civilizations comparatively, and these weaker students either did not read carefully or could not process the differences between the groups. Of those who recognized that Asoka was in the regions of Persia and India, most remembered the fact that he wrote down his laws on tablets. This is a key point of the author, who seeks to demonstrate to students the challenge of source evidence. Most also were able to remember that Asoka’s method was, as one student noted, “to unify them by incorporating homogenous practices throughout the empire.” Students remembered that as a principle, though very few came up with examples of this phenomenon. Again, the textbook reading by the stronger students revealed retention of basic theses of the chapter, though relatively little of specific evidence for these theses.

Ch. 9 quiz was a multiple choice affair, which was completed in groups with books open. Consequently I made the questions more integrative, rather than asking content questions that could be answered through the index by someone who had not done the reading. Nearly the entire class answered questions on Nestorian Christianity and Islamic presence in Guangzhou province. Nestorian Christians are unusual in their understanding of Jesus as human rather than divine, a notion that probably stuck in the craw of my largely Midwestern Christian class. Almost all of them answered the Muslim question correctly since to this point my own strong thesis in the world history narrative argues that the Islamic trading system was the major global force. I take this as evidence that repetition of key concepts does eventually work.

Ch. 6 was a multiple choice, taken individually and without books. Here the scores were predictably lower, but trends once again revealed the ability to recall simple and key facts from the text, such as the idea that Buddhism initially developed in India. (My guess is that if they had not read the chapter at all, most would have claimed that it began in China.) Yet the missed more specific questions about philosophical beliefs of Confucianism and the Greek thinker Epicurus.

Ch. 12 was another short answer quiz to the question, “How did the Crusades affect the Islamic world and Byzantium”? Once again, most of the students were able to remember the key thesis of the author, that the Crusades were, in the words of one student “a minor problem for the Islamic world,” and in the words of another “not as good and noble as they were made out to be” in Christian history. Very few were able to mention any specific details in their response, though they were encouraged to do so. In sum, lots of Bs.

- In class assessments

Another group of data that I collected involved assessments that occurred during the class and/or at the end of class. These pieces of evidence are helpful for weighing the impact of activities within the class, as distinct from preparation through reading, etc.

Once a week or so the class was devoted to the analysis of primary sources, which are published in a reader. Other days the class would analyze secondary sources, or works of contemporary historians. Both of these class genres are meant to develop analytical skills that are key to the business of history.

One day the students spent a few minutes reviewing one of four documents from the Christian tradition. Then they were individually provided with worksheets that asked about the context of the document (what, when, where) and required students to come up with two examples of *implicit* information in the document. The first and simpler task was handled with great brio, of course. As one student wrote of the Gospel of Mathew, this is “a major account of the life of Jesus and teachings, written around 85 – 90.” Under implicit information the same student listed descriptive information such as “Jesus lists different types of people who shall be blessed,” and for his other example actually quotes the famous phrase about being struck on the cheek. The student suggested that there was probably a lot of retaliation and aggression in his society. This would be a beginning level of implicit analysis, which was about the state of some 60% of the quizzes. Perhaps 20% did not even reach this level of implicit analysis, while 20% offered more impressive insights, such as the notion that gender relations in Jesus’ society were characterized by the contradiction that while males and females are accepted by religion, the notion in this particular Gnostic text was that salvation through wisdom was not possible for women. In sum, implicit analysis of documents is an acquired skill, one that arguably was honed AFTER this particular assessment device was assigned.

Western Civilization Discussion. During one class I passed out an anonymous assessment that asked for a 2-3 sentence answer to, “whaty is meant by the ‘West’ and what impact

has it had on World History’?” I received some vigorous responses; they seemed more comfortable with this question than any other. A few said they thought of the West as the land of cowboys, but most were able to recite some of the well-worn precepts of the Western Civ world view: European – based, rooted in the Classics of Greece, provider of most of the world’s progress. A few of the more savvy students identified the West as a “construction,” but these amounted to three or four at the most. My not surprising conclusion is that the myth of the West is alive and well in the nation’s high schools. The rest of the class was spent in open discussion about how this tradition is continually re-invented, at some times more than others such as during the Enlightenment. I have no data from later in the course to indicate that students learned to deconstruct the notion with more clarity than these early statements suggest.

One day was spent analyzing non-written ancient sources, such as sculpture and architecture. Students are typically not as practiced in this analysis as in literary work. Toward the end of the period, without asking their opinions in advance, I asked them to write their answer to the meta-question “contrast the challenges and rewards of analysis of non-written sources.” Having just spent forty minutes involved in this process they all had much to say. For the most part the reaction was that it is more difficult to analyze non-written sources since written text provides better context. A considerable minority, some 40%, claimed that non-written sources challenge them to think with more imagination, which some of them identified as good. About 10% recognized that in many ways, written sources suffer from some of the same problems as non-written ones, such as the blinders of perspective (once called “bias”). In sum, this evidence indicates to me that my students were shifting their view of what it is that historians do. These skill exercise days allow them some space to consider the actual craft of history, one of the core goals of my department.

Another class was devoted to the spread of religious missionaries through the Eastern Hemisphere. I showed the students two short film clips, one from a documentary on Islamic belief and mission, and the other from the movie *Black Robe*, which describes the encounter between Jesuits and native folks in southeastern Canada. The first clip is informative in a technical sort of way, the second one *imagines* what was happening in the minds of the Algonquians. After a very brief discussion I handed out a worksheet that asked students to use their own historical imagination. The sheet had a map of the Indian Ocean world, where Islam spread during the period we were studying. They were to “imagine that you are a ‘local’ in one place on this map” and explain how and why they might have been converted. Surprisingly, very few of them could imagine being converted. (The next time I will not give the option of not converting!) Among the few students who imagined being converted, he suggested that his appreciation of the military prowess of the Islamic invaders would have impressed him. Another suggested that this would be a longer-term process. Yet another said that the benefits of the afterlife would be persuasive. I was a little surprised that I did not receive many better responses. One problem might have been that the *Black Robe* clip, which was meant to show how *complicated* conversion is, might have been interpreted that conversion was impossible. A larger problem looms, though, in my opinion. Students are not skilled in using historical imagination because, face it, they have not been rewarded for it in high school

history classes, and maybe not at Wabash either. I conclude that the evidence points to a need for more such interactive exercises, to work toward our departmental goal of creating student historians.

Patterns in Evidence

This project can benefit from engagement with other SoTL literature on teaching and learning styles. In the meantime I can draw several conclusions:

1. In general students learn more historical detail if they do more than read the text and listen to me talk. Group discussion increases their learning potential, and more interactive group exercises takes their learning one step further.
2. In general the distinction between content (goal 1) and developing the skills and aptitude of a historian (goals 4-5) is not as hardened as I previously believed. That is, if the goal is either content mastery or skills mastery the same delivery systems are likely to benefit students.
3. An unanswered question continues to be: if I utilize more interactive methods and spend fewer days lecturing, will the students only be learning a narrower base of historical information though more deeply?

This research has encouraged me to think about a concept that I call integrative pedagogy. By this term I mean to exercise an intentional merging of various teaching styles, recognizing that there are various learning styles in the classroom. If the integration can be achieved in such a way that the different teaching techniques actually work in concert; that mini-lectures can be used to set up discussions and interactive exercises such as skits and debates. This research suggests that a variety of teaching and learning activities can create stronger synergies in classroom discourse, improving student comprehension of historical content and the development of analytical skills.