Encounters and Other People's Mail:
Teaching the History of U.S. Foreign Relations

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Introduction

In the mid-1980s, when he was President of the American Association for Higher Education, Russell Edgerton offered the following insight: "We measure our success as educators, and our successes as educational institutions, on the basis of the quality of the encounters we arrange."[1]

Since the time I first read it, Edgerton's metaphor has helped me articulate for myself a view of what a college education should be: encounters with professors and with other students; with a wide variety of people, ideas, experiences, and contexts, nonacademic as well as academic; in laboratories and on athletic fields and debate teams; with scholars through their writings; and with historical actors through their writings and other legacies.

This last type of encounter was described very well, twenty years ago, by a leading historian of U.S. foreign relations. In a 1985 *OAH Newsletter* piece, William Appleman Williams provided a synopsis of how he involved his students in what he called "doing History." Williams wrote: "I always send undergraduates as well as graduate students off into the bowels of the library to read other people's mail. . . . Students return from such trips into the unknown ecstatic, engaged, and confused….The play of the mind with the evidence. The coming to terms with causes and consequences. The joy of making one's own sense of the documents….That is doing History."[2]

On the one hand, we might plausibly say that although these are articulate statements, and useful reminders, they aren't telling us anything we didn't already know. After all, for many decades, at least, college teachers of history have wanted their students to obtain a basic knowledge of what happened when, why, through whose agency, and what it all means. Most of us have given considerable thought to arranging encounters for our students, although we may not have thought of our teaching in these terms. We have considered what we want to have our students confront, contemplate, and analyze: their classmates' ideas and assumptions, as well as their own; our lectures and our other words of wisdom; and the books, articles, films, and other documents we assign to them, as well as others that they discover on their own as part of their research. Long before the verb and adverb came to be packaged as the compound noun "critical thinking", we wanted our students to think critically and to articulate their thoughts more clearly.

On the other hand, reminders such as these from Edgerton and Williams can be very useful indeed. They can prompt us to recall some of the fundamentals and, sometimes, to adapt them to current circumstances – such as new technologies and new generations of students. In my courses over the years I have given more thought to the books and other documents, especially primary sources and visual resources, that I want my students to confront and wrestle with just as they also confront my ideas and those of their peers. In addition to what the students and I do in the classroom, I have come to place considerable emphasis on what they do outside of class, particularly work that takes them beyond assigned readings and into what Williams called "other people's mail."

Learning How Others Teach

For the most part we have acquired our teaching skills and practices chiefly through our individual efforts, taking as our points of reference the examples provided by the good (and not-so-good) teachers we as students had encountered years before. Once in the field, we have relied on the occasional conversation at a professional conference (what historian David Pace, perhaps too unappreciatively, has recently termed "haphazardly shared folk wisdom"[3]) and, if we are lucky, on the productive discussions that occur in some of our history departments on a fairly formal basis. It is quite a contrast with our role as scholars. There we conduct research – in the process usually profiting greatly from the work of others who have gone before – and are eager to publish our results. But as a profession we have not shared widely much information about our teaching, and consequently there is relatively little information readily available from others upon which we might draw.[4] Diplomatic historian Ken Bain, in his new book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, spells out the consequences of this neglect: "Teaching is one of those human endeavors that seldom benefits from its past. Great teachers emerge, they touch the lives of their students, and perhaps only through some of those students do they have any influence on the broad art of teaching. For the most part, their insights die with them, and subsequent generations must discover anew the wisdom that drove their practices."[5] This is hardly a situation we would wish to see prevail in historical research and writing.

Nevertheless, this contrast between the record of our scholarship and that of our teaching is understandable. In-depth research, particularly when combined with the act of laying out the results for the scrutiny of one's peers, tends to make us expert on a

given topic. We usually have a good basis for saying: “here’s my interpretation of this matter and here’s why.” When it comes to teaching, relatively few of us believe that we have the same kind of expertise. We have faith in our practices for our colleges and our students, but for the most part we probably do not consider our experiences sufficiently generalizable to write them up and share them with our colleagues nationally or internationally.

Those SHAFR members who would like to learn more about what their colleagues teach, and how they teach it, will likely be interested in a couple of developments. One of these is SHAFR's "syllabus initiative," begun last year, which makes syllabi available on our association's website. As William Cronon wrote in 1986, "the next best thing to asking someone how they teach is to look at the syllabi they hand out to students."[6] We on SHAFR's Teaching Committee[7] strongly encourage you to submit your syllabi to the SHAFR website. We hope that this enterprise will grow in the number of submissions and that it will also expand beyond syllabi to include assignments and other useful descriptions, which should make more evident the physiology of our courses as well as their anatomy.

In addition to the syllabus initiative, the Teaching Committee has in fact asked SHAFR members what they teach and how they teach it, via the recent Survey on Teaching. The purpose of the survey was to obtain information about what courses SHAFR members are offering on the history of U.S. foreign relations, and how they are teaching them. By "how", we meant what materials (books, articles, audiovisual productions, other documents, etc.) teachers require students to read or view, what kinds of assignments they make, and how teachers and students use their time together in class. Some 150

SHAFR members responded, providing data on more than 300 courses. A full analysis of the survey will take many months, perhaps years, but the Committee expects to provide some of the survey results in the December 2005 issue of *Passport*.

SHAFR Conference Program

A few months ago, the Teaching Committee thought it would be useful to schedule a program on teaching at the 2005 annual conference. We wanted to do several things: 1) encourage discussion about teaching among our colleagues; 2) hear from those in attendance any ideas about how they believe SHAFR might be able to contribute to their teaching; 3) inform them about what the Teaching Committee is planning, and get their reactions; and 4) provide some preliminary results from the survey of teaching conducted this past spring. The program took place on Friday, June 24, with five members of the committee on hand along with 55 other conference attendees.

Committee chair Mark Gilderhus welcomed the audience and outlined the organization of the program. The committee members then summarized briefly our approaches to teaching. For example, Mitch Lerner described in some detail techniques that he uses because he can't expect all of his students to love history the way he does. These include music as students come into and leave class, and a different tie carefully selected for each class day. Lerner also noted that he often tells his students, "There's no such thing as a wrong answer, just one that's insufficiently supported." In her classes, Catherine Forslund emphasizes the teacher's "enthusiasm and honesty," and she reminds her students that they too are historians. Carol Adams observed that a large number of courses are of the more general survey variety, and that it is important to make the history

of foreign relations an important part of these. For my part, some of the points I made at the session are replicated in the first few paragraphs above.

One member of the audience expressed concern that the higher education departments on our campuses are failing to help prepare people for teaching at the university level. Mark Gilderhus agreed, saying that we tend to model our performance on the good teachers that we have had. He added that his university, Texas Christian, is one of the few he knows of that offers a course on university teaching.

Another teacher in the audience advocated reviewing oneself. He asks his audiovisual center staff to make a video of him every couple of years, and he reviews several years' worth of these. Other suggestions from the audience included asking students on the final exam how they would have designed the course differently,[8] and the keeping of a teaching journal by the professor.

As for the discussion about how SHAFR might help with teaching, there were a number of comments from the audience advocating the sharing at SHAFR conferences of various teaching tips, including information about what course materials are being used.

Straws in the Wind?

As the size of the audience at our June 24 program might suggest, it is likely that teachers of American diplomatic history are becoming more interested in sharing with other practitioners information about their teaching. In addition, there seems to be some interest in helping build a professional infrastructure to support teaching in this field. As additional evidence I'll point to several straws in the wind: 1) in the April 2004 issue of *Passport*, Mitch Lerner's provocative "last word" column advocating more emphasis in

SHAFR on teaching; 2) soon afterward, SHAFR president Mark Stoler's creation of a SHAFR Task Force on Teaching, now the Teaching Committee; 3) columns in *Passport* last August and December by Gilderhus and Stoler, respectively, speaking to teaching issues; 4) Robert Shaffer's very interesting and useful article in last December's *Passport*, describing how he had his students react to books by Nick Cullather and Samuel Flagg Bemis in his classes (One member of the Teaching Committee has already followed Shaffer's suggestion and used Cullather's book, with very good results.); 5) in January, action by the SHAFR Council, funding a graduate assistant at Ohio State University to help launch a web version of the forthcoming survey; 6) the survey itself, both on the web and on paper, the latter appearing in last April's issue of *Passport*.

Another indication of a growing interest in the teaching of history, coming from the larger historical profession, is a review article in last October's *American Historical Review*. The tone of David Pace's article can be inferred from its title: "The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning."[9]

Finally, across higher education more generally, there is the burgeoning growth of the National Survey of Student Engagement, conducted by researchers at Indiana University, and its companion Faculty Survey of Student Engagement. Since its inception in 2000, NSSE has been administered to more than 850 colleges and universities, institutions that account for approximately two-thirds of undergraduates enrolled in four-year schools. The findings of NSSE and FSSE are part of a growing body of higher education research that emphasizes the importance of several factors that many of us can appreciate, including an "academically rigorous curriculum, . . . challenging writing assignments," and "undergraduate research experiences."[10]

Two related conclusions drawing upon this body of research come from Professor George Kuh of Indiana University, chief architect and administrator of the NSSE survey:

1) "What counts most in terms of desired outcomes of college is what students do during college, not who they are or even where they go to college. . . .The time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development."[11]

2) "On balance, students do pretty much what their teachers expect and require them to do."[12]

It is worth contemplating in our own environments the appropriate mix of factors that make for our students' educational success, including the traditionally accepted characteristics of ability and motivation, and the additional element of academically demanding assignments from faculty.

Postscript

This guest column on teaching is only the first in what the Teaching Committee hopes will be a regular and long-lived series in *Passport*. We encourage your submissions and hope that editor Mitch Lerner receives a large number from which to choose. We also would like to see the submissions reflect a wide array of views, ranging from the most traditional to the unimaginably innovative, about what teachers of the history of U.S foreign relations have found useful for themselves and for their students' learning within the context of this vital subject.[13]

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[1] Paul G. Pearson, "Powerful Encounters: Defining and Achieving Excellence," in *The State of the University* (Oxford, Ohio, 1986), p. 3. Pearson was President of Miami University, and this document was his address to the University Senate.

[2] William Appleman Williams, “Thoughts on the Fun and Purpose of Being an American Historian,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, 13 (February 1985), 2-3.

[3] David Pace, "The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *American Historical Review*, 109 (October 2004), 1172. See also Mark Gilderhus, "The Last Word," *Passport*, 35 (August 2004), 55.
[4] William Cronon, "History Behind Classroom Doors: Teaching the American Past," *The History Teacher*, 19 (February 1986), 201.
[5] Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 3.
[6] Cronon, "History Behind Classroom Doors," 201-202.
[7] Mark Gilderhus, Texas Christian University, chair; Carol Jackson Adams, Ottawa University; Catherine Forslund, Rockford College; Mitchell Lerner, Ohio State University—Newark; John McNay, University of Cincinnati; Richard Werking, U.S. Naval Academy; and Thomas Zeiler, University of Colorado

[8] One of the most worthwhile assignments I've experienced was in graduate school at Wisconsin in John Smail's course on Southeast Asian history. The grad students had a choice of either writing the typical research paper, or developing a syllabus for a course on Southeast Asian history and then meeting with the professor for an hour one-on-one to discuss it at the end of the semester. The latter was a most interesting, challenging, and useful assignment.

[9] Pace, *AHR*, October 2004, 1171--1192.

[10] George D. Kuh, Thomas F. Nelson Laird, and Paul D. Umback, "Aligning Faculty Activities and Student Behavior: Realizing the Promise of Greater Expectations," *Liberal Education* , 24-25. See also Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (Washington, D.C., 2002).
[11] George D. Kuh, "The National Survey of Student Engagement: Conceptual Framework and Overview of Psychometic Properties," available at www.indiana.edu/~nsse [accessed July 5, 2005], 1.
[12] Kuh *et al.*, "Aligning Faculty Activities," 26. See also John Biggs, "What the Student Does: Teaching for Enhanced Learning," *Higher Education Research & Development*, 18, #1 (1999), 57-75.
[13] For example, two historians' highly pertinent and recent pieces about college teaching offer quite different perspectives. See Roy Rosenzweig, "Digital Archives Are a Gift of Wisdom to Be Used Wisely," B20-24, and Patrick Allitt, "Professors, Stop Your Microchips," B38-39, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 24, 2005. (The entire section is entitled "10 Techniques to Change Your Teaching," *Chronicle*, B1-43)

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