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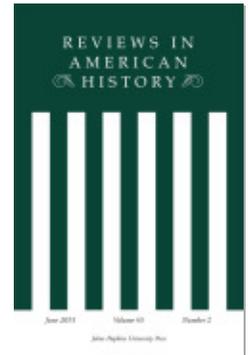
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Reflections

A LIFE OF LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM*

MICHAEL H. EBNER

For me, one of the continuing pleasures of being a college professor was in the opportunity—year after year, decade after decade—to teach women and men of unquestionable promise. As a faculty member for five years at the City University of New York and thirty-three at Lake Forest College, I derived unending gratification from nurturing my students' advancement as undergraduates and from hearing about their post-baccalaureate successes. Their attainments sustained my investment in the enterprise of learning.

I think of myself as especially fortunate that I could devote much of my teaching career to a residential liberal arts setting. Carl E. Schorske, in reflecting on his earliest teaching at Wesleyan University (less well known than his years at Berkeley and then Princeton), has spoken eloquently of this formative experience: “. . . only a small college could have provided the openness of discourse that made it possible to confront the cultural transformation across the borders of increasingly anonymous disciplines.”¹ Likewise, Lauro Martines, in an essay entitled “Large and Little School Teaching,” which I have often circled back to since reading it almost thirty years ago, recollected his best moments with undergraduates as a professor at UCLA. They returned him to his heady experiences while teaching at Reed College.² And Carl N. Degler, writing about his youthful years as an assistant professor at Vassar College preceding his long association with Stanford, warmly recalls one of its singular attributes: “it sought . . . to develop its faculty as well as its students.”³

As I have contemplated my own experiences in the classroom—bridging my years as student and then as teacher—at first blush I thought my life of learning dated back more than sixty years. It began, so I believed upon early consideration, when I entered Public School No. 1 in Clifton, New Jersey, in 1947. But as I very recently regarded that benchmark, I made a discovery I deem startling: this story line encompasses influences embedded in portions of three different centuries.

Mrs. Meta Wentink, a cherished third-grade teacher, provides the source of one of my earliest schoolboy memories. It is easy enough to deduce that the youthful Meta Merrill, born in rural Connecticut in 1885, commenced her

own formal education circa 1890. I surmise that she completed her schooling during the second decade of the twentieth century. Mrs. Wentink inspired me in any number of ways, only one of which I elaborate upon. In a year-long curricular unit drawing upon history and geography, she introduced our class to maps as a consequential source of unending discovery. I vividly recall that Phoenicia was colored lavender on our large wall map of the ancient Mediterranean civilizations.

Much more recently I have taken time to contemplate the influences that might have shaped Mrs. Wentink's own sensibilities about learning. Her teachers, I quickly figured out, lived amid momentous events of the nineteenth century: emancipation, immigration, industrialization, technological ingenuity, multiple wars, and expansion (domestic as well as international). Mrs. Wentink was sixty-five when I first sat in her classroom in 1950. Now I appreciate that I surely was influenced by lessons and strategies that she herself had derived from her own teachers. I imagine that one or more of young Meta Merrill's teachers might have used a map to trace the course of the Atlanta campaign during the Civil War or the westward routes of the then-new transcontinental railway network. In her youth, she undoubtedly witnessed some of the profound changes in the landscapes of American culture.

Mrs. Wentink's inspiring teaching, I recognize from an almost unimaginable temporal distance, furnished me with my most useful impulses for sustained success once I became responsible for my own classroom in 1969. Above all, I pursued the objective of easing the entry of my students into "communities of serious discourse," a concept I have gratefully borrowed from Stephen R. Graubard.⁴ Whether as a neophyte classroom instructor or in my final decade at the lectern or the seminar table, this goal entailed a multiplicity of opportunities. From one class session to the next, I aspired to render for my students the story lines of American history in their assorted complexities, alive, meaningful, and lasting. My goal, well before I counted myself among the acolytes of Richard J. Light, was to hear a gratified student express in some way "I really got what I came here for."⁵

Presented with the opportunity, I would report to Professor Light that I too reaped what I had envisioned for myself in devoting my adult professional life to the teaching of American history. If I were to elaborate on the source of satisfaction, at the top of my list would be a penchant to intertwine instructional strategies with current scholarship. But I now recognize that few of these strategies stayed long in place. I benefitted, as I hope my students did, from perpetually refurbishing my repertoire. As a result, huge differences distinguish the various courses in American history I offered in 1969 from the much-transformed classrooms I've been part of in the twenty-first century. Louis Menand rightfully considers these changes as a veritable revolution reshaping the humanities before our eyes.⁶ Consciously as well as more sub-

liminally, I tried to deepen my students' understanding of the wellsprings and consequences of these changes.

A handful of examples underscore the point. At the City College of New York, near the beginning of my career, I infused my teaching of American social history with the pathbreaking scholarship of Herbert G. Gutman, then a widely discussed and internationally acclaimed exponent of the "new" labor history.⁷ I saw at once how this provocative re-reading of American working-class history excited my students as much as it had me. Soon after arriving at Lake Forest College, I organized a comprehensive study packet—relied upon to this day by colleagues responsible for teaching U.S. Survey II—that introduced our first-year students to the intricacies of historical evidence needed to research, frame, document, and write a college-level history term paper.⁸ I tied this project to the sixty-nine-volume set of the papers of Woodrow Wilson prodigiously edited by Arthur S. Link and his associates, as well as to an ever-proliferating list of secondary sources. In my urban history course, *American Cities*, I experimented with reformulating its chronological framework. Here I responded to students' desire for more emphasis on contemporary urbanism.⁹ After some false starts, I fastened upon an adjustment that proved satisfactory for students and instructor alike: the first four class sessions focused upon contemporary cities; next we examined, over two further sessions, the industrial revolution on a macro scale; then we dropped back to the seventeenth century and began a more traditional chronological climb to modern history. Another way that the *American Cities* course changed, as the student body at Lake Forest College became increasingly international, involved incorporating a global dimension. This turn would fix our gaze on Lagos, Mexico City, and Mumbai, as well as Detroit, Los Angeles, and New Orleans.¹⁰ Over more than twenty-five years in conducting my seminar on American social history, I constantly revised my required reading list to take advantage of the unending procession of new scholarship I have found exhilarating. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's remark at a symposium on liberal arts colleges has helped me to appreciate the rich possibilities I experienced in this and other courses: "Much of effective college teaching involves spontaneous interplay between professor, materials, and students in class."¹¹ Notable books I read with various students included: John Bodnar et al., *Lives of Their Own* (1982); John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive* (1994); Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress* (1964); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale* (1991); and Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (1999), as well as, more recently, his *Masquerade, The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson* (2004). Our reading and discussion of Thomas Bender's *Community and Social Change in America* (1978) partly shaped my devoting eight years to writing *Creating Chicago's North Shore, A Suburban History* (1988). Presuming that my students did not necessarily know of their influential role in their professor's research design,

I recognized them by name in the acknowledgments (“Students enrolled in a seminar at Lake Forest College planted the seeds . . .”).

Another consequential dimension of my teaching, central to the tradition of liberal learning, brought theoretical perspectives—frequently interdisciplinary—into my courses. Early on in a senior seminar, we explored the strengths as well as the liabilities embedded in the writing of contemporary history, juxtaposing the divergent perspectives of John Lewis Gaddis and Barry M. Karl.¹² As my students prepared their capstone projects—a major research paper on topics of their own choice and design—I expected them to mindfully assess this contentious and ongoing debate about contemporary history. During the 1980s, in the seminar on American social history, I introduced the scholarship of Natalie Zemon Davis, Clifford Geertz, and Rhys Isaac. We parried with the possibilities and limitations of how ethnographic methodologies might add to our research in primary sources.¹³ More recently, drawing upon the scholarship of David W. Blight, we tried to distinguish between history and memory.¹⁴ Over the last decade or so, I brought D. W. Meinig’s four-volume work, *The Shaping of America, A Geographic Perspective on 500 Years*, into the intellectual framework of American Cities.¹⁵ Arguably the preeminent historical geographer of our time, Meinig’s wide-ranging and masterly volumes are replete with imaginative maps, many of them from his own hand. His presence in American Cities hastened the students’ appreciation of the forces—cultural, economic, international, political, and topographic—contributing to the evolution of our national urban networks since the sixteenth century. Connecting my students to the venerable discipline of geography—its fortunes on the academic landscape, markedly and lamentably ebbing in my own lifetime—has coincidentally furnished me with the satisfaction of my earliest intellectual ferment.

Writing has comprised a bedrock dimension bordering on obsession in my life of learning in the classroom.¹⁶ Richard J. Light, drawing upon extensive interviews with undergraduates at Harvard and elsewhere, has shared candidly a key finding about this: “I was surprised by students’ strong attitudes toward writing . . . I didn’t realize how deeply many of them care about it, or how strongly they hunger for specific suggestions about how to improve it.”¹⁷ Stanley Fish, renowned literary scholar and academic administrator, recently offered advice that I considered unrivaled. At the opening of a new academic year when the *New York Times* posed the question about how ambitious first-year undergraduates might fortify themselves for success, he answered resoundingly: “learning to write a clean English sentence . . . if you can’t do that, you can’t do anything.”¹⁸

A single example, from my course on the History of Sport, sums up my own long-simmering views about student writing. A specific assignment, adjusted and improved upon over the years, had to do with analyzing the sports section of big-city newspapers since the 1880s. We had covered this

topic in depth during class sessions, augmented with corresponding reading assignments.¹⁹ Each student was assigned five segments, spanning over more than one-hundred years and also spread over the four seasons of the calendar. For example, Marlys Hammond '87 would find herself with the following dates: January 1885; April 1910; July 1934; October 1960; and December 1985. At the heart of this project, which required a final paper of approximately twelve pages, was a sequence of interrelated questions. A sampling included:

- (1) How did the organization of reporting as well as organizing sports news change as a full-scale sports section first emerged?
- (2) How and why did the advertisements change?
- (3) How and why did the focus of sports reporting shift in terms of professional, intercollegiate, and high school contests?
- (4) How and why did matters of gender, race, and class change in sports reporting?
- (5) How and why did the nature of sports and seasonal variations shift?
- (6) How and why did the globalization of sport proliferate? and
- (7) How and why did the unending information revolution—photography, telegraph, radio, cinema, television, and ultimately the internet—continuously impose itself on the shape of newspaper sports reporting?

I underscored repeatedly that this assignment was *not* about whether, for example, the manager of the Chicago Cubs erred in designating Hank Borowy as the starting pitcher against the Detroit Tigers in game seven of the World Series in 1945 or whom Althea Gibson defeated for the All-England championship at Wimbledon in 1957. Rather, for all of its contemporary manifestations, this comparative project remained a classic analytic exercise. It required each student to formulate a workable organizational scheme. And the result culminated in artfully written papers that focused on the ever-shifting nature of newspaper sports news and the forces underlying its transformations over more than a century.

I also sought to convey a key strategy, as I did in every course, for the successful completion of this admittedly demanding and complex assignment. Your greatest effort, I reminded the students, should *not* be devoted to the research. This evinced surprise. I suggested this phase of the project might be completed by allocating a maximum of three or four hours to read newspapers on microfilm in the college library. Instead I advised my students that the challenge of their assignment entailed framing an effective paper conforming to the exacting expectations I had set forth.

In my courses I also reminded my students routinely that I maintained a generous schedule of office hours with no advanced appointment required. I expressed my willingness to discuss their evidence, to guide them in shaping rhetorical strategies, and to read rough drafts as due dates neared. Students who took heed of my availability and who adhered to pointers I frequently proffered about their avowedly complex assignments—and many did—found themselves not only appreciative of the process but also fulfilled by the result. Richard J. Light as well as Stanley Fish, I suspect, might nod in assent if they could witness my students' affirming response.

Another way of teaching that stands as a hallmark of the collegiate experience—independent work with students—quickly surfaced at Lake Forest College.²⁰ It entailed a partnership with talented students who opted to prepare a senior thesis. This comprises a self-selected option, *not* a requirement. Just over 10 percent of our fourth-year students make this choice. The initial step for prospective thesis writers involves aligning themselves with a professor who agrees to guide their pursuit over two semesters. My role assumed multiple forms: guide, prod, critic, sympathetic ear in the all-but-inevitable moments of despair, and advocate. More than twenty-five thesis writers came my way. The array of topics—among them the origins of Social Security, Japanese-Americans during World War II, the Great Depression in Lake Forest, the Black Panthers, the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago, the character of Richard Nixon, the changing experiences of women students at Lake Forest College, memories of a Navy seaman in the Pacific War, Abraham Lincoln's role in the Dakota uprising, Theodore Roosevelt as child and father, and the shaping of fan loyalty to the Green Bay Packers—reflected the range of predilections in the writers. More often than not the very process of writing a thesis forged enduring bonds, in some instances stretching over decades, fondly recalled by the authors and certainly by their professor.

My concluding decade at Lake Forest College deserves elaboration. It began with a rush of unanticipated yet interrelated opportunities for teaching in another guise. When the college organized an Academic Innovations Group, I served as its initial chair. The group's efforts, faced with challenges and even obstacles, generated an intellectual ferment on campus, culminating in a sequence of cross-disciplinary curricular experiments. I also led a team of colleagues in preparing a curricular innovation proposal that had been invited by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Our outcome—*The Geographically Extended Classroom*, intellectually indebted to the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan—linked our campus-based curriculum to the culture and institutions of Chicago, thirty miles to the south.²¹ Almost simultaneously, I found myself at the center of a large-scale consortium hosted on our campus. It encompassed a nearby urban school district, two Chicago-area universities joining with Lake Forest College, and the Chicago History Museum. An award of \$926,000 from

the U.S. Department of Education's newly instituted grant program, known as Teaching American History, made this enterprise possible. McRAH, the acronym for *Rethinking American History, A Model Collaboration*, yielded multiple outcomes. It fostered a sense of shared responsibility among public school instructors, museum curators, and professors. Collectively we re-thought the history curriculum, its pedagogical assumptions, and our common disciplinary traditions.²²

With these three enterprises—the Academic Innovations Group, Creating the Geographically Extended Classroom, and Teaching American History—I met challenges that would yield unscheduled dividends. They enabled colleagues working together in unaccustomed arenas to shape as well as implement distinctive curricular models. Each had practical as well as theoretical ramifications, affecting not only how students learned but also how faculty could refurbish their instructional repertoires.

Because I carefully had planned my retirement at the close of the spring semester of 2007, I purposefully resumed my role as a full-time professor of American history in the fall semester of 2005. I taught those courses—American Cities, History of Sport, U.S. Social History, and Contemporary History—that I had long ago organized, cultivated, indeed loved. Some of them dated to my first academic appointment thirty-eight years earlier.

This finale marked a gratifying and rewarding life of learning in the classroom. Contemplating my very good fortune, I remain ever mindful of received wisdom inspired by John Dewey and offered some years ago by Louis Menand: "For those of us who are teachers, it isn't what we teach that instills virtue; it is how we teach. We are the books that our students read most closely."²³

Michael H. Ebner, James D. Vail III Professor of American History Emeritus at Lake Forest College, has received recognitions as teacher and mentor from the American Historical Association, the *Chicago Tribune*, The City College of New York, and Lake Forest College.

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1. Carl E. Schorske, "1987—Charles Homer Haskins Lecture of the American Council of Learned Societies," in *The Life of Learning*, ed. Douglas Greenberg and Stanley N. Katz (1994), 60.

2. Lauro Martines, "Large and Little School Teaching, Reed College and UCLA," *The American Scholar* 54 (Spring 1985): 194–203.

3. Carl N. Degler, "Vassar College," in *American Places, Encounters with History*, ed. William E. Leuchtenburg (2000), 103.

4. Stephen R. Graubard, "Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts College," *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 128 (Winter 1999): xi.

5. Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (2001), 1. Professor Light, trained as a statistician and longtime professor of education at Harvard University, has devoted some twenty-five years to assessing undergraduate learning at his own institution

as well as colleges and universities across the U.S. He visited Lake Forest College on two occasions to talk with faculty.

6. Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (2010), 61–92.

7. Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919," *American Historical Review* 78 (January 1973): 531–88. Professor Gutman, in advance of this protean paper's publication, characteristically distributed his manuscript as a mimeograph.

8. Although there are many such books about preparing the college history term paper, to my way of thinking the best of them is William Kelleher Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, 3rd ed. (2008).

9. I have elaborated upon the transformation of the American Cities course in Michael H. Ebner, "Nurturing Romance," *Common-Place* 3 (July 2003), which is also available online: <http://www.common-place.org/vol-03/no-04/school> [accessed May 29, 2010].

10. Despite its unduly modest title, Kenneth T. Jackson, "Cities," in *The Columbia History of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Richard Bulliet (1998), 528–42, provides a broad-gauge vantage point for a global turn. I subsequently added to the assigned readings, as an invaluable case study, George Packer, "The Megacity: DeCoding the Chaos in Lagos," *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2006, 69–75.

11. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "Balancing Hopes and Limits in the Liberal Arts College," *ACLS Occasional Paper* 59 (2005), 24.

12. A cogent affirmation is John Lewis Gaddis, "The Nature of Contemporary History," *National Council for History Education, Inc., Occasional Paper* (n.d., c. 1992?). Far less sanguine—but most instructive nonetheless—is Barry D. Karl, "Visiting the Recent Past," *Reviews in American History* 18 (March 1990): 137–41.

13. Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth Century France," *Past & Present* 50 (February 1971): 41–75; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), 3–30; and Rhys Isaac, "Ethnographic Method in History: An Action Approach," *Historical Methods* 13 (Winter 1980): 43–61.

14. David W. Blight, "Historians and Memory," *Common-Place* 2 (April 2002), <http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-03/author> [accessed May 21, 2010], as well as his *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001).

15. D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America, A Geographic Perspective on 500 Years of History*, 4 vols. (1986–2004).

16. Stephen J. Pyne, *Voices and Visions, A Guide to Writing History and Other Serious Nonfiction* (2009), 191–203, has written a chapter entitled "Point of View" that I have read and re-read in contemplating rhetorical strategies.

17. Light, *Making the Most of College*, 10.

18. Stanley Fish, "The Hunt for a Good Teacher," *New York Times*, September 5, 2009.

19. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978), and Mark Douglas Lowes, *Inside the Sports Page* (1999).

20. Charles Lipson, *How to Write a BA Thesis: A Practical Guide from Your First Ideas to Your Finished Paper* (2005), 18–27, offers especially useful words of guidance, beneficial to students and professors, pertaining to the thesis writer as well as the role of the advisor.

21. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Life as a Field Trip," *Geographical Review* 91 (January–April 2001): 41–45. Regarding the scope of the Lake Forest College's Center for Chicago Programs, consult <http://www.lakeforest.edu/chicago> [accessed August 1, 2010].

22. Michael H. Ebner, "Applying for a Teaching American History Grant: An Unofficial Guide," *Perspectives, The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* 41 (November 2003), 28–34; Michael H. Ebner, Rachel G. Ragland, and Dawn Abt-Perkins, "Teaching American History: A Report from Lake County, IL," *OAH Newsletter* 31 (February 2003), 5–6; Rachel G. Ragland and Michael H. Ebner, "Increasing Teacher Efficacy in High-Need High Schools: Lessons from American History Teachers," *Journal of Success* 2 (December 2006), <http://www.successinhighneedschools.org/journal/issue/current> [accessed June 11, 2010]; and Rachel G. Ragland and Kelly A. Woestman, eds., *The Teaching American History Project, Lessons for History Educators and Historians* (2009). See also <http://campus.lakeforest.edu/mcrah/index.html>.

23. Louis Menand, "Re-imagining Liberal Education," in *Education and Democracy, Re-imagining Liberal Learning in America*, ed. Robert Orill (1997), 18.