



April 5

What History Students Read

Four years ago, the *Journal of American History* decided to look at the state of instruction in survey courses of American history. The scholars who participated in the journal's forum said that textbooks were generally used as backup material, and they described courses in which students were deeply engaged in a variety of different readings.

Skeptics might have wondered if the forum was overly glowing about the state of instruction. Daniel J. Cohen, [writing](#) in the new issue of the journal, says that he wondered too — so he set out to figure out just what was going on in survey courses. The answer is that textbooks dominate readings — and in a surprisingly large number of cases, textbooks are the only readings. And where textbooks are the primary source of readings, tests — not essays — seem to be the primary form of judging what students learn.

All in all, it's not a pretty picture for the discipline. "Choose a large textbook from one of the large publishers, throw in a few quizzes, a midterm, and a final, and instructors quickly have a ready-made course," writes Cohen, director of research projects at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. "While professional historians may complain about standardized testing in secondary schools and what it does to history education — the peril of 'teaching to the test' — they should worry just as much about the 'textbook and testing' character of so many American history survey courses."

Specifically, Cohen found that 26 percent of survey courses in American history at universities, 30 percent of courses at four-year colleges, and 47 percent of those at community colleges relied solely on a textbook for readings.

Cohen did his research using the [Syllabus Finder](#), software he created to search for, capture and analyze syllabi that are posted online by professors. He counted separate sections only if they had independently produced syllabi and weeded out syllabi that had been updated. He ended up with a sample of 792 survey courses. While he acknowledged that the sample is imperfect in part because it excludes some professors (presumably older professors), he writes that the sample is a strong statement of the future direction of teaching in the field.

Besides examining which courses relied solely on textbooks, Cohen analyzed the syllabi to see which textbooks were being used, what other works were used, and how grades were given out.

Unlike some fields where a single text dominates, or where a few duke it out for top position, American history is wide open. *The American Promise: A History of the United States* (Bedford) is listed on the greatest number of syllabi (12 percent). But it is followed by *The American People* (Pearson), *Nation of Nations* (McGraw-Hill), and *Out of Many* (Pearson), each of which is used on between 8 and 9 percent of syllabi.

While the Bedford text has the top slot over all, it is second to *The American People* at community

colleges, and tied with *Nation of Nations* at universities.

Cohen's research indicates that there is little consensus — among those who do use other readings — on what to include. He found only 14 titles that appeared on at least 1 percent of the syllabi, led by *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (taught in 5.2 percent of the courses.) Several of these books, he noted, deal with issues of race. Among the others: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Classic Slave Narratives* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

This subject matter isn't surprising, Cohen writes, given the widespread criticism that textbooks fail to do justice to issues of race. Despite the presence of these books on syllabi, Cohen writes that it would be wrong to assume that issues of race are being given too much attention in history survey courses. Searching the syllabi for the words "religion" or "religious," he finds that they appear on nearly 30 percent of syllabi, only slightly lower than the 32 percent that may be found searching for the word "race."

In an e-mail interview, Cohen said he was bothered by the "fairly pedestrian way" so many courses are taught, relying primarily on a textbook. But he said he was "pleased and surprised" to find so much diversity in secondary books by those professors who use them. "The list of works used by these hundreds of professors ran into hundreds of titles — a very idiosyncratic bunch of works."

Another trend Cohen noticed was that the more reliant a course is on textbooks, the more course grades are determined by exams. And for a field like history that prides itself on critical reading and writing, papers don't play much of a role in student grades.

Four-year colleges placed the most emphasis on papers in grades, and they counted for an average of 33 percent of a student's grade. But tests accounted for 51 percent. Tests accounted for a greater share of students' grades at community colleges (71 percent) and universities (67 percent).

Basis of Course Grades, American History Survey Courses

Type of Institution	Tests	Papers	Participation	Other
Community college	71.0%	16.8%	4.5%	7.7%
Four-year college	50.9%	33.2%	10.0%	5.9%
University	67.0%	19.5%	8.1%	5.1%

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

Comments

Thanks

Nice summary of an interesting article, but is it really such a surprise? In my survey courses, I use a textbook but de-emphasize it as optional reading to supplement lecture. The focus of the course is on four short books, all of which are discussed in depth (I vary the books term to term). I do have both

written essays (2) and tests (midterm, final). But I've thought that this emphasis on writing and discussion was atypical for the survey, and I don't necessarily fault others for putting more weight on the lecture-textbook side. One thing to bear in mind is that for many departments, the survey is necessarily information-oriented. It is where the factual basis is laid and the general narrative of political history laid out so that students can proceed to advanced studies that are more particularly focused and invariably more built around reading, discussion, and critical paper-writing. There is a division of labor between the survey and the seminar, in short. Just because the survey is textbook-dominated is not necessarily atrocious, since students really do have to come out of the survey with a textbook knowledge of the American past — i.e., what Reconstruction was, or why FDR was significant.

Christopher Phelps, Department of History at The Ohio State University at Mansfield, at 10:35 am EDT on April 5, 2005

Significance of the study

I'm also not surprised about the results of the study. What does surprise me, though, is how the "experts" thought that history was being taught in survey courses. Thus, the significance of the study is that the experts are wrong. Furthermore, if the experts (1) are training the next crop of teachers and (2) believe that history is best taught via diverse readings, essays, etc., then the experts need to change the way they are teaching future teachers.

[Ted Smith](#), at 2:26 pm EDT on April 5, 2005

Why would people be surprised at this result? At many schools history survey courses are taught by droves of adjuncts hired at the last minute. Many of them are given a text they must use, and are paid so little that there is no incentive to add extra reading and writing which translates into extra work. Another problem is student loads running into the hundreds make multiple papers impossible. Lastly, many students plain and simple cannot read and write at the level necessary for the types of assignments that were traditional in college history courses 30 years ago.

Don Butts, Professor of History at Gordon College, at 11:09 am EDT on April 8, 2005

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