

EXPERIENCING HISTORY
(Unit 2 - American Perspectives)

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The hearings took place between October 20 and 29, 1913. They were held in the rather small conference room of an 11 member select joint investigating committee appointed by the Congress to investigate labor conditions and problems in the United States. The committee was chaired by Robert M. La Follette, Sr., a Wisconsin senator well-known for his interest in the problems of labor and of labor organizations. To either side, by party and in order of seniority, were seated such redoubtables as William E. Borah, Henry Cabot Lodge, 'Pitchfork Ben' Tillman of South Carolina, and A. Mitchell Palmer. Before them appeared a parade of witnesses: typical workers in the meat packing, mining, needle trades, and steel manufacturing industries; prominent employers; Samuel Gompers and other union heads; social workers, Jane Addams among them; civil rights leaders; and such muckraking reformers as Jacob Riis and Ida M. Tarbell.

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This was how Vesconn's American Perspectives course recently re-created a segment of U. S. history. American Perspectives is a history course which students may elect in meeting their core curriculum requirement. This fall's class numbers approximately 100 students, ranging from first semester freshmen to eighth semester seniors. Their majors cover the usual wide range; few expect to concentrate in history. So, since the course is introductory for some, probably terminal for more, it emphasizes the processes of history and how the historian works. Unit 2 attempts to clarify how the historian combines research and imagination in re-creating the past.

In preparing for Unit 2, the course instructors developed guidance materials for the use of the class in its reconstruction of the past. They were of four kinds;

1. A statement of the learning objectives, the why, of Unit 2. These were defined as: helping the student learn history by placing him in an historical setting; helping him 'feel' history by assuming an authentic role within it; and helping him understand the historical process by re-creating a situation which would develop over a continuing period of class sessions.
2. A statement of the setting for the simulation. 1913 was selected as an appropriate year for numerous reasons. Largely as protest against the dominance of Big Business, Woodrow Wilson and a Democratic administration had recently been elected. The world was on the verge of a great conflict. Strikes and labor unrest had plagued the country for most of the years since the turn of the century; there was concern for national unity. And a separate Department of Labor had been established by the Congress early in 1913 to deal specifically with the interests of American workers.

3. Role sheets giving the names of U.S. senators and representatives of the 63rd Congress who would serve on the investigating committee and names and occupations of witnesses who would be subpoenaed to testify before it. (For example, the employer witnesses would be J. Ogden Armour, Judge Elbert H. Gary, and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Only occupations were given for the four 'typical workers'.)
4. Suggested research sources for getting started in developing simulation of the 32 persons from history who would be involved in the hearings, either as committee members or as witnesses. These starter research materials were placed on reserve for the class in the library. In addition, both course instructors set up non-class hours when they were available at the library to assist in locating, and suggesting, potential sources of research background.

In the first class session of Unit 2, students were informed of the role groups to be formed, and they were left free to join the group of most interest to them. Initially, there was some unevenness as a result--about twenty students chose the Social Worker group, and only about five wanted the spotlight of serving on the committee, but this worked itself out. The role groups were then informed of the written research each would be expected to submit before the hearings began:

1. A biography for each of the roles the group would simulate (thus, for the Congressional committee, eleven biographies had to be prepared). The biographies were to be written newspaper style, that is, as press releases to be used by newspapermen reporting the hearings; they were not to be simple statements of who the committee member or witness was from the perspective of 1975. Copies of these press releases were distributed to the entire class before the hearings began, to help them in identifying each student in his 1913 role.
2. In addition, each witness (or group of witness, as in the case of the Social Workers) had to submit a copy of his or their opening statement to the committee before the hearings began. These helped the committee develop, in advance, a line of questioning for each group of witnesses.

Now the groups began preparing for the committee hearings two weeks hence. The first order of business for each group was to decide which of its members would assume a role. The remaining members of each group were then assigned to work as research aides with the role members. For example, nine students comprised the Union Leader group. Three were selected to serve as witnesses - Samuel Gompers, Eugene Debs, and 'Big Bill' Hayward - and each of

them formed a research sub-group with two other students. Research was to be performed outside of class hours. Regular class periods were to be used for each group to get together, discuss its findings and positions, and decide on such matters as opening statements, in-group conflicts, etc.

The Congressional committee faced the most extensive job of research. What was Mitchell Palmer like, and where did he stand with respect to American labor? On what kind of issue might Representative Lindberg and Senator Bankhead be likely to clash? Do Congressional committees follow Roberts' Rules of Order; how are witnesses called (e.g., subpoenas are printed on yellow paper); what kinds of questions and statements may the chairman determine to be out of order; how does a committee formulate and present its findings? For effective questioning, the committee had to be aware, for example, of the wide differences of viewpoint concerning the black worker held by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois when they came to testify as Civil Rights leaders.

Meanwhile, the instructors worried. Where and how does this production get produced. The answer rested with four students, two of them Speech and Theater majors, one a Speech and Theater minor, and the fourth a programmer for Wesconn radio. They volunteered to serve as a production staff, with full responsibility for all production details. On their heads be praises! They handled all physical and technical arrangements, e.g.: preparation of a paneled hearing room, complete with the Great Seal and a U.S. flag; location of tables and seating for the committee, the witnesses, witnesses' aides, and committee staff; special lighting; audio-visual transmission of the proceedings to a larger room down the hall for students not involved in the hearings on a particular day; and videotaping of the hearings for future reference. Cooperation was a keynote: the production staff consulted with the committee concerning hearing-room arrangements ("Don't forget the water pitchers!"); the committee circulated among the various witness groups during the research period to pick up ideas for questions and attitudes when the hearings began.

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Promptly at 11:10 a.m. on October 20, 1913, the committee chairman called the committee to order. He stated the purpose of the hearings, how they would proceed, and the rights and obligations of witnesses. With the swearing-in of the first witness - the widow of a former worker in the Chicago slaughterhouses - the hearings began. From then on, opening statements of witnesses, and questioning by committee members, educed conflicting testimony and opinion from both sides concerning the condition (or plight) of the typical American workingman and his family. Every now and then, the chairman had to limit sharp exchanges between committee members - once, by calling a brief recess. The last of the five hearing sessions, on October 29, was devoted mainly to recall of witnesses

whom the committee wished to question further (and, in fact, to satisfy several witnesses who wanted more time to make their cases).

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Was 'Experiencing History' a worthwhile investment of student and teaching time in the study of history? More time is needed to consider its pluses and minuses, but we are sure it is worth doing again. It created a high level of student interest and enthusiasm, apparently well beyond its welcome change of pace from the lecture-and-discussion approach of Unit 1. Several students have commented on new insights from their research concerning career choices in public service and in politics. The requirement for role research was, for numbers of students, their initiation into the research process (and how satisfying to hear a student critical of her testimony as Mother Jones - "I know I should have said goddamit. She whold have!"). The potential for inter-disciplinary involvement in future simulations (vis-a-vis the invaluable contribution of our Speech and Theater students) has already produced enthusiastic outside-the-department comment.

Each student has been asked to submit his evaluation of the experience, covering such matters as: how he feels about learning history by simulation in contrast to more traditional methods; research problems in re-creating the past; how the individual student's contribution to his group's research might be more clearly identified; how future simulation units might be improved. A summary of what the class has to say will be reported to and discussed with the class before the end of the semester.

But a very preliminary scanning of about sixty of the evaluations indicates that the students liked 'Experiencing History', and feel they benefited from it. One noticeable suggestion for improving future simulations is that each role group appoint its own research coordinator - this from several students who feel the format allowed some group members to 'goof-off' while others took the brunt of the necessary research. Still, even here, perhaps a lesson in the democratic process?