

THE GREAT DEBATES: A NEW APPROACH TO LEARNING HISTORY

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COMPOSITE ARTICLE

In the Spring Semester of 1975, Dr. David Detzer of the WESCONN History Department embarked on a new course in one of his classes. The class was Recent U.S. History, and the new course concerned the manner in which the class was taught. Dr. Detzer decided to divide the class into three teams and have them hold debate-trials on three events in recent U.S. history: the Alger Hiss trial, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Nixon-McGovern Presidential election (this debate was not held due to problems with information).

The editorial staff of CLIO solicited written critiques from many members of the class, and we received opinions from four students: Dorothy Gunther, Diana Healy, Richard Stoops, and Paul Palazzo. The purpose of this article is to share their opinions with you and to offer a brief summary and update on the method at the end.

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On January 22, 1975, Dr. Detzer gave the usual first-class outline of how Recent U.S. History would be taught that semester. The class would arbitrarily be divided into three teams--each team responsible for in-depth research on two set topics, with a cursory knowledge of a third. In other words, three debates, two teams actively involved pro and con in each, with the third acting as a jury. The teams could not choose either the question or the side which they were assigned. It was both frightening and challenging, and I remember most of us viewed the course with mixed emotions. We were to be graded as a team, so our individual efforts would be judged by our team performance. It was rather like a dependent independent study program.

Needless to say, the next time the class met we were smaller in number. As an older student newly returned to Academia, I was still unsure whether I could function efficiently in a team situation. The second class was devoted to an impromptu debate on the Second World War. I became so captivated that I went to the Student Union with some classmates--still actively arguing some moot points. Thirty minutes later I came to and realized I should be in another class. I was hooked!

The course was demanding. Every member of our team was willing and eager to do the best job possible--although we were not at all convinced at the outset about our assigned position (particularly in one debate that was subsequently changed). The enthusiasm was contagious. We met at odd hours--even over vacation--and the teams became close-knit working units.

The advantages were that we acquired real investigative and research skills, ability to work as a group, and a real feeling of achievement in our efforts--as well as a thorough, sharply-focused knowledge of a specific historical event. This is similar in technique to that of a scientist who studies one cell to find out about

the whole body.

The disadvantage is that some ideas and events are naturally by-passed. This is regrettable of course, but more than compensated for by the stimulation, team loyalty, and prolonged, intense interest engendered. The esprit de corps was so fantastic that we had two parties--a class affair and individual team dinners. The students had grown so close together, they were loathe to part.

My conclusion is that the experiment was a success and should be tried again.

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From the course on Recent U.S. History, I had expected as much history as William Manchester had put into The Glory and The Dream; several personal anecdotes about the famous and the powerful; a deep insight into two or three aspects of the period; and a trip to the capital.

Actually, I've been to the capital and read Manchester's book on vacation, but I now have an almost embarrassingly intimate knowledge of Lee Harvey Oswald (and an almost certain conviction he was acting alone), and the Alger Hiss Case mystery has finally been made clear to me.

It's hard to say if this is a good idea for such an extensive course, but it was fun and hard work, as well as a lesson in debating techniques and group dynamics.

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Can recent U.S. history be defined as the acts of the past forty years, or thirty, or even the last four? It is hard and even depressing to look beyond the pre-Watergate era and study the acts of men that plowed the fields for ineffective government that plagues us today.

While studying Recent U.S. History last semester under the helm of Dr. Detzer, a few students, including myself, searched for an answer to questions whose resolutions have been blanketed by the lies of prestige-hungry men and by the lack of public commitment to seek the truth.

Our first case was to discern the veracity of one, Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist spy, in contrast to an apparant flawless picture of a Harvard graduate, Alger Hiss, then Assistant Secretary of State under Roosevelt.

I had the opportunity to study the role of emotion, false intent, and personal degradation in moving the times during the existence of the Select Committee on Un-American Affairs. The facts researched by my team members convinced us of the deep concern Chambers had, and showed the coward to be a man waving a banner of prestige to cover events of his past, namely, Alger Hiss.

Case two of our objective view of the facts was to determine if Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin of President John F. Kennedy. This experience taught me that to be a member of a jury meant that you were a judge as well. The public information available led to the supposition of high-up conspiracy, perhaps even among our own government. As a jury member on finds Oswald guilty, as a judge, one can not rest without the full, and possibly withheld, picture.

It is amazing, but not unexpected, to note that these events of the past three decades are in today's newspapers, taking more space each day. The questions are unanswered, but they are not impossible to bring to light.

Alger Hiss has lately won his right to view the evidence that convicted him. He tells us that there was nothing in the Pumpkin Papers. We are left to take his work for it, to believe and to stand by him. The Massachusetts Bar Association has readmitted Alger Hiss stressing that this action does not support his innocence.

Lee Harvey Oswald is dead. So are many Warren Commission witnesses. There is a new rumbling in the air to find the truth in both Kennedy assassinations. Are we to trust the Warren resolution?

Recent U.S. History, in regards to both these events, has shown me that it is easy to deviate and deceive one's idea of truth, justice, and testimony. The answers, truths, and hopes of men, all these virtues can be flexed in the mind that wants to bend them. These virtues have to be deep-rooted in the leadership of our government, deeper than the mind.

Today and tomorrow's history can only be viewed if that deep-rooted truth is in the writer. Alger Hiss' voice did not assure me of the truth, neither did the lone assassin theory. Dr. Detzer's class taught me how to view history, remembering that those with crooked ears will hear a crooked voice.

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The debate seminar is not only a valid teaching tool, but it is an innovative movement away from the hum-drum world of lectures and tests. The combination of individual interest and group responsibility produces an effective, yet stimulating, result.

There is only one negative aspect of the seminar method, and this is a minor one that is far outweighed by the positive features. The negative point is that some people like to hear themselves talk, while others are shy and fearful of voicing an opinion. While these factors potentially lead to an unequal input among members of each team, the responsibility each member feels to the team tends to balance it out. Thus, the shy, and even the usually unambitious, tend to become actively involved.

Another plus is that students learn to present their arguments in a concise, organized manner. Debate procedure does not lend

itself to chaos, and because of this, both participants and the audience retain more of what is said.

It has been argued that this method should not be employed extensively since it generally concerns itself with one isolated incident rather than a pattern of events. This is not valid, however, since the study of one aspect of history builds knowledge of other aspects. Thus, through the Alger Hiss case we do not only learn about the trial itself, but also about the American attitudes that served as a background in the case, as well as the international conditions that produced those attitudes.

There is a great deal of room in our educational system for innovation and improvement. The debate seminar method is a valuable method of education not only because the concept itself works, but also because it opens the door to other previously untried methods.

The comments of our four contributors, as well as the casual comments of others in the class, indicate that the debate-trial method used in Recent U.S. History last semester was a success. Dr. Detzer again employed the method in his Colonial America class this semester. The comments from the members of that class have been generally favorable also. There are some problems with the method, especially in the range of material covered, but the debate-trial method of learning history is creative and innovative and should be considered by other instructors who seek new methods to present old facts.