

# Writing a Course Portfolio for an Introductory Survey Course in American History<sup>1</sup>

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The following case study describes and analyzes a course portfolio for History 67, The Economic, Social, and Political History of the United States to 1877, an undergraduate class in early American history at Temple University. I compiled this portfolio (to which I shall refer hereafter as CPH67) during the 1996-97 academic year, when I taught History 67 twice, once in the fall at Temple's suburban campus in Ambler, Pennsylvania, and again in the spring at the university's main campus in North Philadelphia.

An introductory survey course that is part of the university's core curriculum, History 67 covers a broad span of time, beginning with the pre-colonial era in North America before 1600, continuing with the colonial and antebellum periods in the United States from 1607 to 1861, and concluding with a short consideration of the American Civil War and its aftermath, Reconstruction.

## The Idea of the Course Portfolio

CPH67 was not my first attempt at writing a course portfolio. During the spring semester 1996, I wrote one for a graduate course in the history and sociology of American education that I have taught many times over the past decade. This trial run taught me

just how difficult it is to document what transpires in a college classroom. So many things occur simultaneously that no one person could ever notice, let alone account for them all. Moreover, instructors never know exactly what students are thinking on any given day or how much they are learning. Traditional assessment tools in history such as quizzes and examinations are at best a reflection of actual instruction.

Though it is inevitably incomplete, being in effect the instructor's account of what went on, a course portfolio gives a fuller picture. Nevertheless, if we are to arrive at a better understanding of what teachers are trying to achieve and how well they achieve it, then it makes sense to put course portfolios together, no matter how incomplete or subjective such documents might be. Portfolio writers, on the other hand, have an obligation to flesh out their account with hard evidence, drawn from such sources as syllabi, examinations, readings, handouts, and samples of student work.

## Uncovering the Scholarship in Teaching History

I prepared CPH67 to test the hypothesis that it could illustrate the ways in which a historian deals with an intel-

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a conference paper at the 112th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Seattle, Washington, January 11, 1998.

lectual problem in the classroom. I developed this rationale during conversations with Dr. Noralee Frankel, the American Historical Association's assistant director for teaching.

She and I agreed that our colleagues in the discipline would never warm to the idea of course portfolios unless it could be shown that they reflect scholarship by demonstrating a historian's knowledge, imagination, and understanding. Designing and delivering almost any history course requires a teacher to possess all of these qualities. Given the vastness and ambiguity of the past, deciding what to include and how to present it surely represents a daunting intellectual problem.<sup>2</sup>

### **Organizing the Evidence**

CPH67 is a large document. It amounts to nearly 300 pages, including appendices. I compiled most of it during the fall semester 1996, when I wrote the course narrative that informs the reader about the content that I taught that term, the pedagogical methods that I used, and the general rhythms of my instruction. Organized by week, the course narrative features a discussion of the ways in which three themes — freedom, diversity, and migration — shaped my lectures, discussions, assignments, and examinations. For example, it says the following about week three, during which I emphasized freedom and diversity:

*On Monday I asked the students to interpret the geography of a 17th-century New England town for the lessons it might teach about the relationship between the individual and the*

*group in Puritan society. Using overheads to show the nucleated layout of an open field town (e.g., Sudbury and Andover, Mass.), I was able to elicit from the students the conclusion that by placing their houses so closely together, the Puritans discouraged individual freedom in favor of group conformity. . . . We then examined how and why the residents of nucleated towns dispersed over three or four generations, and we discussed the ramifications of this dispersal for the Puritan concept and practice of community.*

As an illustration of the pedagogical methods I used and the rhythms of my teaching, the following excerpt from my course narrative might be instructive:

*During week five I employed three different types of teaching strategies. On Monday I gave a lecture that set the agenda for the week; on Wednesday I taught the class by the Socratic method, using the concept of sovereignty as my organizational framework; on Friday, Mr. Wilson [the TA] conducted a quick review before we broke into small groups to discuss the questions he prepared.*

### **Partners in My Portfolio Project**

My department gave me teaching assistants, one in each semester. They were Mr. Martin Wilson in the fall and Ms. Jennifer Coleman in the spring. Both are doctoral students who were working in History 67 for the first time,

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<sup>2</sup>The same could be said, no doubt, for many other disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences, where the choice content and the sequence of instruction are by no means preordained.

but Mr. Wilson was a more experienced teacher, who had even taught another history course at Temple on his own. They graded papers, gave a lecture, and ran one of our two weekly discussion sections. I asked each TA to keep a pedagogical diary, and these reflective statements offer an interesting and informative complement to my narrative and perhaps some reassurance that my narrative is not just self-serving.

The diaries composed by my two TAs differ in many ways. Mr. Wilson focused on his efforts to teach the course themes in his weekly discussion section. Ms. Coleman used her diary to test her understanding of the information that I conveyed in my lectures, giving readers of my portfolio a way to judge whether or not I was being understood, at least by one receptive listener. Both used their diaries to reflect on the success or failure of different lessons and to air their own anxieties about teaching. For example, Mr. Wilson wrote the following about an early class devoted to defining the discipline of history:

*Professor Cutler talked some about how memory can be seen as the first step in assembling history. My feeling is that the class had a hard time understanding the concept of collective memory. They, for the most part, retained their first concept of the difference between memory and history. I would have liked to get into a discussion of how memory and history are similar. I think that explaining how memory changes with changing circumstances in the present, as does history, would have provided an important clue to the students about the nature of interpretation.*

## Responses From Readers

In the fall of 1997, I submitted my portfolio for merit review at Temple University, and the two members of my department who reviewed it said that it provided them with a welcome means by which to judge my teaching. One of the two said, in particular, that he liked my portfolio's emphasis on defining course objectives and themes. He added that my portfolio might serve an institutional purpose by acting as a model for graduate students and junior colleagues preparing to teach this course for the first time.

I also sent the portfolio (minus some of its appendices) to Professor John Inscoe, in the History Department at the University of Georgia, who used it as a prompt for a teaching circle. He and his colleagues also thought it could serve as a model. They were particularly impressed by the two TA diaries, not only because they reveal something about how my course differed from one semester to the next but also because these documents augmented my narrative, giving another perspective on my teaching.

## The Course and Its Purposes

Much of the documentation that I included in CPH67 is meant to show how I try to help beginning students make sense of early American history by organizing their thinking around the three course themes. Too often undergraduates get lost in the study of history, overwhelmed and disoriented by the amount of information they encounter in lectures and readings. My syllabus, the handouts that my TAs prepared for the discussion sections, and the examinations that we wrote were intended to solve this

problem by encouraging students to think in terms of these themes. The syllabus prompts them thematically by asking them a series of questions about freedom, diversity, and migration that are linked to the reading for that week.

For example, there are questions designed to help them grasp the changing meaning and importance of diversity by encouraging them to look for material pertaining to Native Americans, women, and blacks. Other questions direct them to passages that explain how ideology, technology, business, and government transformed the meaning of freedom in the United States over time. Still others encourage them to find out about migration by reflecting on the textbook's or the supplementary reader's treatment of such topics as the Great Awakening, the Middle Passage, Manifest Destiny, and westward expansion.

During each semester, my students had to tackle these themes by writing 14 (fall) or 12 (spring) short essays about them based on the textbook and the reader. There are samples of these essays in the portfolio's appendix, representing the work of four students over time. Making students write about the assigned readings increases the probability that they will do it and remember something about it afterwards. Between the fall and spring semesters, I reduced the number of journal assignments, because in the fall many students had difficulty writing an essay each week. But in the spring, some students fell behind anyway.

I do not teach History 67 the same way today that I did when I began my career in college teaching. In the early-1970s I organized my version of this course around the argument that American society changed from being communal to individualistic

between 1600 and 1877. This approach seemed to work well then, and its underlying idea remains a part of my teaching. But after being away from this course for several years I decided that I needed to revise my version of it around a broader and less abstract framework that would more readily engage today's sophomores and freshmen. I chose freedom, diversity, and migration as themes because these concepts are at least familiar if not transparent to most Americans. CPH67 represents an attempt to demonstrate how I now use these three themes to make this basic course more accessible to beginning college students.

### **Practical Lessons**

A historian contemplating a course portfolio might want to know how much time it took me to put one together. I spent between one and two hours per week during the fall semester 1996 when I started preparing it from scratch. I devoted the bulk of that time to writing the course narrative, but assembling and organizing the syllabus, handouts, and other course materials also was time-consuming. Going into such depth and detail might burden the author, but it can benefit colleagues thinking about doing a course portfolio of their own or planning to teach a similar course for the first or second time. Course portfolios can serve both these functions; and, as a formative exercise, the time devoted to them can be justified not just because of their value to their authors but also because of what they can do to help others engaged in similar kinds of teaching.

As either a model for practice or a reflection on experimentation, the course portfolio need not be just a

snapshot of someone's teaching. It can be an account of the ongoing narrative of the course over time. For instance, after the spring semester 1997 I wrote a short, reflective statement describing the different context of the History 67 section that I taught that term. It had a more diverse enrollment, including students from Ireland, Russia, and Vietnam, and was taught in 90-minute blocks (i.e., a Tuesday/Thursday schedule) that reduced the amount of lecture time because we devoted every other class to discussion.

Because I worked with a different TA each time, the tone of the course was also not the same. In each semester, my TA wrote the questions that we both used to frame the weekly class discussions. Compared with her counterpart in the fall, my spring TA encouraged students to be more structured and less open-ended in their thinking. In retrospect, I think this probably led to a subtle change in the nature of those conversations, which a reader of my portfolio could infer by comparing the two sets of discussion questions.

### **Examining Student Learning**

Aside from documenting the scholarship of the instructor, a course portfolio can open the door to a careful consideration of student learning. It can help teachers of history (or any discipline) think more carefully about what their students are learning and how that learning relates to the content and methods of instruction. But a serious problem arises when it comes to documenting that learning, because the amount of written work done by students of history is large, and most readers of a history portfolio will not be able to read it all, even if they are so inclined.

I dealt with this problem in two

ways. First, my TAs and I wrote our midterm examination comments on the same floppy disk, a strategy that made it easy to include them in my portfolio. We spoke to what the students did both well and poorly on the exam and made a special effort to point out how the examination questions picked up on the three course themes. By consulting this relatively brief section of my portfolio, a reader would have no trouble getting a good idea about the extent to which my students demonstrated their command of these themes on the midterm.

Second, I asked my students in both semesters to write sample questions for their final examinations, promising them that I would use the best of the lot on the actual test. This assignment required them to make a judgment about what was important in the course. The questions they wrote let me know whether they had understood my priorities. Unfortunately, some wrote better questions for the final than they did answers on the actual examination.

I would recommend both of these strategies to anyone preparing a course portfolio in history, but it should be pointed out that they have their limitations. Neither strategy allows for the documentation of student development over time. This calls for monitoring the performance of students as they engage the material week to week. I addressed this need by tracking some of my students' journals and including those from the fall semester in a special appendix. More often than not, this exercise demonstrated that most students quickly establish a level of performance, good or bad, and stick to it throughout the semester.

This past term (fall 1997), when I taught History 67 again, I tried to help my students break out of this pattern

by providing a higher level of feedback, week to week, on journal entries. I focused my comments on their use of historical data to support generalizations, a teaching strategy that seemed to help those who were academically in the middle compared with their stronger and weaker peers. The best students did not need such direction, while the poorest were not able to profit from it. Based on my experience with CPH67, I am prepared to say, in conclusion, that doing a course portfolio in history can pro-

vide both a learning and a teaching experience. I benefited by reflecting on content and method from term to term. I hope my readers have gained by learning something about how I teach a basic history course, a lesson that could be put to either a formative or a summative end.

Those interested in examining the portfolio itself can find it on the website of the American Historical Association located at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/aha>.