

ROUND TABLE

**TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY MIDDLE EAST HISTORY
SURVEY COURSE****Correcting for the Problems of the Survey Course**

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Every year, I teach a broad survey course on the Modern Middle East (between 120 and 200 students), along with seminars on a wide range of topics. Regardless of the content of these courses, I have three big goals. I want them to come away understanding that the history of the region is more complex and fascinating than they learned in high school and from the pundits, and the simplistic assumptions and solutions they offer answer no questions. Second, I want to persuade them that things change over time, and we can't understand anything without knowing its context—and the context of the Middle East is global. But most imperative: I want to convince students to be critical in analyzing sources of information. Informed citizenship requires students to be able to think critically, and that is what historians do offer. We analyze multiple sources in myriad ways.

Achieving these goals is challenging under the best of circumstances, even with a small group of engaged students who read everything assigned, question it cogently, and discuss it passionately. Trying to teach students about complexity, context, and critical analysis becomes even more difficult in a course organized around lectures, note-taking, and exam-passing.

The lecture format itself is a problem. Neither my students nor my colleagues seem to remember much that they were “taught” during lectures—studies have shown that passive listening is generally less effective as a way for most people to learn. New research by one of my colleagues points to a more insidious problem with this technique: it discriminates against less-prepared and minority students.¹

The project—a didactic survey—challenges my basic values as a citizen and as an historian. Beginning in high school, I resisted my own teachers' efforts to impart information as Truth, to tell me what to think, to provide grades as rewards for accepting and regurgitating their own ideas. I read voraciously

the emerging literature on the failure of traditional education and carried on my own personal (and comically ineffective) adolescent resistance—based on the most current research at the time, of course. I resisted passively accepting Truths and demanded that I figure them out myself.

Historians must, indeed, come to conclusions, and we present those conclusions in articles and at conferences. In addition to our conclusions (truths often forgotten by exam time), though, it is crucial that we demonstrate how we arrive at those conclusions. What questions do we ask? How do we seek answers? Once we have information, how do we order it to draw conclusions and make arguments? What do we do with those elements of our findings that conflict with the narratives we generate? Especially in an era when academics are under fire for our supposed political biases, it is important to convey what we do and why it is so important.

Ultimately, teaching history is a political project. President Eisenhower insisted that “only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.” That alert and knowledgeable citizenry is the goal of our educational system, and requires that our students need to learn to critically analyze what they read and they hear. Lectures telling students “What Really Happened” run at cross purposes to one of our primary jobs as educators. How can I simultaneously function as the sage on the stage and teach students to challenge what they hear/read?

The lecture format makes me pause each semester. The project itself, encapsulating an enormous and varied region over a long period, is daunting. It almost demands glossing over differences in favor of broad strokes that reinforce notions of sameness, focusing on political events and war, and omitting the role of people in determining their own experiences. My goals, stated clearly on my syllabus, include teaching students to think critically, to consider change over time, to understand that historical factors affect people’s lives, and to recognize the impact of global forces on the course of Middle Eastern history and on the choices of individual people. When students arrive, they tend to “know” a great deal about the Middle East, “knowledge” that emphasizes the uniqueness of the region, the central role of religion, and the inherent violence of the people. I struggle throughout the semester to offer alternative views and historical understanding. Setting the region within global contexts and emphasizing change over time precludes the facile explanations that focus on “Islam,” “underdevelopment,” “terrorism,” and “sectarianism.” (Many of my

students, also Douglas Adams fans, recognize the course is not the equivalent of the number 42—the answer to life, the universe, and everything.)

Teaching a history of the Middle East automatically excises it from the broader global context, reinforcing the way the students have heard it discussed in popular media. I work hard to try to illustrate the ways in which the region is part of broader global change, to convey confidence that they can use analytical tools from other histories to understand this one.

One of my early lectures is on Muhammad Ali (Khedive of Egypt, 1805–1848). I begin by asking the students what it takes to create a modern army. They are silent at first—even the many ROTC students in the group—and begin slowly, a TA typing their list onto a PowerPoint slide. Weapons, training, ammunition, officers When I push them, they catch on. For weapons, the government needed an industrial infrastructure, a transportation network, and raw materials. For training, literacy, books, printing presses, schools. Egypt needed to produce uniforms, doctors, hospitals, teachers.

The students create a list of the requisite elements of a modern economy and industrial society, recognizing that Egypt wasn't "backward" at the time of Muhammad Ali, but that it was challenged by the same kinds of historical context that other regions had/would confront(ed). The next step, of course, is to ask them to speculate on how one could pay for these projects. I think (I hope) that these exercises make them not only place early nineteenth-century Egypt into a global context, but also recognize that the world they inhabit has changed from previous centuries, and that the kinds of questions one must ask about the past are consistent across the globe.

More important, I hope the exercise introduces them to the project of history: to ask questions of the past and to answer them. As we get to the more recent period, I ask them to articulate questions. For example, I ask them what they want to know about the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Again with the TA typing, they articulate a list of questions. Then I ask them where they might look for the answers to these questions. They see quickly that some questions cannot be answered because there are no sources available: any response would be speculation. They also recognize that different questions require different sources—there is no one stop location, even on the Internet, to find the information they seek.

If I am to teach them to think as historians, then my lectures must take into account alternative views. This can be tricky. Students, at least at the four U.S. universities where I have taught, seem to believe that if there are two views, the Truth must be in the middle somewhere. (I share Jim Hightower's line, there's nothing in the middle of the road except yellow stripes and dead armadillos.) Nonetheless, I assign them readings that contradict each other,

and try to make sense of them in lecture. Then the TAs lead discussions of how and why the readings diverge so significantly. The students seem fascinated not only with the construction of narratives, but also with the importance of understanding where those competing stories come from. I hope they think about not only accuracy of the narratives, but also the importance of recognizing the impact that even inaccurate narratives can have on subsequent events.

In analyzing articles, I ask students to think AAAE: Author, Audience, Argument, Evidence. I have tried to explain the importance of information as evidence during lecture. During my first lecture, I take an online poll (using Poll Everywhere—polleverywhere.com) asking the cause of the recent uprisings. Religion or politics generally take first place. Then I play a video of El Général's "Reis Lebled" and do the same poll again. The response shifts to Economics. The point is not that there is one right answer, but instead that information can change the way we understand the region—and our world. Moreover, evidence can come not only from textbooks, but also from popular music and literature.

As others have pointed out, it is very difficult to know when to begin a course on the modern Middle East (what is modern), and how to define the area that it will cover (where is the Middle East). I have never been comfortable with my decision to begin in 1798, fearing that it implies that Napoleon set "modern" in motion. Some years I have included the area that became Afghanistan, but mostly Iran is the point furthest east; and I always include North Africa. But even with time and space defined, it is a huge challenge to know what to emphasize. I was trained as a social and economic historian, but I often find myself lecturing on events, wars, and politics. I have relied heavily on novels and anthropological accounts over the years, trying to humanize the region and to make the consequences of an event-driven course more apparent. (I have been castigated for too much emphasis on women, especially in the readings.) Before each lecture, the students enter the hall to a music or comedy video from the Middle East, surprising many that both humor and popular cultures exist in the region.

But after all these years, I remain uncomfortable with my role as sage on the stage. My very position in the classroom suggests to students trained in the US educational system that my knowledge is supreme and they are minds to be filled. I respect their views and their abilities to ask questions. I need them to learn to challenge what they hear and read. As a result, I set myself up as simply another source among many, and I provide extra credit if they take on something I have said and prove me wrong. The requirement is that they use primary sources to disprove something I have said in class.

Most often, their research leads them to the same conclusions I have drawn, and they still get credit. Anyone who has used primary sources to formulate a coherent argument not only gets extra credit, but also has the option of sharing that research with the rest of the class on the course website.

I continue to search for ways to make the survey a compelling experience for the students, to engage them in analytical thinking and encourage them to challenge received wisdom. This will, I hope, be an ongoing conversation, because the stakes have never been higher.²

Endnotes

¹(see: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/education/active-learning-study.html?_r=0)

²I blogged about my survey course during the spring semester 2012 at <https://teachingthemiddleeast.wordpress.com/>