

ROUND TABLE

TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY MIDDLE EAST HISTORY SURVEY COURSE*

What is the Future of the Survey Course?

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I want to kick off this discussion with three quotes and a statistic. The first quote is as follows: “The chief purpose [of historical education] is not to fill [someone’s] head with a mass of material which he may perhaps put forward again when a college examiner demands its production.” The second—a line from a front page story in *The New York Times*—reads, “College freshmen throughout the nation reveal a striking ignorance of even the most elementary aspects of United States history.” And the third:

We have descended into what some consider the dark age of declining enrollments, professional unemployment, and a growing rejection of history by many students who seem to agree with Henry Ford that history is “bunk.” If we are going to have any real impact on individuals or society, we must do something besides just cover the material.

Finally, the statistic: in eight years alone, the number of students majoring in history dropped 40 percent.

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? The first quote comes from 1898, the second from 1943 (Fine 1943), and the third from 1974 (Sipress and Voelker 2011). And the eight years in which the number of history majors declined so dramatically were 1968–76 (Shapiro 1986). In other words, the issues of history pedagogy, its impact on the future of the discipline, and the importance of the study of history (self-fulfillment? a better, more informed citizenry? the acquisition of analytical and other skills that may be of use in one’s career?) are perennial ones, clearly predating Alan Bloom and Elizabeth Cheney. All three issues—pedagogy, how pedagogy affects historical study, and the purpose of historical study—relate to the topic considered in this essay and the five that follow: the history survey course.

Nearly all MESA members who are practicing historians have taught some variation on the “History of the Middle East” or the “History of the Middle

East until/since ____.” The question that needs to be addressed is should they.

The survey course is a staple of history education in the United States. On the post-secondary school level, it commonly embraces six characteristics:

- It is a lecture course and, at most universities, a sizable one. Being a lecture, it emphasizes the transmission of knowledge from professor to student. In other words, it casts the professor in the role of historical authority, with students assigned the task of absorbing and reproducing expert knowledge.
- It is meant for the fulfillment of a general education requirement, as an introduction to history, or as background for a related discipline (e.g., Anthropology or Middle East Studies). In terms of the first, the survey course is usually required of non-majors and it is assumed that this will be the sole course a student will take on the topic and perhaps even in history.
- It applies what is known as a “coverage model” (Sipress and Voelker 2011) In other words, the top priority of the survey course is to “cover” a particular body of historical knowledge—usually one with either a great deal of breadth or chronological depth.
- It adopts a “facts-first approach” (Sipress and Voelker 2011) In other words, since at least the 1880s in the United States, educators have assumed that even if a student is to go on to study history in greater depth, he/she must first know “the facts” of the topic under consideration. Only then will the student be able to undertake different approaches, explore sub-topics, and the like.
- Its intention is cultural literacy. The survey course came into its own in the United States in the aftermath of World War I, when there was the overriding perception among policy-makers (both educational and non-educational ones) that Americans did not understand what they were fighting for and had to be instructed in it. Ever since, it has been justified by the idea that there are certain things about the past that every educated human being should just know (Sipress and Voelker 2011).
- It has never lacked detractors, particularly within the professoriate, but like the Terminator it has proved impossible to exterminate. To the contrary—it has mushroomed. My university has, depending on how expansive your definition is, between 100 and 150 survey courses in history alone on the books (in spite of periodic housecleaning).

In 2015, the Committee for Undergraduate Middle East Studies of the Middle East Studies Association invited me to organize a roundtable at its annual meeting in Denver titled, “The Future of the Survey Course.” I reached out to three others at varying stages of their careers and types of institutions to make initial presentations and help guide the discussion. I knew that all three had put a great deal of thought into matters of pedagogy.

At the beginning of the discussion, I proposed a number of questions for consideration by the panelists and the audience. Among them were:

- What are the implications for pedagogy of the fact that more students come to university unprepared than thirty or forty years ago?
- How do changing economies of scale affect the types of courses universities offer?
- Is there a connection between a reliance on the survey course in historical instruction and declining enrollments in history?
- What strategies might educators adopt to confront the dual problems of economies of scale and declining enrollments in an age in which neo-liberalism seems to offer the operant model for running a college or university?
- Are survey courses an efficient use of faculty time?
- What is the relationship between the survey course as an educational mainstay and the “adjunctification” of academia?
- Is it possible to demonstrate complex historical processes within the framework of a single narrative (within a single term), or does the attempt to do so run counter to historical practice and thus leave a false impression about the craft of history?
- Do survey courses necessarily do violence to the material being presented by, for example, privileging events over processes or “the political” over everything else?
- Is presenting history from the vantage point of a single authoritative voice, be it of a professor or a textbook, a problem? On the one hand, doesn’t providing that voice impose a gendered (i.e., patriarchal) structural framework on the material? On the other hand, isn’t speaking with a single authoritative voice what professional historians do?
- Is the fact that survey courses privilege coverage over “historical thinking” a problem?
- Do regional historical surveys reinforce the tendency on the part of students to think in civilizational and cultural terms and, if so, how might this be addressed?

- What strategies might educators employ to situate the history of a single region within global history?
- What strategies might educators employ to reach beyond the cultural boundary separating them from most of their students?
- What theme or themes might link the disparate elements of the historical narrative presented within a History of the Middle East survey course, particularly when instructors deal with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?

If measured by the overflow attendance and the liveliness of discussion, the roundtable was an overwhelming success. As a result, Richard C. Martin, editor of *Review of Middle East Studies*, asked me if I might put together a group of essays—some from the roundtable, some solicited afterwards—for publication. The contributors and their contributions to this discussion are as follows:

- Ziad Abu-Rish, Assistant Professor, Ohio University, and co-editor, *Jadaliya*, “The Middle East Survey Course: Challenges and Opportunities.”
- Kate Elizabeth Creasey, Ph.D. candidate, Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, “The Middle East Survey Course: Some Problems and Some Solutions.”
- Sarah D. Shields, Professor of History, University of North Carolina, “Correcting for the Problems of the Survey Course.”
- Richard Pennell, Associate Professor, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, “Making the Foreign Past real: Teaching and assessing Middle Eastern History in Australia.”
- Laila Hussein Moustafa, Assistant Professor, Library Administration and Middle East and North Africa subject specialist in the International Area Studies Library, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, “Teaching History to the Digital Natives Generation.”
- Nadia Yaqub, Associate Professor, Department of Asian Studies, University of North Carolina, “Teaching with Film and Photography in Introductory Middle East Courses.”

Endnote

*The idea for a roundtable on teaching the Middle East history survey course originated with James Gelvin of UCLA, and took place at the annual meeting of MESA in November, 2015. Other articles on this topic have been added to the special section in this issue (editor).

Works Cited

- Fine, Benjamin. 1943. "Ignorance of U.S. History Shown by College Freshmen." *The New York Times*, 4 April. Accessed 15 August 2016, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1943/04/04/85093387.html?pageNumber=1>.
- Shapiro, Edward S. 1986. "The American History Survey and the Comparative Approach." *The Journal of General Education* 38:1. Accessed 15 August 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27797052>.
- Sipress, Joel M., and David J. Voelker. 2011. "The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model," *The Journal of American History* (March). Accessed 15 August 2016, <http://jah.oxfordjournals.org/content/97/4/1050.full>.