

4 Using History

Students believe there is only one story.

—Marlene

When Marlene expresses her desire that students write passionate historical argument, I cannot help thinking of two assumptions underlying that desire: that ideas can be passionately held and expressed and that such academic work has significance beyond the classroom exercise. At the two-year college, where the time to reflect—to engage the world of ideas—may indeed be seen as a “luxury” afforded to the few, the academic component of the comprehensive mission can be given short shrift. So often we overhear students as well as colleagues refer to what is needed in “the real world,” a world quite different, apparently, from that of the classroom. So often we two-year college teachers, imbibing the utilitarian milieu of our institutions, view our teaching in purely utilitarian terms: giving students workplace skills or giving them credits to enable them to transfer smoothly to four-year schools. The notion that ideas (and scholarship) matter, not only for what they can do in the world but for their own sake, gets lost amid our students’ goal of obtaining a well-paid job and our own well-intentioned efforts to serve the community’s practical needs.

Surely, any effort to foster the academic culture of the two-year college must begin with the view that the intellectual enterprise poses no threat to the comprehensive mission of the college. Nor should intellectual work be seen as trivial next to vocational and transfer functions. As I listen to colleagues around this table debating how we read and know—and doing so with considerable passion and conviction—I feel confident that for these teachers classrooms can be places where ideas catch fire.

But what does it mean exactly to be passionate about history? Diane asks, “Can there be passion if there is objectivity?” Don’t historians look at events through the clear medium of intellect rather than through the unreliable filter of emotion? Marlene has of course all along presented a view of history as a tissue of perspectives, an amalgam of historians’ biases and the biases of their times. But what does such historical writing look like? We clearly need an example or model to anchor us—much as do our students, who so often travel through our courses without ever seeing the way a historian or a sociologist really writes and works.

Marlene obliges us with the introduction to a class text entitled *Lifelines from Our Past* (Stavrianos 1992). She chooses to draw from this par-

ticular book because it has had a huge impact on her view of history. Specifically, she says, she has been influenced by the writer's view of history not as steady progress (which, according to Marlene, would express a Judeo-Christian perspective only) but as recursive. In other words, the writer may, for example, look at hunter-gatherer societies in all their complexities and, in certain respects, note the advantages of such societies relative to our own.

It becomes obvious as well that Marlene admires the author's view of history's usefulness. Rather than see history as merely predictive, the author offers a complicated notion of his discipline's "relevance":

History deals with human beings whose actions can hardly be predicted at all, much less with the certainty that a chemist can predict what will happen when element A is combined with element B. . . . Its usefulness is not in being predictive, but in providing a framework for considering past and present—a framework that will not foretell what is to come, but that can reveal the human flexibility and human potentiality that is our legacy. (12)

We can learn from the past and become a better society, Marlene says in summing up the writer's premise, but we cannot assume that such will happen without studying and understanding history. Nor is history locked in a causal scheme free of human agency. ¹

The framework that the writer provides is astonishingly personal. "All macrohistory is autobiography," he begins, and proceeds to describe the "roots" of this history in his own upbringing during the Depression (3). Having worked early in his life as a waiter in a skid row restaurant, the writer recounts his impressions of the great disparity between the customers that he served and the affluence present elsewhere in Vancouver and in British Columbia generally. Taking his skid row restaurant experience as his "university," the writer roots his schooling and later academic career in that earlier experience and commits his life to exploring the "gap between official rhetoric and the social reality" (5). "The role of a historian," he writes, "should be to cast light on the origins of that gap" (5). Just as the writer has traced his own particular "lifeline," so he intends to analyze the lifelines of larger human communities, as they break into three groups (kinship, tributary, and capitalist societies).

Marlene assigns this introductory chapter in her early modern history course to demonstrate the historian's "bias":

I wanted [my students] to say he had a bias. A bias for students means something bad. . . . We had a discussion of what I thought was his bias. [I said that] he sees things in terms of the many. What are the interests of the many? Why aren't the needs of the many being met by the few?

But the “many” in this room are not ready to go even that far with Marlene. We are struggling with the range and scope of the writer’s historical sweep. We are trying to connect the author’s personal narrative with the larger human narrative to come (two hundred thousand years of human history, Marlene tells us). Diane reminds us that the statement “All macrohistory is autobiographical” is one of those picket fences designed to keep the rest of us out, with its absolute, “take no prisoners” quality (“All . . .”) and its union of the seemingly contradictory terms “macrohistory” and “autobiographical.” She implies that the writer has an obligation to be clearer and more accessible from the start, especially in a text designed for uninitiated students. I find Diane’s response most interesting in light of her own inside perspective on our earlier piece on diabetes treatments. There she assumed, and understood, the writer’s complex motives and rich technical expertise. Now she is on the outside and feels considerable discomfort in that position.

Kathy, whose own expertise is rooted in her ability to navigate the linguistic and cultural styles of her ESL students, observes that the piece poses terrific challenges for all of us in this room, let alone those students who must come to it as uninitiated in the discipline. I ask her and the others if the difficulty arises from its specialized vocabulary or rather from a way of seeing experience. To get at some answers, we look closely at the following:

. . . the task of appraising those societies and relating them to our times and needs is correspondingly formidable. It becomes more manageable only when it is noted that all of these hundreds of past and present human societies fall into three broad categories: kinship societies, encompassing all human communities until about 2500 BC; tributary societies . . . which appeared first in the Middle East about 3500 BC . . . ; and free-market, or capitalist societies, which first appeared in northwestern Europe about 1500 AD. . . . (11)

What distinguishes such writing, according to Marlene, is the way in which the author takes a massive amount of experience, the countless forms of human societies, and groups them in terms of “basic modes of production” (Marlene’s words). He then attempts to draw “lifelines” among the groupings, that is, categories of human experience that run through the groups: “ecology, gender relations, social relations, and war” (11). The writer does not pretend to write an exhaustive history of humanity: “This book is instead a highly selective analysis of those aspects of the past that illuminate our present. It is, in short, an inquiry into our usable past” (12). The challenge for readers outside the writer’s area of expertise is to be comfortable with the paradigm constructed. That level of comfort rises or falls depending on our willingness and ability not only to accept these

categories as viable but also to draw the “lifelines” between microhistory and macrohistory. The task is formidable for writer and reader.

Kathy, for one, reaches an acceptance of the writer’s broad method, based in part on her familiarity with Marlene’s perspective: “You want to look from the people up,” she says to Marlene. “That’s what he was saying, that history is all of our autobiographies.” Peter adds a corrective reading by saying, “I think he means autobiography not as a personal thing but autobiography of the human race.” These are both astute readings. Taken together they represent the challenge of the writer’s task: to render history as a human story.

To make this lesson explicit, Marlene shares an assignment with us from her early modern European history course. In that assignment, which is the first of the course, she asks her students to consider the question, “Was there a Renaissance for women?” Implicit in that question, of course, is a rereading of the Renaissance to include multiple stories, multiple perspectives on that historical period. (How, in other words, did the Renaissance affect a wide range of society—not simply powerful men?)

Even more interesting to me is the glimpse that Marlene’s assignment provides of historical methods:

Like many historians, you are confronted with evidence that might seem contradictory, uneven, and fragmentary. Your task is to make sense of this by analyzing the evidence, trying to spot patterns, overarching themes, and/or inconsistencies, and then drawing some conclusions.

There is no right or wrong answer to this question!

As I look back at this assignment, I am fascinated by Marlene’s use of that term “evidence.” In the current version of our list of “primary traits” of good writing, evidence is simply said to be the detail that writers use to persuade readers. The assumption is that, with the proper use of evidence, clarity and truth can be achieved. Marlene, however, asks us (and her students) to view “evidence” as sometimes yielding contradiction and incompleteness. She is clearly bringing a distinct set of expectations to that term, reflecting a social epistemic that our “primary traits” do not. In asking her students to write “like many historians,” Marlene wants them to sift through many perspectives and stories and to establish an interpretation that, for the time, brings order to the many “inconsistencies” that history can offer. That interpretation, like the “normal” science that Thomas Kuhn describes, may itself be challenged and overturned by a competing and ultimately more credible interpretation (1962, 10). I cannot help adding, however, that in going so far as saying, “There is no right or wrong answer to this question,” Marlene undermines the premise of her assignment. All interpretations are not equal. To make the claim that truths,

historical or otherwise, are socially constructed (reflecting the inherently limited perspectives of human beings), should not open the door to outright relativism. "Right answers" are indeed achievable; beliefs can acquire the authority of consensus and convention. Paraphrasing the words of the historian R. H. Tawney that begin the "Lifelines" piece, Marlene observes, "Every generation has to reinvent history," taking from it what that generation needs. The interpretation that emerges has currency and legitimacy.

All this talk about "using history" brings us back, of course, to those students whose view of historical writing is that it is disconnected from their own worlds. How do we enable them to draw their own "lifelines" to history? "Would you allow your students," I ask Marlene, "to become more autobiographical in their own writing" so as to begin to "use" history? But in asking that question I fall into the trap of confusing individual and personal autobiography with the "autobiography of the human race," as Peter puts it. The point is not to tell their own stories, but rather to see history as encompassing a multiplicity of stories. We run a similar risk in writing courses when we privilege individual students' stories rather than have students work with a range of experiences offered in texts written by nonstudents. To write from experience ought not to be narrowly circumscribed by students' own "voices" and private autobiographies but should include a host of voices and a convergence of narratives. Perhaps the kind of writing that we ought to be considering in our courses is what Mary Louise Pratt calls "autoethnography," in which writers represent themselves "in dialogue" with other stories, other representations (1992, 7). Autoethnographic texts, as Pratt defines them, are written by "others" or outsiders involving "collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror" (7). In terms of the classroom, students may write autoethnographic pieces as a way to respond to the powerful and authoritative stories of their teachers and their assigned reading (Bartholomae 1993). In any event, the goal becomes not to write merely personal stories, nor simply to mimic teachers and texts. Rather, it is a way for students to "use" their subjects and to become immersed in them.

Such writing invariably requires struggle because writers must work with and through authoritative accounts to tell their own stories. Indeed, the historian whose writing we have been discussing may be struggling himself to draw the "lifelines" of history. Marlene, speaking of her own students, admits that she wants them to struggle in "using" history. She wants them to reinvent history in light of their own needs.

Kathy, as is so often the case, redirects us to the practical needs of our students. She asks whether our particular students, students who come to the community college with a wide array of backgrounds and levels of

preparedness, are ready to engage in such a struggle, to wrestle with a difficult text as we have done here. Diane voices her agreement and wonders whether such writing might intimidate less confident readers and writers. Wouldn't it make more sense to have students read pieces "written by classmates down more to their level, [so] that they would understand and be less intimidated by it?"

"Down more to their level"—taken out of context these words might suggest a condescension toward our students, a feeling that they cannot handle difficult readings, and that we need to "dumb down" our instruction and our reading lists in order to teach them. Diane does not mean that. Rather, like Kathy, she brings to our discussion a set of assumptions about this college's mission that need to be recognized. They emphasize what our college catalog calls a "learner-centered environment," in which the students' varied needs are taken into account. They also remind us of the comprehensive nature of our college, whose purpose seems broader than to train future historians.

But the issues raised here are not cut and dried, of course. We are all trained academics, hired to share our experience and expertise in the academy with our students. Marlene, in asking her students to struggle with and "reinvent history," is hardly ignoring her students' needs. In fact, she wants her students to "relate" to what she teaches but, in her own words, "You want to move people beyond that" [too]. She wants her students to listen to and grasp stories other than their own.

A similar discussion has been played out in composition studies for years. When Mina Shaughnessy demonstrated that the work of basic writing students deserved the kind of close reading that the academy reserved for cherished canonical texts, she sent out the message that student texts ought to be central in our courses (1977). The same can be said for Peter Elbow, whose concern over the years has been to show that student writing must have pride of place in any supportive writing community (1973; 1981). Within the last decade, however, other perspectives on student work have emerged. David Bartholomae has issued a call that writing students—including basic writers—be immersed in the work of the academy, not simply to conform to it but rather to discover or "invent" the university for themselves (1986). Others, like Min-Zhan Lu, have challenged Shaughnessy's view of the basic writing classroom as discrete and insular and have advocated using that classroom as a setting for the study of cultural texts, not to be limited to the students' work alone (1991; 1992).

The mission of the community college, with its broad and comprehensive purpose to train a thoughtful citizenry, would seem to place it outside this "academic" debate. But, in fact, as we have seen, it is at the community college that the debate is put into its sharpest relief. With a stu-

dent body roughly split between those who intend to transfer to four-year institutions and those who plan to go directly to the workplace, and with a faculty whose background reflects both academic training and workplace experience, the community college cannot afford to ignore the critical question, What kind of knowledge do we want our students to leave us with? Put in the terms that Marlene must face every day in her classroom, the questions might be, Am I endowing my students with insights into historical methods? or, Am I providing them with more generalizable skills, appropriate for the workplace? Put more profoundly, our question might very well go to the nature of general education itself: What kind of persons do we want our students to become?