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CHAPTER SEVEN

ADAPT HISTORY:

The Inexpensive Unification of Clio and Piaget

by L.C. Duly

Recent experimentation in the teaching of history at both the secondary and tertiary levels displays a wide variety of approaches designed to preserve the integrity of the discipline while overcoming the seemingly increasing ahistorical orientation of students. Although it would appear that experimentation at the secondary level has been more vigorous and more creative, the inclusion of history per se within broader definitions of a social science curriculum has made many of these programs somewhat inappropriate for use at the college level. Critics of high school experimentation have criticized--perhaps unfairly--the new approaches for failing to give students a sense of the historical perspective: an understanding of man through the concept of time and in-depth relationships. Experimentation at the college level has taken a variety of forms: the "repackaging" of older courses into more social and culture-oriented courses (the contents of which are supposed to be of more interest to the students of today); the development of new multimedia courses, designed to heighten the student's perceptions; the creation of courses stressing thematic processes within aspects of history; or the supervision of small-group investigative programs. The techniques at the college level have ranged from a revitalization of the lecture and discussion format to the formation of one-to-one student/teacher ratios in personalized experiences. Within the profession at the college level, debate is increasing as to what devices or methods serve both the instructors and students best. A certain reluctance is evident on the part of the profession to venture too far into new teaching methodology unless assurances can be given that the costs are within reason, that the approaches have a universality not confined to one professor or institution, and that the benefits will include a preservation of the discipline's standards. It is perhaps too early for many of the current projects to demonstrate their performance in these three areas.

The ADAPT History course at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is still very much in its infancy. To date it has consisted of a two-semester course dealing with the nature of

"revolution and other forms of change" in Modern Europe from 1776 to the present. The thematic tone of its title has been kept deliberately vague; its content has tended to stress the origin, development, and change of ideas, institutions, and value-structures within the established chronology, all of which one would likely find in the traditional "Western Civilization" course. The course has not attempted to present the study of man in some new mode or to create a multimedia framework. It has benefited from being a part of the ADAPT project in that students have had opportunities to bring into the course discoveries and experiences gained in their other academic work. However, the instruments of the course have been only those of one instructor and a typical selection of about 30 freshmen students¹ one would find in any other history course at the University. Yet because of the utilization of Piagetian learning concepts, the course is a marked departure from existing courses in the Department's program. An index of its worth at this point would lead one to suggest that it may meet the criteria expected by the profession: a limited investment of time and money; a relatively easy application of its format to other history courses and to other groupings of university students; and the maintenance of the discipline's commitment to scholarship. Since Piaget has already found its place within the learning programs of many high school and primary school curricula, the ADAPT course may also provide a vehicle of communication so necessary among teachers of history at all levels in the American educational structure.

The essence of the ADAPT course is its emphasis on recognizing and working with the various levels of cognitive development of its students. Its first requirement has been that of learning where students are in the perceptions of problems, their applications of "solutions" to these problems, and their ability to comprehend and weigh variables. As pointed out in the introductory essays to this volume, the Piagetian concept of learning sees the need for students to use self-regulation as the process by which they can go from the Concrete stage of reasoning to the college-expected Formal state. If we face any new problem by calling upon our past experiences for solutions, then we can readily see what Piaget states as the basis of the process of cognitive expansion. Unfortunately, our assumption in history calls for students as well as ourselves to be at the Formal level of analysis: to be able to comprehend and use abstractions, to recognize contradictions as well as similarities, and to use one mental image to explain another. Learning situations which do not give students an opportunity to participate in their own

¹Enrollment was 32 students first semester and 28 students second semester.

internal self-regulation--that is, learning situations which begin at the Formal state--are unlikely to be of benefit to students who have yet to reach the same stage of mental analysis as that of the instructor.

Since the historian's task is that of making rational the irrational, of using the scientific method to handle the subjective, it is not easy for him or for his students to be "measured" by the tools designed for other disciplines with more pronounced or obvious thought patterns. Typically, we measure our students within the demands of the discipline: we evaluate their answers to our questions. In determining where students are as they enter the ADAPT History course and as a continuing device to "test" cognitive development, I have reversed the typical process: I solicit their questions in a variety of ways. The most important may be in the form of the first examination, given much earlier in the course than one would normally expect. Students are asked to put themselves into the role of the instructor and to frame the questions that they wish to have on the examination. Each student is asked to bring to the examination period (written on the first page of his "Bluebook") three essay-type questions over the unit covered by the class. Questions are then discussed by the class at the beginning of the period, and then the class is either assigned a "composite" question or the students are told to select their "best" question and write a model answer for it. By asking for three questions, the exercise usually forces students to go beyond those which the instructor may have posed. Although a range of thinking might be evident in a student's list of questions, it is fairly easy to "classify" the student's level of thinking. Since students also read another student's essay as well as one on their own work, the instructor is given additional insight as to the particular skills, needs, and value-structure of each student within the context of the course. Using the Piaget classifications, students in ADAPT as well as in my other classes where I have used this approach this year may be classified as follows:

Concrete thinker--sees only limited, immediate relationships; single causation; and little awareness of inter-relationships.

Transitional thinker--begins to see more general relationships among a series of "events" and shows some skill in separating as well as uniting variables and determinants.

Formal thinker--unites generalizations to formulate observations and insights about man in society; unites periods of time; sees the interplay of ideas and action; cautious in assuming that one can see casual relationships among "isolated facts."

That a high proportion of freshmen students today cannot do well in history courses in which content is presented at the Formal level is suggested in the following table, recording the placement of all freshmen students I have had in all of my undergraduate courses this year. In each instance the classification was devised through self-generated question-type examinations as described above. Although the contents of this table must be considered the results of a crude and limited measurement, I found in working with the students that about only one or two out of every five began the semesters' work at the Formal stage of analysis.

	<u>No. of Students</u>	<u>Percentage of Students*</u>
Pre-Concrete**	11	11.
Concrete	51	50.
Transitional	17	17.
Formal	<u>22</u>	<u>22.</u>
Totals	101	100.

*In rough percentages only.

**Many Pre-Concrete students, characterized by either an inability to express a recognizable form of logic or a willingness to participate in the classes, could not be adequately "measured."

With the sobering insight that many students were hurt by the lack of cognitive skills as opposed to a lack of interest in history, I became especially concerned about introducing each unit in the ADAPT course in the form of "Concrete" experiences. In its daily format as well as in its semester-long objectives, ADAPT History, in conjunction with the other ADAPT courses, used Piaget in a three-part learning experience.

In the first part, Exploration, subjects were introduced in familiar and limited forms. Questions by both the instructor and students focused upon a specific problem or observation or the classroom material used uncomplicated and controlled variables. For example, to move to an eventual understanding of the diplomatic alliances among the major European states from 1890 to 1914, the first part of the unit emphasized personal perceptions of power ratios through the playing of the simulation game, "Shipwreck," developed by Abraham Caplow. The game calls for three players, each with a different "power ratio," to negotiate

strategies to protect their own interests. Subsequent questioning of the students concerning the decisions they made brought out in very explicit terms the vocabulary and the logic they used to "survive" in the game. In the second part of the learning cycle, called Invention, students were placed in a "state of disequilibrium"--a situation in which they found that while many of their concepts or solutions from "Shipwreck" might fit a new set of problems, they still had to invent new strategies or concepts in order to cope with the problems. Giving each European state a power ratio comparable to those assigned to participants in "Shipwreck" and then asking students to determine what combinations of states made the "best" alliances was the opening exercise for the study of the European alliance system in the Invention phase. Students quickly found that the "formulas" they had invented earlier could not be used to cover their increasing exposure to the variables in the patterns of European diplomacy, yet the relationship between their experience in the game and the realities of the alliance system suggested that the two situations were not totally dissimilar. In this phase, students found it necessary not only to change some of their assumptions but also to seek out additional information from inclass sources and supportive outside readings. Here, students were learning what they did not "know," yet were developing formulas for finding out what they needed to learn.

In the third part of the learning cycle, Discovery, students are supposed to have completed the process of self-regulation--to gain equilibrium once more--and to be in a position of seeing variables and possibilities not apparent in the Exploration stage. For the learning cycle on diplomacy, students were able to discuss as well as to suggest the contradictions within the alliance systems, to probe indirect as well as direct relationships, and, most importantly, to ask and to synthesize questions that showed they had placed their own exploration, invention, and discovery experiences within the larger framework of the study of history.

It may be asked if Piaget is suitable for only the college student who is at the Concrete stage in the study of history. Since there was no attempt throughout the course to separate students, Formal thinkers did participate in all of the phases of the learning cycle. It appears that they did push faster into the Invention phase. Yet this was not a consistent pattern--some found they could handle certain situations quickly one day, whereas in facing a different dimension of history at another time, they, too, seemed to gain from the familiarity and security inherent in the Exploration phase. They also served as classroom leaders and fellow teachers--roles which I believe helped them to expand further upon their abilities.

Although few lectures were given, and then only in the Discovery stage of a learning cycle, I did not feel that I was having to "water-down" the discipline. Fewer topics may have been included in the course's content; however, the utilization of primary sources and different historiographical approaches within the learning cycle allowed students to become more deeply involved in identifying and using historical judgments than is typical with undergraduates. These skills were self-acquired rather than "imposed." The flexibility in the internal format of the course allowed me to respond to the specific needs of the student as well as to the progress of the class as a whole. In short, we could "slow down" or move more quickly depending upon how difficult students found the stages of Invention and Discovery. Those unable to "complete" a stage could be given an immediate encouragement or additional experience not usually possible in courses of comparable size.

The longterm impact of the course and the ADAPT program on the students will have to be determined at a later date. One cannot claim that this course or any of those in ADAPT made Formal thinkers out of Concrete students. However, perhaps the process was started. The enthusiasm of the students in the history course plus the amount of work they were willing to undertake indicated to me that the experience was worthwhile, if not rewarding both to them and to me. The size of the class seemed not to influence what we did or could do in using Piaget. (This suggests that a class of 50 or 60 students might pose some problems not encountered in this year's class of 30 but at this point there seems to be no fixed limitation on class enrollment for an ADAPT-based history course.)²

If Piaget has a particular significance for the teacher of history at the university level, it is that it transfers to the student responsibility for learning. It decreases passivity. And it allows even first semester students to discover that the pleasures of the discipline can be shared by them.

²Obviously, a class of 100 or 200 students would be excessive for any one instructor, but such large classes--one might argue--jeopardize any effective, active learning process.