

## ASSESSMENT REPORT: SKILLS AND ABILITIES OF HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES MAJORS

From Hist. 401: Senior Seminar, Spring Semester, 2002; Irwin K. Smemo, Instructor

This report will attempt to assess the performance of eighteen students, all of them Seniors, in History 401, the capstone seminar required of all History and Social Studies (Teaching) majors at MSUM. Of the eighteen, seven were completing the requirements for the B.A. in History, while the other eleven were at this stage in the B.S. degree in Social Studies and about to do their student teaching semester. This assessment is based on the degree of mastery shown individually and collectively by this cohort of Seniors relative to the six components contained in the Department of History's "Skills and Abilities History and Social Studies Majors Should Have" criteria, adopted Spring, 1998. [A copy is appended.]

The topic of this seminar was "The 1960's: How Events of This Decade Changed American Society". The major experiential activities required of the participants consisted of: common readings; researching, preparing and delivering three twenty-minute lectures on various interpretationally controversial aspects of the 1960's, followed by discussion; and producing a tight scholarly article based on the research done for one of their lectures, using both primary and secondary materials for their conclusions, with correct scholarly apparatus based on the University of Chicago style. Factual understandings of the period were assessed through essay examinations, but this report will concentrate on these students' skills and abilities based on the departmental criteria alluded to above.

At the end of the course, each participant was given a copy of these criteria and asked to rank themselves in terms of the degree to which each had achieved mastery in each category as a result of their experiences in the department's course offerings and requirements as they worked to complete their respective majors. Done anonymously, with comments encouraged, these results will also be reported.

### A. READING COMPREHENSION AND COGNITIVE SKILLS:

In their self-assessments, 12 of the 18 seminar participants felt they had achieved excellent mastery of the specific abilities cited under this heading, while 6 ranked themselves as very-good. Among the comments provided were:

"The Medieval Europe class and the historiography assignment really helped in this."

"We need more varying texts or books in order to evaluate interpretation differences"

"The Senior Seminar helped me to develop these skills."

Over all, I would say that this group of seniors showed little difficulty in regard to identifying theses in pieces of writing or recognizing different historical interpretations among authors.

### B. HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS:

Ten of the seminar participants ranked themselves as excellent in regard to the abilities under this heading, 7 felt they were very good in regard to these, and 1 student indicated merely a good. Among the comments:

"Senior Seminar especially enhanced my historical thinking skills."

"Even though I may recognize bias in a book or writing, it affects the way I think maybe more than it should."

"Each history course I have taken has improved these skills for me, since they allow you to research different authors and perspectives."

None of the participants had difficulty in recognizing bias in historical writings, interpreting events in their historic contexts, or dealing with cause and effect and other sequential relationships. In shaping their lecture presentations they showed the ability to synthesize various pieces of data and evidence into a coherent account. They also showed sensitivity toward the complexity of human motivations and cultural differences affecting patterns of behavior and ideation. Studying the 1960's was especially fruitful in regard to highlighting these understandings.

### C. RESEARCH SKILLS:

Twelve of the students rated themselves excellent on these criteria, 4 as very good, and 2 as good. Among the comments:

"All my history classes were helpful in this, but American Biography me to learn how to find and use new kinds of sources."

"Searching for periodicals was frustrating for me, so I limited by research to books."

"I am not sure how to find some sources."

"I am still a little leery about annotating sources, but the rest of my research skills have surpassed my expectations."

"Need more instruction in compiling and annotating a bibliography in correct form."

This class knew the differences between primary and secondary sources, were required to use both types in their research, and were able to find a variety of source materials for their topics using both the PALS catalog and the internet. Despite the comment above, all became proficient at evaluating their sources and providing bibliographic annotation in this regard by their third attempt (they were required to provide these as handouts to accompany each of their lectures).

Although the students' three interpretational topics were selected from a predetermined list by a choice/lottery method, their personal responsibility was to shape the contents of their lectures coherently, explain varying judgments by historians, and argue their own conclusions, based on evidence. They became more able to do these things effectively with each presentation, aided by specific criticisms after each, and all were quite uniformly excellent in these areas by their third lecture.

Conducting an oral history interview was suggested but not required. Three of the participants did these, however, very effectively, and what they learned from them added interestingly to their lectures.

### D. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS:

Eleven of the students felt their abilities were excellent in this area, while the other 7 rated themselves as very good. Relevant student comments:

"My writing skills have drastically (!) improved through all my history classes."

"My history classes helped me very much in writing papers, so that I have usually gotten A's on papers in other departments as well."

"I still have problems citing sources properly."  
"I need to develop better proof-reading skills."

These students obviously held their writing abilities in high regard, which was largely justified. Their lecture outlines and final papers were quite uniformly well written in correct, if not always graceful, prose style. They were able to develop a topic thesis, trace the relevant data, and argue an interpretive conclusion quite well. Careful proof-reading with correction of typos and minor usage/stylistic errors was occasionally a problem for some, largely due to haste and carelessness. Their lecture handouts were evaluated in regard to this as well, and such errors virtually disappeared by the third round and in their final papers.

As to finding and using the best evidence for their conclusions, many of them were not always cognizant of the shortcomings of the evidence they cited, however. This might be suggestive for improving the department's courses, especially at the upper level, by providing more specific instruction and "hands on" experience in the use of evidence to bolster historical assertions or conclusions. In response to criticisms and suggestions, most improved in this area, however, and this was reflected in their final papers.

#### E. ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS:

Eleven students rated their skills in this area as excellent by the end of the course, seven as very good, one as good. Comments:

"This was the first semester in which I had to do oral presentations in any history classes, and I ended up doing six. I felt this class was better than speech class in preparing presentations."

"Senior Seminar was the only history class in which I've had to do oral presentations."

"I will always feel slightly uncomfortable in front of people, but before this class I would have rated myself as only fair."

"I needed more opportunities to speak before a class before this seminar."

In response to previous Senior Seminar assessments, by myself and others, I made a conscious decision to stress oral communication skills to a greater extent than I had ever done before in this course, which is why I required three oral mini-lectures from each student, with tightly-structured guidelines as to what these presentations should entail and critical feedback after each.

On the whole, this group rose to these lectures very well, almost from the start. Those who showed problems in their first attempt--in organization, use of data, effective delivery, response to questions, etc.--improved rapidly by their third one. They all entered animatedly into questioning and discussion after each presentation, but, as usual, they were very hesitant in questioning or criticizing other students' assertions or conclusions. Other than this, I believe their self-assessments in this category were quite valid--and especially good training for those that will become secondary teachers of history.

#### F. COMPUTER LITERACY:

In regard to the two abilities cited under this category, 15 of the participants rated themselves as excellent and the other 3 as very good, other than using e-mail, which was not required. Comments:

"Sometimes a little trouble with the web."

"I am getting better at using the web."

Most of the participants used relevant web sites and all produced their final papers using word processing software without difficulty.

### CONCLUSIONS:

As indicated above, this was an unusually able group of senior majors in this department. They entered into the spirit of reading, research, lecturing and paper preparation with motivation and energy, which made the seminar very enjoyable. Interestingly, those participants in the seminar that had taken all or most of their history courses in this department, the great majority, showed the highest levels of skills and abilities in the various assessment categories, whereas the two participants that had recently transferred into this school had the greatest difficulties rising to these, especially in areas of historical thinking skills.

Perhaps the relatively "contemporary" 1960's seminar topic, with all of that decade's colorful personalities and dramatic events, made for greater interest and intellectual involvement on the part of this cohort of seniors, but the experiences and standards required of them nonetheless tested their historical abilities effectively and accurately, I believe. And, over all, they were quite impressive, both in motivation and performance.

As mentioned earlier, these students were not as well-versed as would be ideal in their ability to find and cite the most useful and relevant evidence pertinent to an historical issue or problem and its subjective resolution. They also tended to shy away from historiographical interpretations that conflict or vary, and tend to look too readily for "settled historical judgments", as most of our students do in all classes. Perhaps a more deliberate attempt to introduce historical judgments that are at clear variance with each other would broaden our majors' sensibilities in this regard. Again, the assessment of this group of senior majors suggests that we are still not doing enough in our courses with oral presentations by our students, and, ideally, ones which call for careful preparation, organization, and examination of a clear, specific thesis, and other skills and abilities from the departmental plan, beyond just a "short talk" to the class. Time constraints are a problem in this regard when the class the large, but to the extent it can be done, especially in upper-level courses, our majors can only benefit from the experience.