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Author(s): David J. Voelker

Source: *The History Teacher*, Aug., 2008, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Aug., 2008), pp. 505-518

Published by: Society for History Education

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40543888>

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Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses: A Sample Strategy

David J. Voelker

University of Wisconsin–Green Bay

STUDENTS OFTEN ARRIVE to my introductory U.S. history courses harboring profound misunderstandings about the nature of historical study. Many assume that studying history will mean memorizing a mass of mind-dulling minutiae. Furthermore, they mistake history as relatively clear cut, as suggested by the maxim: “It either happened or it didn’t.” From their point of view, historians who move beyond simple chronicling seem to be throwing around mere “opinions.” Unfortunately, the pedagogical and assessment strategies of many large introductory courses—mine included—can reinforce rather than correct these errors. Lectures and textbooks tend to obscure the interpretive nature of historical knowledge by presenting conclusions drawn by historians without revealing much about the research and deliberation that made the conclusions possible, and exams often brim with questions about decontextualized terms and events. To a certain extent, this problem is endemic to a course whose main imperative sometimes seems to be to get from point A (*e.g.*, the year 1865) to point B (*e.g.*, the present). A course that must cover such a span of time can partake of few historiographical debates along the way.¹

For quite some time, however, a growing number of historians have been quietly changing the way they teach introductory college courses by deemphasizing coverage for coverage’s sake, by relying less heavily on

lecturing, and by presenting students with a greater variety of both primary and secondary sources.² Moreover, a number of scholars of teaching and learning (including Robert Bain, Sam Wineburg, David Pace, and Lendol Calder) have promoted teaching strategies to help introductory history students take steps toward emulating expert modes of historical thinking.³ As Lendol Calder has put it, “the mystique of coverage is abating.” Calder, drawing on the “coverage versus uncoverage” distinction made by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, has urged history instructors to focus less on covering material and more on “uncovering” what historians do.⁴

The problem with the “facts first” coverage model, Calder explains, is that it relies upon an outmoded conception of human learning that assumes that before we can learn to think (and thus perform) intelligently, we must first absorb a large body of facts. Only later, after the factual foundation has been laid, according to this model, can we become capable of higher-level skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.⁵ Decades of research into cognitive functioning has revealed the inadequacies of this model. (See *How People Learn* for an excellent summary of this research.)⁶ The human brain seeks to assimilate new information into its existing mental schema, whether that schema is accurate or not. Piling more facts onto a flawed foundation will impede rather than advance learning. Therefore, the road between teachers and students must run two ways, as instructors discover and address students’ pre-existing knowledge. A coverage-centered pedagogy is unlikely to meet this need. Furthermore, the coverage model implies either that students will already know how to put the facts they have (allegedly) learned to use or that they will develop this ability in later courses. Only a small fraction of introductory students, however, will later take upper-level history courses, where they will hone skills of historical interpretation. Those who do not take advanced courses are likely to persist in holding the misconceptions about history that I noted above.

Dethroning coverage, however, does not mean voiding a course of content. It does not mean acting as if every past event or figure is of equal historical significance. History teachers already make many decisions about what topics to address in their courses. We need to continue making these tough decisions while prioritizing considerations above and beyond coverage. To state this point slightly differently: coverage should not be the first principle behind the design of an introductory course, but to accept this idea is not to downplay the significance of carefully choosing topics for inclusion or exclusion. For instance, I believe that an introductory U.S. history course can be designed to help students develop functional civic knowledge about the workings of American political, economic, and social systems. Within this framework, having students memorize the federal Bill of Rights seems substantially less productive than guiding them to inquire more deeply into a couple of historic controversies over

church-state relations or freedom of speech. My survey courses thus do not cover each amendment in the Bill of Rights, but we do discuss the conceptual origins of such rights and repeatedly consider conflicts regarding constitutionally protected rights.

While the move away from coverage raises many important questions about course design, it brings special challenges for assessing student learning, especially in introductory classes, which tend to enroll large numbers of students. When a course focuses on “covering” the history of a specified place and time through lectures and textbook reading assignments, evaluating students seems relatively straightforward. Multiple-choice questions, brief “identification” assignments (e.g., “Define coverture”), and essay questions (e.g., “Describe and explain the origins and outcome of the Spanish-American War”) have been widely used to gauge student learning of historical content. What happens, though, if we want to assess historical understanding rather than simple content mastery? History instructors have developed plenty of methods for accomplishing this higher-level assessment, but most of them require substantial writing on the part of students and thus generate a heavy grading load.

Unfortunately, in many institutional contexts, instructors lack the time to require introductory-level students to write extensively in order to develop and demonstrate historical understanding. Unless instructors have teaching assistants or graders, it is seldom feasible for them to evaluate several lengthy essays from scores of students. During my first few years of teaching, I found it necessary to rely heavily on multiple-choice exams and quizzes. My students happily filled out bubble forms to earn their grades. Some were probably aware, as one of my students recently observed, that “Multiple-choice questions don’t show quite as much what you know—more what you can recognize.”⁷ Plenty of students struggled with my multiple-choice exams, to be sure, but most of them saw the exams as manageable, with appropriate preparation.

I was painfully aware, however, that multiple-choice questions over-rewarded memorization and seldom asked students to think like historians. I found it possible to ask some questions that targeted understanding rather than simpler factual knowledge, but I recognized that many students were simply memorizing the understandings that they encountered in class and the textbook.⁸ I had an uncomfortable suspicion that at least some of the time, my students were merely simulating learning. Although I want my students to develop mastery of facts and concepts, which may require some memorization, I am even more committed to having them build useable knowledge and develop skills of critical thinking, historical interpretation, and argumentation.

In other words, I want students to develop “understanding,” as defined by Wiggins and McTighe in *Understanding by Design*. Wiggins and Mc-

Tighe advocate using a “backward design” process to create courses that will help students build understanding. This process demands substantial clarity about one’s learning goals for students: “big ideas” and “essential questions” displace a catalog of content that is to be summarily “covered.” Assessment also plays a key role in the understanding by design process. Instructors should start with the question, “What do I want my students to be able to do as a result of this course?” Based on the answers to this first question, teachers craft assessments that will allow them to evaluate student success at meeting these goals. In the understanding by design model, *understanding* refers to the integration of knowledge and skills. Wiggins and McTighe see understanding as a form of deep knowledge: “Understanding is the result of facts acquiring meaning for the learner.” Likewise, “An understanding is a mental construct, an abstraction made by the human mind to make sense of many distinct pieces of knowledge.” But they also indicate that understanding goes beyond static knowledge. To understand, according to Wiggins and McTighe, “is to be able to wisely and effectively *use*—transfer—what we know, in context; to *apply* knowledge and skill effectively, in realistic tasks and settings.”⁹ This functional definition elucidates one of the shortcomings of so-called objective questions: they lack the realistic quality that Wiggins and McTighe call “authenticity.” Multiple-choice questions are contrivances that seldom reflect “real life;” life does not present us with multiple-choice questions. Instead, as workers, citizens, and family members, we encounter problems and challenges that require us to apply our knowledge and skills within constantly shifting contexts. Answering multiple-choice questions about history requires remembering, recognizing, and educated guessing but does not necessarily demand understanding.¹⁰ A student who can correctly answer a multiple-choice question—even a question that seems to require understanding—cannot necessarily apply that knowledge in realistic situations.

Within the context of an introductory history course, *understanding* has several additional meanings. First and foremost, a student who understands history realizes that historians are engaged in an ongoing conversation about the past and that they must rely on a variety of primary sources, emanating from a variety of perspectives, in order to construct narratives and interpretations. Engaging in historical discourse, furthermore, requires several other abilities, including: awareness of continuity and change over time, of the multitudinous ways in which the past differs fundamentally from the present while the present is nevertheless rooted in the past; recognition that past events developed within a complex context, within a web of causality where multiple causes and effects were densely connected; consciousness of the contingency of past events, of the advantages and disadvantages of relying on hindsight; and an ability to judge the relative significance of past events.¹¹ Given the complexity of even a basic level of historical

understanding, it is easy to see that assessment poses quite a challenge.

As I reworked my own introductory courses to prioritize understanding over coverage, I developed an assessment tool called “For and Against.” I doubt that any single simple assessment can allow an instructor to evaluate every facet of historical thinking, but I believe that For and Against can play a useful role. During four semesters, I have graded over two thousand For and Against responses and have also collected survey data about my exams. I am convinced that For and Against provides a means of assessing students’ ability to apply knowledge to the authentic task of evaluating a historical claim according to the standards of our discipline. Moreover, students’ responses to For and Against questions can be graded quickly enough to make the assessment tool practical for use in large courses.¹² Although I believe that other instructors may find For and Against to be a useful tool, I am presenting it here less as a model to be copied than as an illustration of the basic challenges and principles of assessing understanding.¹³

Constructing For and Against Prompts

For and Against asks students to respond critically to a set of historical claims, such as “The U.S. Constitution created a democratic government” or “The antebellum Republican Party posed a serious threat to the institution of slavery.” I ask students to write two brief paragraphs that provide the best evidence *for* the statement and the best evidence *against* the statement, with three or four pieces of evidence for each side. (See Figure 1 for the instructions.) Students have about two-thirds of a sheet of paper to write their answers, and they respond to either two out of three or three out of five For and Against statements.

For the instructor, writing For and Against statements requires careful thinking. Each statement must have something to be said for both sides. Otherwise, students will avoid responding for fear of losing points. For and Against statements should cover topics that are broad and significant. They should get to the heart of the course by asking students to address what Wiggins and McTighe call “big ideas.” Many of the statements I use might be called “half truths”—claims that contain scraps of truth but that obscure more than they clarify. Some of them also reflect common misunderstandings (*e.g.*, “The coming of the American Civil War had nothing to do with slavery”). I have also successfully used many statements that include truth, but need to be qualified (*e.g.*, “The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s succeeded in creating equality for African Americans”). Both half-truths and underqualified statements demand that students take a critical stance. Half-truths, especially, require that students interrogate the statement and its use of language.

As students respond to these statements, they encounter the complex-

Figure 1: Sample Exam Instructions

- After each statement, use the available space to write 2 separate paragraphs labeled “For” and “Against.”
- The first paragraph will summarize the best evidence that you can give FOR, or in support of, the statement.
- The second paragraph will summarize the best evidence that you can give AGAINST the statement.
- Include only accurate evidence. Do not exaggerate the facts.
- Explain how the evidence you present supports or undermines the statement.
- Show me what you know! Be as detailed as possible. Include approximately 6-7 separate points, with as much balance between the two sides as the statement permits.
- Write legibly in complete sentences.

ity of history. Although the For and Against label sounds binary, students often find that they need to draw on multiple perspectives in order to write a strong response. In order to head off the style of hyperbolic polemic so common to contemporary television and radio coverage of political issues, I instruct students to “include only accurate evidence” and to avoid exaggeration. For example, given the statement “The coming of the American Civil War had nothing to do with slavery,” a student can do well on the “for” side by explaining factors other than slavery that precipitated the Civil War, but not by downplaying the significance of slavery to the secessionists. To prevent such errors, I try to steer students away from making an all-out (and almost surely unbalanced) case for each side. I reward them, instead, for making balanced judgments.

I can imagine using modified versions of the For and Against assessment for smaller classes or for upper-level courses. For large introductory courses, I find it most efficient to have students clearly demarcate the supporting and contravening evidence, and I do not ask them to provide an ultimate evaluation.¹⁴ If I had a smaller class and wanted to increase the difficulty of the exercise, I might simply ask students to provide a balanced evaluation of a statement. Upper-level students might also have the resources to bring historiographical debates to bear in evaluating statements by referring to various historians’ arguments. Doing so could reinforce for them the extent to which studying history demands ongoing conversation. Clearly, many variations on this style of exam question are possible.

Grading For and Against Responses

One advantage of the For and Against format is that there are many valid ways for students to approach each statement. Students can construct a strong answer from numerous starting points. Thorough responses tend to overlap (in part because students are generally relying on the same raw materials), but there is plenty of room for students to think for themselves and to connect evidence and examples that may not have been juxtaposed in class. As a result, I have found that a rigid rubric is inadequate for grading these responses. When I grade, I preview about ten responses to each statement before assigning any grades. This process allows me to get a sense of the range of responses, so that I can calibrate my expectations. (After this preliminary pass, I can grade most of the responses in about one minute each.) As I get started, I draw up a brief list of good elements and common errors of fact and understanding. Although I find I need to be flexible, there are usually a few details that deserve mention in any adequate response. A student writing about the 1960s civil rights movement, for example, should address both government policy and grassroots activism; ignoring either shows a lack of knowledge or an absence of judgment about historical significance.

To assess a For and Against response for understanding, I evaluate both the content and the analysis embedded in each paragraph. I discourage students from memorizing minutiae, and I do not expect them to display this sort of memorization on an exam. Instead, my study guides encourage them to build their knowledge by preparing answers to the “essential questions” for the unit. If they have spent sufficient time on task preparing for and attending class and studying for the exam, they should know enough to respond to the For and Against statements. The more they know, the more information they can choose from to present evidence. The more they understand, the better they are able to choose, weigh, and explain the evidence. A good response generally exhibits student comprehension of historical context, change over time, and multiple perspectives. On the other hand, when students memorize facts that they do not understand, their responses read like a “data dump”—they lack a framework to make sense of what they have mindlessly committed to memory. Each response thus reveals a great deal about how much a student knows and understands.

Confronted with the statement, “Christopher Columbus discovered the New World in 1492,” for example, students who wrote strong responses tended to begin by interrogating the language of the statement itself. They recognized that the validity of the statement depended on one’s perspective. As one student wrote: “In the case of Europeans, Christopher Columbus had discovered the New World. He introduced Europeans to a land that they

had no idea existed. This ‘New World’ offered a new income, territory, and opportunities. As well as a new group of people, the Native Americans. To the Europeans looking to get rich, seeking adventure, or a second chance, America certainly was a new world.” While the prose bears faults often seen on in-class exams, this student showed good understanding of the significance of Columbus’s 1492 voyages from the European point of view. Not all students displayed this critical awareness. Another student, for instance, noted: “Columbus discovered the New World since he was essentially the one that told the rest of the world it could be inhabited. He encouraged the English to explore and try to settle in the New World.” This response leaves much to be desired, given that it is both vague and inaccurate. In that sense, it gave me some basis to evaluate this student’s relatively low level of understanding.¹⁵

Writing against the Columbus statement allowed students to show that they firmly understood the state of American civilizations before 1492. A well-performing student argued:

Christopher Columbus did not discover a new world in 1492. The people who truly discovered “the New World” had been living there for thousands of years. In fact they had been living there for so long that it wasn’t a new world at all, but an old world. As far as Europeans are concerned, Christopher Columbus wasn’t the first to discover the continent. The Vikings had been there far sooner but had shown little interest in the land. The ironic thing is Columbus died before ever understanding what it was he had found.

This response, to be sure, could have included more detail about pre-Columbian American cultures (as many replies did), but it nevertheless indicated an awareness of the basic issues at stake in the problematic New World–Old World designation.¹⁶ Some students, on the other hand, failed to show understanding of the significance of Columbus’s voyage. One response mistakenly insisted: “The land had already been found and looked at by many other explorers. Everyone knew the land existed but no one wanted to explore or take advantage of it.” This student clearly lacked on understanding of Columbus’s importance.

As the examples above suggest, the For and Against format asks students to compose compressed historical arguments on the spot, drawing on their knowledge of the period at hand. To do so, they must call up information and convert it into evidence. In the process, they also need to explain how the evidence supports their point—simply listing facts is inadequate. (For this reason, I insist upon the paragraph format, which allows students to make connections in ways that a list of bullet points does not.) Students must also consider multiple points of view as they write their responses, thereby displaying awareness that a convincing historical interpretation rests upon a comprehensive weighing of the available evidence.

Figure 2: Sample Exam Debriefing Slide

Statement: Christopher Columbus discovered the New World in 1492.

The strongest answers mentioned most or all of the following:

- Columbus’s voyage did make Europeans aware of America.
- America did seem like a new world to Europeans.
- But, Columbus thought he was in Asia—not a “New World”—and he didn’t introduce that name.
- Vikings had already been to America.
- Most importantly, America was an old world, filled with millions of people whose ancestors had been in American for thousands of years. (More detail here was good.)

Common errors:

- Columbus, whose real name was *Cristoforo Colombo*, was not English, nor did his discovery directly launch English colonies. He was probably from Genoa, and he was employed by Spain.

Post-Exam Debriefing

Because the For and Against responses often include numerous insights and errors that are worth sharing with the whole class, I find it useful to spend part of a class period to debrief after I have graded an exam. (See Figure 2 for a sample debriefing slide.) The debriefing is especially important in situations (like mine) where the instructor cannot feasibly comment extensively on each exam; instead, feedback can be given collectively. I have two strategies for keeping these debriefings relevant. First, I provide feedback as quickly as possible after an exam, while students’ responses are still fresh in their minds. Second, I tell students that I may include similar questions on the final exam. Debriefings also allow me to address common misconceptions. For example, I discovered that many students held on to their erroneous belief that Christopher Columbus was English, despite my efforts in class to explain his origins. (Can we blame them, given that we Anglicize his name?) More substantively, the debriefing gives me a chance to address uncritical thinking that does not meet the standards of the discipline. Many students in one class, for instance, applied their personal twenty-first-century definitions of Christianity to nineteenth-century slaveholders in order to argue simplistically that the

early United States was not a Christian nation. In doing so, they not only showed that they were thinking ahistorically but also convinced me that I needed to address Christian proslavery and antislavery earlier in the course. As this example suggests, the process of assessing students can help us refine our teaching as well.

Student Insights into For and Against

When I surveyed my modern American history students about the exams used in the course, their responses suggested that the For and Against format facilitates their learning while helping me to gauge their understanding. The students in this course were mainly sophomores and juniors who had managed to avoid taking history courses up to that point in their college careers. These students were veteran test-takers. Their survey responses revealed that some of them valued ease over learning, but they were quite aware of the demands of different kinds of exam questions.

The majority of students believed that For and Against questions accurately measured their historical knowledge while requiring them “to think carefully before answering.” The comparison here against multiple-choice questions was revealing. For two semesters, about 90 percent of students agreed that the For and Against questions required careful thought; only a single student out of over one hundred surveyed disagreed. By contrast, only a third thought that the multiple-choice questions required careful thought—and I was using the best questions I had developed during three previous semesters. Although I never briefed students on my reasons for using the For and Against questions, fully 85 percent claimed to see why I used them, and their written comments suggested that many did in fact understand my rationale.¹⁷

When asked to compare multiple-choice and For and Against questions, many students showed awareness that For and Against questions assessed higher-level knowledge. One student, for instance, observed: “For & Against makes you think and compare what you learned. It allows you to apply the knowledge gained from readings & lectures. Multiple-choice only asks you to remember something, not remember and apply.” Another student noted: “With the multiple-choice exam questions, it’s like memorizing information from your notes & then being able to just recognize the correct answer. With the For & Against questions you had to really understand the material & be able to interconnect with other pieces of info[rmation].” One student who thought that “Multiple-choice was a good place to test for straight-forward facts of history” also saw For and Against as the more effective assessment, because it “opened our eyes to two sides of controversial subjects, showing how history is rarely one-sided, and there exist multiple interpretations.” Many agreed with the sentiment that,

as one student explained: “Multiple-choice questions are easier to study for, but they don’t show what I’ve learned or make me think deeply about the subject matter like For and Against do.” Another student, who said that studying history was as unpleasant as “eating cauliflower,” nevertheless admitted that For and Against “really tested our knowledge.”

A number of students ably explained why they believed that For and Against helped them to learn. One student focused on the argumentative element: “For & Against questions make the student connect a few pieces of evidence together. This makes sure that the student knows what they are talking about.” Another explained: “The For & Against format really made sure you knew enough about each topic to be able to argue for both sides. It also makes you think critically about each of your answers.” Several students emphasized the importance of drawing connections: “The For & Against question format requires that I know how things are related & connected in history.” Many students also observed that objective questions were much narrower: “For & Against questions made sure you understood the whole issue and why & how events happened. Multiple-choice was more highlighting vocab[ulary] words rather than how they fit into history.” As many of my students saw it, then, For and Against required them to show that they understood the course content—not that they had just memorized the appropriate terminology.

Conclusion: Assessment and Student Learning

For and Against, simple as it is, has transformed my introductory history classes. My courses have more validity, because the course assessments align better with my goals for student learning. Students now earn most of their grades by demonstrating historical understanding. Unlike other common assessments, For and Against responses cannot easily be memorized in advance. This point is important, because objective exam questions are not the only kind of questions that reward memorization. Straightforward essay exams often allow students to do fairly well by more or less replicating a narrative and historical explanation from lectures or the textbook. And the popular “identification”-style questions seldom require students to show deep understanding.¹⁸ I give my students plenty of guidance about how and what to study, but when they sit down in class to take the exam, they are usually encountering these specific historical claims for the first time. To do well, they have to show not only that they have information to bring to bear on the statement but also that they can evaluate the statement *as a historian* by judging historical significance, recognizing complexity and contingency, and drawing on context and chronology to frame their explanations. Each time they respond to a statement, students fashion rudimentary historical arguments by transforming inert facts into applied evidence. This

exercise, furthermore, demands authentic thinking by requiring students to carry out the kind of task—evaluating a claim and using evidence—that they will regularly encounter in life outside of the classroom.¹⁹

I would thus like to recommend For and Against as a useful tool for assessing student understanding, especially in large classes. As we historians develop new pedagogical strategies, I think we should also create and share assessments that match our learning ambitions for our students.²⁰ In doing so, we may find ways to break down the barrier that frequently separates testing from learning, thus helping students develop a working understanding of the past that so crucially shapes our shared present and future.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the 2006–07 Wisconsin Teaching Fellows, led by Jane Ewens and Donna Silver, for their feedback and support as I developed this project. I would also like to thank the University of Wisconsin’s Office of Professional and Instructional Development for sponsoring this very productive program. Along the way, I also had helpful discussions with Lendol Calder, Regan Gurung, Angela Bauer-Dantoin, Carmen Wilson, Tracy White, Brian Steele, and Ruth Homrighaus. Ryan Martin helped me navigate Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, and Kate Burns, Jolanda Sallmann, and Laura Nice graciously helped me collect consent forms and surveys. I benefited greatly from comments that Brian Steele, Andrew Kersten, Jane Ewens, Joel Sipress, and Ruth Homrighaus made on a draft of the essay. Last but not least, I would like to thank my 2006–07 introductory U.S. history students who elected to participate in the study. All data presented in this essay was collected with informed student consent under the supervision of the IRB of the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay.

2. None of these concerns or strategies are new. Throughout the twentieth century, historians favored written essays over objective questions, and supplementary primary and secondary sources have been widely used in introductory courses since the middle of the twentieth century. See Julie A. Reuben, “Going National: American History Instruction in Colleges and Universities,” *OAH Magazine of History*, April 2007, 33–38. For an example of the deep roots of the shift away from coverage, see Robert H. Mayer, “Connecting Narrative and Historical Thinking: A Research-Based Approach to Teaching History,” *Social Education* 62 (1998): 97–100. Mayer describes an “inquiry method” of teaching history, which came into vogue in the early 1970s.

3. See Robert B. Bain, “Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2000), 331–52; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple Univ. Press, 2001); David Pace, “The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” *American Historical Review* 109 (October 2004): 1171–92; and Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *Journal of American History* 92 (March 2006): 1358–70. For citations of studies on the shortcomings of traditional pedagogies in promoting “higher-level learning goals,” see L.

Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 3-4.

4. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, second ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2006), 228; Calder, "Uncoverage," 1359, 1362-63.

5. Calder, "Uncoverage," 1361-63.

6. John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, eds., *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, expanded ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000).

7. Anonymous comment from untitled anonymous survey of History 206 (History of the United States, 1865-present) students, by David Voelker, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, 26 April 2007.

8. One of the premises of *Understanding by Design* is that "An understanding can never be 'covered' if it is to be understood." In other words, a memorized understanding is not an understanding. Wiggins and McTighe, 229.

9. Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 37, 7. For a more comprehensive discussion of understanding, see Martha Stone Wiske, ed., *Teaching for Understanding: Linking Research with Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), especially David Perkins's essay, "What is Understanding," 39-57. Perkins nicely distinguishes between the "representational view of understanding" and the "performance view of understanding," which Wiggins and McTighe to a certain extent conflate. Perkins advocates convincingly for the performance view.

10. On the significance of transfer and authenticity, see Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 39-44, 153-58. See also the chapter on "Learning and Transfer" in Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, *How People Learn*, 51-78.

11. The substantial literature on historical thinking includes Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically," *Perspectives* [newsmagazine of the American Historical Association], January 2007, 32-35; Kathryn T. Spoehr and Luther W. Spoehr, "Learning to Think Historically," *Educational Psychologist* 29 (1994): 71-77; Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*; Peter N. Stearns, *Thinking History* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 2004); Peter J. Lee, "Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History," in *How Students Learn History in the Classroom*, ed. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), 31-77; and Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York: College Entrance Exam Board, 1990). For examples of strategies for teaching students to think historically, see: Joel M. Sipsess, "Why Students Don't Get Evidence and What We Can Do About It," *The History Teacher* 37 (May 2004): 351-63; and Todd Estes, "Constructing the Syllabus: Devising a Framework for Helping Students Learn to Think Like Historians," *The History Teacher* 40 (February 2007): 183-201. Also useful is Geoffrey Scheurman, "From Behaviorist to Constructivist Teaching," *Social Education* 62 (1998): 6-9.

12. I have used this assessment for up to 130 students in a semester, with 3 exams and up to 8 total responses from each student during the semester.

13. When I began using the For and Against format, I used it in conjunction with multiple-choice questions. Since then, I have shifted entirely to written exams, with positive results. In addition to For and Against, I now also use short answer questions and very short essay questions, both of which require students to practice fashioning historical explanations by connecting evidence to claims. Like For and Against, these sorts of questions can encourage students move beyond a simple recitation of memorized facts. These assessments are part of a larger framework for developing understanding. For sample syllabi, see <<http://www.uwgb.edu/voelkerd/>>.

14. My reasons for stopping short of asking students to provide an ultimate evaluation

are partially logistical—to do so would complicate and lengthen exam responses— and partially developmental. In short, I doubt that introductory-level students are fully prepared to make a final evaluation. For a helpful analysis of how students develop critical thinking skills, see Craig E. Nelson, “On the Persistence of Unicorns: The Trade-Off between Content and Critical Thinking Revisited,” in *The Social Worlds of Higher Education: Handbook for Teaching in a New Century*, ed. Bernice A. Pescosolido and Ronald Aminzade (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1999), 168-84.

15. I administered this exam question to my History 205 (History of the United States, 1600–1865) students at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay on 5 October 2006.

16. My student and I are both informed by Neal Salisbury, “The Indians’ Old World: Native Americans and the Coming of Europeans,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (1996): 435-458.

17. Untitled anonymous survey of History 205 students, by David Voelker, University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, 7 December 2006; Untitled anonymous survey of History 206 students, by David Voelker, University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, 26 April 2007. All subsequent student comments come from the 26 April 2007 survey.

18. I am not suggesting that conventional essay and identification exams are without value. However, these written exam formats are not necessarily superior to multiple-choice in terms of the depth of understanding that they require. Many history teachers have devised modified versions of the essay and identification format that probably allow them to assess for understanding. For example, “cluster identifications” and “matching identifications” require students to define and connect multiple terms while explaining their mutual significance. Likewise, more complex essay questions ask students to perform acts of synthesis and evaluation. Like For and Against, these sorts of questions can stymie students who have memorized information that they do not actually understand. I encourage historians who are using such assessments to consider evaluating them systematically and sharing the results. For primers on the methods of the scholarship of teaching and learning, see Kathleen McKinney, *Enhancing Learning through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The Challenges and Joys of Juggling* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007) and Regan A. R. Gurung and Beth Schwartz, *Optimizing Teaching and Learning: A Pragmatic Guide to Pedagogical Research* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, forthcoming).

19. Most of these students will not go on to do historical research on their own. However, they are going to live and work in a world where historical thinking can be a powerful tool for understanding. If they become active citizens, they will encounter historical claims intended to sway their political support in one direction or another. For and Against gives them practice in evaluating such assertions. Even if they do not immediately possess the knowledge to evaluate the claim, they will be practiced in applying multiple perspectives to critique the claim. Although I do not have longitudinal data to show that my students make this skill “transfer,” I feel comfortable asserting that this sort of transfer is much more likely to happen as a result of For and Against than as a result of multiple-choice, identifications, and even standard essay questions that inspire more repetition than critical thought.

20. For help designing assessments, see Thomas A. Angelo and Patricia K. Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, second ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1993).