

# FCH Annals

Journal of the Florida Conference of Historians



Online Supplement to Volume 23  
"Teaching Critical Thinking"  
August 2015

*FCH Annals: The Journal of the Florida Conference of Historians*

ISSN 2373-9525 (Print)

ISSN 2373-9541 (Online)

The Online Supplement to the *Annals* is published periodically by the Florida Conference of Historians. Inquiries should be directed to mcole@fgcu.edu.

**Copyright:** © 2015 The Florida Conference of Historians. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior written permission of the copyright holder. Requests should be directed to mcole@fgcu.edu, or to Michael S. Cole, Florida Gulf Coast University, 10501 FGCU Boulevard South, Fort Myers, Florida 33965.

**Disclaimer:** The Florida Conference of Historians and the editors cannot be held responsible for any errors or consequences resulting from the use of information published in this journal. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the editors or the Florida Conference of Historians.

### **Senior Editor**

Michael S. Cole, Florida Gulf Coast University

### **Editorial Board Members**

Michael S. Cole, Editor

#### *Campbell Award Committee Members*

Dr. Julian Chambliss, Rollins College

Dr. David Harvey, New College of Florida

Dr. Patricia Farless, University of Central Florida

#### *Browne Award Committee Members*

Dr. Blaine Browne, Broward College

Dr. Michael Butler, Flagler College

Dr. Rowena Hernández-Múzquiz, Broward College

#### *Clarke Award Committee Members*

Dr. Jay Clarke, Emeritus, Jacksonville University

Dr. Mike Epple, Florida Gulf Coast University

Dr. Sean McMahon, Florida Gateway College

*Published in memory of Dr. Thomas (Tom) M. Campbell, the driving force behind the creation of the Florida Conference of Historians.*

## **A Note from the Editor**

It is with great satisfaction that I present the inaugural online supplemental volume of the *FCH Annals: Journal of the Florida Conference of Historians*. The supplement will be published periodically, exclusively online, and will feature pedagogical articles by authors who teach history at the college or university level. The present supplement features articles presented at the 54th and 55th Annual Meetings of the FCH. Attendees at the Annual Meetings present this type of scholarship on a regular basis, but because of the prior space limitations of the print format, until now the organization's journal has not often published them, limiting itself, rather, to articles of a historical character. We hope this supplement will be beneficial to others who teach history, and will foster engaging pedagogical discussions on the FCH website.

Michael S. Cole  
23 July 2015

# Can an Intensive Course in the History of the Cold War Significantly Improve Critical Thinking Among Undergraduates?

Alex G. Cummins  
*Flagler College*

In a recent study of 2,322 undergraduates in 24 four-year institutions in the United States from fall 2005 to spring 2007, sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa concluded that approximately half of the college students, based on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, showed “no statistically significant gain in critical thinking” in their first two years of college.<sup>1</sup> They pointed out that students were less likely to improve critical thinking after their first two years in college. They showed that students were only slightly more proficient than when they entered college and their performance paled compared to students in the 1980s who developed their skills at twice the rate. They attributed students’ failure, in part, to social and peer pressures, and to reduced rigor and challenges in courses and teaching.<sup>2</sup>

Arum and Roksa explained that courses needed to be challenging, rigorous, and demanding for any success in improving critical thinking (CT).<sup>3</sup> Sixteen upperclassmen enrolled in such an intensive upper-division course at Flagler College in the fall semester of 2013. The course, History of the Cold War, examined the global rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union from World War II to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It offered students an opportunity to learn the cause and effect of numerous controversial events, identify and learn historical interpretations, and use ample primary sources for understanding these events. It provided students with the tools, subject matter, and sources necessary to improve CT. Based on a pretest and posttest in the course, twelve of the sixteen students failed to demonstrate any significant gain in CT. They encountered personal and cultural obstacles. And they struggled with their written assignments, which required the identification of arguments and the plausible evidence to support those arguments.<sup>4</sup>

---

*Presented at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Florida Conference of Historians, St Augustine, Florida, 31 Jan.-1 Feb. 2014.*

<sup>1</sup> Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>4</sup> The author extends his appreciation to Flagler College’s Proctor Library, librarians, and staff for their assistance in obtaining materials. He also extends his appreciation to Dr. J. Calvitt Clarke, professor emeritus of Jacksonville University, for his advice and suggestions. He embarked on this study several years ago with the assumption that the Cold War course would significantly improve CT in undergraduate students.

Critical thinking (CT) is considered the ability to identify arguments, discern assumptions and patterns in arguments, and provide an argument with supportive evidence and conclusions.<sup>5</sup> Students, for example, engage in CT when they investigate differing views about a historical event and attempt to formulate a plausible interpretation about what actually happened and the meaning of that event.<sup>6</sup> Arum and Roksa used the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to measure students' progress in CT. The CLA, consisting of written open-ended arguments in response to real-world scenarios, as opposed to answers to multi-choice questions, measured performance in CT, problem solving, complex reasoning, and written communications. It entailed the evaluation of answers based on a graduated numerical-rating system.<sup>7</sup> Critics argued that the CLA focused on general skills rather than domain knowledge, i.e., subject-matter knowledge, and specialization. These critics would agree that the mastery of domain knowledge enhances CT.<sup>8</sup>

Sixteen Flagler students completed a pretest on the first day of class of the Cold War course. The pretest consisted of twenty-two open-ended questions, eighteen of which entailed domain knowledge about terms, events, and issues familiar to readers of editorials in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (See Appendix A for the questions). Each of the eighteen questions was worth a maximum of one point. A student received 0.5 points for a partial answer. The remaining four questions represented CT topics. Each of these questions was worth a maximum of two points; however, a student received 0.5 points for a partial answer. On the domain-knowledge portion of the pretest, the sixteen students scored forty-three out of a maximum of 288 points, 15 percent. On the CT portion, they scored 10.5 out of a maximum of 128 points, 8 percent.

On the last day of class, eleven of the original sixteen students completed the same test, the so-called posttest. On the domain-knowledge portion, they scored 119 out of a maximum of 198 points, 60 percent. On the CT portion, they scored forty-three out of a maximum of eighty-eight points, 49 percent. Four students showed significant improvement in CT, from one point on the pretest to five or more points on the posttest. The other students showed minimal or limited improvement. Three of the students showed considerable improvement in domain knowledge, but limited improvement in CT. Two of the four students who scored highest on the CT portion showed modest improvement in domain knowledge (See Appendix

---

<sup>5</sup> Noel Hendrickson, Kirk St. Amant, et al., *The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook for Critical Thinking* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), ix, 128. See also Lisa Tsui, "Cultivating Critical Thinking: Insights from an Elite Liberal Arts College," *JGE: The Journal of General Education* 56, nos. 3-4 (2008): 201, doi: 10.1353/jge.0.0001.

<sup>6</sup> Joanne G. Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities* (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1988), 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, 20-21, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 16-19.

B for the results of the pretest and posttest). These data suggest that there may not always be a direct correlation between improvement in domain knowledge and CT.<sup>9</sup>

Arum and Roksa offered advice for improving students' academic performance, especially in CT. They wrote that courses should encompass rigorous instruction and tasks that emphasized CT, complex reasoning, and written communications. They suggested that students should read forty pages per week and write forty pages per semester for each course. They added that instructors should provide examples for and prompt feedback to written assignments, and meet with students to discuss assignments and offer advice about performance and career.<sup>10</sup>

Many scholars would agree with Arum and Roksa that writing is an excellent learning tool, especially if it is part of a process which enhances CT. In their studies, they stressed the importance of domain knowledge in enhancing CT.<sup>11</sup> Joanne Kurfiss examined several domains to show how each contributed to CT enhancement. In the discipline of history, students investigated divergent accounts of a historical event and determined the meaning and significance of that event. Cause-and-effect and controversial issues provided students with excellent mechanisms for determining meaning and significance.<sup>12</sup> Jenny Reed demonstrated success in CT among students in a lower-division history course through the analysis and interpretation of primary source documents.<sup>13</sup>

Gamze Cavdar and Sue Doe, based on their experience teaching CT in a lower-division political science course, stressed that students rarely paid attention to instructions and feedback from professors, failed to incorporate such feedback in subsequent writing assignments, and repeated their errors.<sup>14</sup> Repeated meetings

---

<sup>9</sup> The author extends his appreciation to Dr. Will Miller, Director, Institutional Research and Effectiveness at Flagler College, for his advice and suggestions about CT topics and the CLA.

<sup>10</sup> Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, 64, 70-71, 129, 131-132.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, 131, 189. For the many scholars, see Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2001), 164; Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Thinker's Guide to How to Write a Paragraph* (Dillon Beach, Calif.: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2007), 4, 6; Gamze Cavdar and Sue Doe, "Learning through Writing: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in Writing Assignments," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 45, no. 2 (April 2012): 298, doi: 10.1017/S1049096511002137; Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 16-19; Ellen M. Cotter and Carrie S. Tally, "Do Critical Thinking Exercises Improve Critical Thinking Skills?," *Educational Research Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (December 2009): 3-4, Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson (accession no. 54575521); Daniel T. Willingham, "Critical Thinking: Why Is it So Hard to Teach?," *Arts Education Policy Review* 109, no. 4 (March/April 2008): 21-24, doi: 3200/AEPR.109.4.21-32.

<sup>12</sup> Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 1, 3, 5, 22, 27, 39-40. Lisa Tsui noted success in writing assignments by having students grapple with controversies and contradictions ("Cultivating Critical Thinking," 222).

<sup>13</sup> Jenny Reed, "Effect of a Model for Critical Thinking on Student Achievement in Primary Source Document Analysis and Interpretation, Argumentative Reasoning, Critical Thinking Dispositions and History Content in a Community College History Course," <http://www.criticalthinking.org>.

<sup>14</sup> Cavdar and Doe, "Learning through Writing," 298.

and permitted revisions of assignments should ensure that students paid attention to instructions and corrected their errors.<sup>15</sup>

According to Kurfiss, professors should show students how to recognize and compare different points-of-view and pursue assignments that organize and develop their knowledge about a subject and increase their thinking about that subject. Students should compose short analytical essays followed by longer and more complex written assignments, which compel them to integrate ideas from multiple sources.<sup>16</sup> Kurfiss and others argued that students should find arguments and evidence used in scholarly works by receiving guided, structural, and repeated feedback, and through practice.<sup>17</sup> An important facet in enhancing CT is knowing how to reason, inquire, and communicate in a discipline, which is called procedural knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Some scholars indicated that abstract concepts and ideas in which students repeatedly examined both sides of an issue in a particular domain enhanced CT. Professors should develop strategies to label concepts and ideas, explain them several times, and apply them to the course material. With such guidance and practice, students could begin using these strategies without a cue from the professor.<sup>19</sup> Labels, interpretations, and categorizations abound in the historical discipline.

The Cold War course at Flagler College incorporated the suggestions and advice from Arum and Roksa, and other scholars described above. The students read at least 50 pages each week from two textbooks. They wrote five essays, a book review, and a research paper, amounting to about 30 pages, single-spaced, of narrative. They received instructions, explanations, and examples of the written assignments and prompt feedback to all assignments. The professor provided students with the incentive of meeting with him to receive instructions and individual feedback by assigning 20 points for special sessions. Unfortunately, two of the students who performed poorly throughout the course failed to meet the professor for scheduled meetings. During class sessions students read and discussed primary sources of the major events and controversial issues, and identified cause-and-effect for each of them. The professor directed the discussions to focus on the context for each of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Roger Peace, "Cultivating Critical Thinking: Five Methods for Teaching the History of U.S. Foreign Policy," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 2 (February 2010): 265, 268, Academic Search Complete (accession no. 48317548); Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, iv, 5, 40, 82; Brooke N. Moore and Richard Parker, *Critical Thinking*, 8th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 5, 12; Willingham, "Critical Thinking," 23, 26; Cavdar and Doe, "Learning through Writing," 298, 300.

<sup>16</sup> Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 19, 21-23, 27, 37-39, 81-82. See also Willingham, "Critical Thinking," 21, 23-24, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking*, 140, 166; Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 4, 82, 88; Brent J. Ruswick, "Teaching Historical Skills through JSTOR: An Online Research Project for Survey Courses," *The History Teacher* 44, no. 2 (February 2011): 286, 291, Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson) (accession no. 508183983); Moore and Parker, *Critical Thinking*, 5, 12; Hendrickson, St. Amant et al., *Rowman & Littlefield Handbook*, 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> James Byrnes, "Formal Operations: A Systematic Reformulation," *Developmental Review* 8, no. 1 (March 1988): 66, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297\(88\)90012-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297(88)90012-3); Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 27, 35, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking*, 62-64, 136-140; Willingham, "Critical Thinking," 28.



primary sources. Most of the students failed to read the assigned readings prior to the class sessions.

The students encountered difficulty in composing two structured comprehensive essays based on primary sources and scholarly articles. They failed to recognize arguments in the articles and the salient points in the primary sources. They also failed to identify and explain the supportive evidence. Some scholars explained that students encountered difficulty in recognizing arguments because they apparently became confused and distracted by extraneous elements and misunderstood words in the text. They added that the students did not acquire the adequate domain knowledge necessary for CT.<sup>20</sup> Students felt much more confident in summarizing, relaying, or regurgitating what they read.<sup>21</sup> Several of the students failed to read the sections in the textbooks for the context of the events which constituted the focus of the primary sources and scholarly articles.

The professor met with each student to correct the errors in the first essay assignment. He gave the students typed paraphrases of the arguments and supportive evidence for the articles, along with the specific pages in the articles for each paraphrase. He permitted the students to revise this essay. Although most of them succeeded in recognizing the arguments in the revisions, they failed to provide the plausible evidence for the arguments. The professor allowed these students to revise the essay once again. Some of the students still encountered difficulty in explaining the evidence for the arguments. The students performed better on the second essay, however, they struggled with the primary sources and the supportive evidence for the argument in the scholarly article.

The professor instructed the students to identify the historical interpretations of the authors of the scholarly articles. He provided the students with explanations about the three distinct historical interpretations of the Cold War: Traditional, Revisionist, and Post-Revisionist. Traditionalists argued that the Soviet Union started the Cold War by its expansionist policies for security, political, or philosophical reasons. And the United States government used military force and other means to contain the expansion of Soviet territory and influence. Revisionists countered by claiming the Soviet Union, exhausted and devastated at the end of World War II, resisted American attempts to open trade and commerce to benefit American capitalists and to prevent the capitalist encirclement of the socialist Soviet state. The U.S. government exploited the monopoly of the atomic bomb to intimidate the Soviets and exhibited mismanagement and incompetence through its policymakers. Reacting to the Revisionists' challenge, Post-Revisionists struck a balance between the two camps and blamed both the Americans and Soviets for

---

<sup>20</sup> Brooke N. Moore and Richard Parker, *Critical Thinking*, 8th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 12; Hendrickson, St. Amant et al., *Rowman & Littlefield Handbook*, 13-14; Willingham, "Critical Thinking," 22; Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, xv.

<sup>21</sup> For an example of students' propensity to avoid CT and resort to formulaic writing, see Lionel Beehner, "Forget Resume Padding: Emphasize Critical Thinking," *USA Today*, May 10, 2012.



creating the Cold War. Their views ranged from escalating tensions, overreactions, and misunderstandings between the two superpowers over spheres of influence, security, reparations, and the future of Germany and Eastern Europe to the belief that the conflict was inevitable.<sup>22</sup> Most of the students encountered difficulty in identifying the interpretations in the first essay. In subsequent assignments, however, a few students continued to confuse the Revisionist and Post-Revisionist positions.

Half of the students performed relatively well in the assignments that were part of the research project. The first assignment entailed an essay that briefly described the topic and presented the thesis in the form of a research question. Students also added a working bibliography of at least ten sources, which included primary sources and scholarly articles. All the students failed to present logical and relevant thoughts in the essay and struggled with a clear and succinct research question. Following individual meetings with students, the professor permitted them to submit revisions. Most of the students' revisions were correct. However, some of the students failed to present a suitable essay. These students revised the essay again, correcting the previous problems. Based on discussions with all the students, the professor determined that the students did not take the time to read enough material to understand the subject matter of their topic.

Following the grading of the first research essay, the students submitted a lengthy essay which gave a history of the research topic and answered the research question posited in the first essay. The goal of this assignment was to force students to gain domain knowledge about their topics and submit a preliminary research paper mid-way through the course. Most students experienced difficulty in presenting sufficient evidence to support the research question. Upon revision, some students relied too much on superficial evidence and generalizations. Two students failed to submit this assignment. Another student did not submit a revision of this essay.

The third assignment was the book review, in which students applied the formula used in examining the sources in the two comprehensive essays. Most of the students identified the thesis of their books and examples from the books that represented supportive evidence for the thesis. Almost all students, however, struggled with identifying the significant criticism and interpretations expressed by scholars in published reviews of the books. Upon prompt verbal and written feedback from the professor, these students succeeded in rendering the pertinent information in their revisions of the book review. The domain knowledge and experience gained in composing the second research essay apparently aided the students in preparing the book reviews.

The fourth assignment was a bibliographical essay in which the students examined the arguments and content of seven scholarly works and primary sources

---

<sup>22</sup> Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey*, 13th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 760-761; Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 10th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 103-105.

so as to identify alternative arguments and evidence about their research topic. Most students performed quite well in this assignment. Some of them presented superficial and generalized evidence. One student failed to submit this assignment.

The four assignments described above represented a graduated process in which students could gain domain knowledge about a specific Cold War topic and subsequently compose a paper that answered a research question supported by differing arguments and plausible evidence. The professor instructed the students to integrate the information and even wording from the four assignments into the paper. Those students who performed well on all written assignments submitted clear and well-documented papers. The students who performed poorly on assignments submitted superficial and sparsely documented papers. The two students who failed to submit the second research essay composed substandard papers.

Time, in many respects, affected the performance of students in their writing assignments. Students tended to rush through assignments, relying too much on summaries and generalizations. Some students submitted revisions in a timely manner, but most delayed their submissions. Two students failed to submit revisions for most of the assignments. Several students claimed that their other courses, part-time jobs, and personal situations limited their available time. They were taking five upper-division courses during the semester. However, two of the students who demonstrated significant improvement in CT were taking five upper-division courses and had part-time jobs. Three of the students commented that the course required too much writing. One student failed to submit one assignment altogether. Another student lacked the organizational, analytical, and writing skills for composing higher-level essays and a research paper. Richard Paul and Linda Elder pointed out students' tendency to complete minimal requirements and adhere to rote memorization. As a result, students failed to acquire the tools needed for CT. Paul and Elder concluded that these obstacles made CT difficult to teach.<sup>23</sup>

It seemed as if some students did not quite comprehend arguments and supportive evidence. William Perry showed in his study of undergraduates at Harvard and Radcliffe in the late 1950s and early 1960s that students struggled with CT and achieved only scattered and varied success throughout their four years. According to Perry, freshmen were inclined to learn the authoritative view, especially that of the professor, and to search for the right answer. They preferred to stick to facts and reject theorizing. At the end of the senior year many students failed to progress successfully toward CT. Perry determined that successful CT required personal attributes such as will, effort, and courage at each step of student development. Although these students accepted only facts and the right answer or believed that scholarly positions merely represented someone's opinion, successful students

---

<sup>23</sup> Paul and Elder, *Critical Thinking*, 134-135, 145-148.

learned to look for and accept ambiguity and differences of views based on plausible evidence.<sup>24</sup>

A major obstacle to students' success in CT concerns individual capabilities. Ellen Cotter and Carrie Tally, in their recent experiment with CT in a lower-division psychology course, suggested that formal operational skills, considered a prerequisite for CT, might not be developed in young adults who entered college. Formal operational skills enable abstract thinking, and hypothetical and deductive reasoning. Cotter and Tally concluded that if students did not possess the necessary cognitive skills, "attempts to improve critical thinking may be futile."<sup>25</sup> James Byrnes and Joanne Kurfiss made similar conclusions in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup>

Elkhonon Goldberg, a cognitive neuroscientist, explained that the human prefrontal cortex, that part of the brain which is associated with CT, is not fully developed until the age of 18 years or even as late as 30. And the pathways connecting the frontal lobe with the rest of the brain, called spindles, reach their full operational state between the ages of 18 and 30.<sup>27</sup> This development of brain capability in young adults could explain why some undergraduates encounter difficulty in developing CT skills.

The Cold War course was writing-intensive, rigorous, and challenging. It entailed those teaching ingredients prescribed in the works of Arum and Roksa, and other scholars who examined CT over the decades. The professor integrated CT principles throughout the course. Although most of the upperclassmen in the course demonstrated significant and limited improvement in domain knowledge, based on the pretest and posttest, only four of them showed significant improvement in CT. Two of the four students were history majors, while the other two students pursued other majors and had only taken a required first-year history course. The other history majors in the course demonstrated limited or minimal improvement in CT. An evaluation of the students' performance in the Cold War course shows similarity to the results of Arum and Roksa's study. As the course represented a rigorous and challenging study of the Cold War, students performed poorly because of many personal factors. Many factors contributed to students' lack of success in improving CT: time-management, cultural and social obstacles, and the passion and ambition to excel. Perhaps some students' emotional or mental maturity lagged behind that of successful students.

Developing CT can be a difficult and disappointing experience for educators as well as students. In fact, students over the decades have performed poorly in developing CT. Kurfiss noted that professors in the 1980s had unrealistically

---

<sup>24</sup> William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (1970, repr., San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1999), xiv-xvi, 75, 122-123, 241, 243.

<sup>25</sup> Cotter and Tally, "Do Critical Thinking Exercises Improve Critical Thinking Skills?" 4.

<sup>26</sup> Byrnes, "Formal Operations: A Systematic Reformulation," 66; Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 27, 35, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Elkhonon Goldberg, *The Wisdom Paradox: How Your Mind Can Grow Stronger as Your Brain Grows Older* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 34, 175-177. Appreciation is extended to Professor Annabel Brooks, University of North Florida, for referral to this book.

high expectations for the development of students' CT.<sup>28</sup> Although an intensive course may not a critical thinker make, repeated rigorous and challenging courses throughout the undergraduate curricula, which include CT principles, as Arum and Roksa suggested, might improve CT in both underclassmen and upperclassmen.

---

<sup>28</sup> Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking*, 4-5, 21.

**Appendix A**  
**Cold War Questionnaire**

Give explicit answers to the eighteen questions listed below, including, whenever appropriate, interpretations, political leaders, locations, and dates, and answer the four Critical-Thinking questions

1. Who started the Cold War and why?
2. What was containment?
3. (Critical Thinking) How did the United States use containment to its advantage during the Cold War?
4. What was the Truman Doctrine?
5. (Critical Thinking) How did the Truman Doctrine affect the progression of the Cold War?
6. What was the Marshall Plan?
7. Why was NATO formed?
8. What was McCarthyism?
9. Explain the domino theory.
10. What were "massive retaliation" and MAD?
11. (Critical Thinking) How did nuclear weapons influence the course of the Cold War?
12. Why was sputnik so important?
13. Who ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall and why?
14. What caused the Cuban Missile crisis?
15. Why did the U.S. become embroiled in Vietnam?
16. What was the Prague Spring?
17. What was Détente?
18. What was SALT?
19. What were the Helsinki Accords?
20. What were Star Wars?
21. (Critical Thinking) What role did Star Wars play in the ending of the Cold War?
22. What caused the end of the Cold War?

**Appendix B**  
**Cold War Pretest and Posttest Results, 11 December 2013**

22 Questions (18 - Domain Knowledge, 4 - Critical Thinking)

Maximum Points for Domain =198      for CT=88

Student	Pretest		Posttest	
	Domain	CT	Domain	CT
1.	4 (22%)	0	7.5 (42%)	1.5 (19%)
2.	3.5 (19)	0.5 (6%)	16.5 (92)	5.5 (69)
3.	3 (17)	1 (13)	8 (44)	1 (13)
4.	3 (17)	1 (13)	11.5 (64)	5 (63)
5.	1 (6)	0	3 (17)	2.5 (31)
6.	3.5 (19)	1 (13)	13 (72)	4 (50)
7.	3 (17)	1.5 (19)	16 (89)	8 (100)
8.	2 (11)	1 (13)	12.5 (69)	3 (38)
9.	2.5 (14)	0	7.5 (42)	3 (38)
10.	7 (39)	0	13.5 (75)	2 (25)
11.	1.5 (8)	0.5 (6)	10 (56)	7.5 (94)
Totals	34/3.09 (17%)	6.5/0.59 (7%)	119/10.82 (60%)	43/3.91 (49%)

The maximum of 198 points was the result of the total number of domain points (18) times 11 students. The maximum of 88 points was the result of the total number of CT points (4) times 11 students.

Original enrolment was 16 students; however, 2 withdrew for health or personal problems; 3 students did not attend class or complete the post-test on the last day of class.

Pretest Based on 16 Students

Domain=43/2.69 (15%)      CT=10.5/0.66 (8%)

# The Pedagogical Merits and Pitfalls of Using the Letters of Hernán Cortés to Teach the Conquest of Mexico

Michael S. Cole  
*Florida Gulf Coast University*

This essay is based on my experiences in an upper-level undergraduate course I have been teaching fairly regularly since 2003 entitled Conquest and Colonization of Mexico. In this and other courses I typically begin my lectures on the military phase of the conquest by telling the class that the traditional question posed to the conquest has often been some variation of: how could approximately four-hundred Spaniards, perhaps sixty with horses, overthrow an empire of 25 to 28 million people? I then go on to say that historiographical trends over the last several decades indicate that this is not exactly the right question to be posing to the events of the conquest.

With this opening I am to some extent setting up a straw-man argument, because my rhetorical question is generally no longer the current approach to the conquest, although it is not entirely absent from the most influential literature on the topic. It was at least partially the approach of R. C. Padden in the late 1960s, of Tzvetan Todorov in the early 1980s, and more recently, Hugh Thomas in the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> But by that time (1993), Ross Hassig's *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* had prioritized the military contribution made by the native allies to the Spanish campaign, all but ending the nineteenth-century-style approach of skewed numbers and long odds, while at the same time taking into account other important factors such as differences in battlefield tactics, and technological advantages such as the Spanish use of brigantines to dominate the lake, causeways, and shoreline of Tenochtitlan.<sup>2</sup> This is also now the analytical framework taken by the authors of some frequently used textbooks of Latin American history, such as Chasteen, and Keene and Haynes.<sup>3</sup>

But despite the now long-standing tendency to eschew the romanticized 25 million-to-four-hundred approach, I nevertheless find that these parameters still hold a fair amount of appeal for my students. This is why I like to start the lecture

---

*Presented at the 55th Annual Meeting of the Florida Conference of Historians, Lakeland, Florida, 13-15 Feb. 2015.*

<sup>1</sup> R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503-1541* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), first published as *La conquête de l'Amérique: la question de l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1982); Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico: With a Preliminary View of the Ancient Mexican Civilization and the Life of the Conqueror Hernando Cortés* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1843); Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* (London: Longman, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes, *A History of Latin America*, 9th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013).



by bringing their attention to the question, in order to begin taking it apart. Most recently I was pleasantly surprised when one of the students in my lower-division survey of Latin American history beat me to the punch by raising his hand as soon as I had set up the question. He asked if it was not obvious that the tens of thousands of native allies invalidated the notion of a 25 million-to-four-hundred ratio. He had obviously done the assigned reading before the lecture, so I conceded his point and confessed that this was the direction the lecture was heading. Nevertheless, this is the exception in my experience. It is the only time that I can recall a student reaching this conclusion from the outset, and so I will probably continue to introduce the topic with the same straw man.

It is sometimes said that Cortés himself did not give sufficient recognition to the contribution his native allies made to the conquest. While it is true that the Tlaxcalans and other allies are far from being the central focus in his letters, Cortés repeatedly acknowledged their importance, especially beginning with the siege of Tenochtitlan, when he first estimated their numbers at 50,000, then 150,000, and finally, resolved himself to observing that the allies came “in such multitudes we could no longer count them.”<sup>4</sup> Given Cortés’s propensity to embellish Spanish successes and underestimate Spanish losses, his ready acknowledgement of his reliance on native allies is an effective tool for convincing students that the allies were of central importance in the fall of Tenochtitlan.<sup>5</sup>

The military aspects of the Spanish conquest occupy only a little more than a week of lecture in my course on the conquest and colonization of Mexico, but I also rely on classroom discussion of Cortés’s letters, along with other primary sources. From the time I first conceived of the course I have assigned the first three letters from Anthony Pagden’s edition, *Letters from Mexico*, as required reading. In conjunction with that I also assign *The Broken Spears*, and the Penguin Classics editions of *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, *Bartolomé de las Casas, A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, and *Bernal Díaz, The Conquest of New Spain*. *The Broken Spears* and *Las Casas* each provide a counter-perspective to Cortés, the former from native accounts of the conquest and the latter from a Spaniard who struggled to put an end to other Spaniards’ abuses of the Indians.<sup>6</sup>

These juxtapositions do not always have the desired effect. Oftentimes students seem to take sides, frequently with *Las Casas*, with a tendency to apply insufficient critical scrutiny to even the most outrageous of his assertions, such as when he

---

<sup>4</sup> Hernán Cortés, Anthony Pagden, and J. H. Elliott, *Letters from Mexico* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2001), 208, 249, 253.

<sup>5</sup> For example, remarking on Cortés’s estimate of Spanish losses at the battle of Cintla, Anthony Pagden notes that “Cortés always underestimates the number of the dead and wounded.” (*Letters*, 455n).

<sup>6</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007); J. M. Cohen and Christopher Columbus, *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); Bartolomé de las Casas and Nigel Griffin, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (London: Penguin Books, 2004); Bernal Díaz del Castillo and J. M. Cohen, *The Conquest of New Spain* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963).

wrote that the conquistador of Guatemala (Pedro de Alvarado) never provided food for his native allies, and instead “gave them leave to eat the prisoners they took, thus setting the royal approval on the establishment . . . of a human abattoir where he himself would preside over the slaughter and grilling of children.”<sup>7</sup> Given Las Casas’s cause, that is, the defense of the rights of Indians, his use of hyperbole is easily excused, but it presents a problem when modern students may be predisposed to accept everything he wrote in the most literal sense.

While many students read Las Casas unquestioningly, others do the same with Cortés’s letters. Whatever shortcomings Cortés’s may have had as a literary stylist, his persuasive abilities were exceptional. Bernal Díaz alluded to this repeatedly, as, for example, when he described a speech given by Cortés to his men shortly before they departed the Gulf coast for the interior of Mexico. According to Díaz this was a fine speech with “an eloquence, and other honeyed words that I have not included here.”<sup>8</sup> And for all Díaz’s protestations in his *historia* of the unfair treatment Cortés gave to some of the Spaniards whom Díaz deemed to be deserving of greater consideration (usually including Díaz himself), in the end Díaz also seems to have succumbed to the attraction of Cortés’s personality. Likewise I have found students in my Conquest of Mexico course to be susceptible to this persuasiveness. This semester a student wrote the following for an assignment on Cortés’s first and second letters:

After reading though a good portion of this course’s material most of which has topics relating to war, torture and slavery, it is a relief to read about encounters that involve something of a more peaceful tone. As in other readings from this course there still remain portions of violence within these expeditions but it is surprisingly low in frequency and mild in brutality compared to previous reads. On top of this there is even some hostile behavior from the natives towards the explorers as opposed to the usual opposite. Instead of the invaders immediately showing aggression towards the natives they seemed to make it a point to treat them as equals for the purposes of knowledge and trade for a time.<sup>9</sup>

Another student initially taken in by Cortés commented that

many of the encounters between Cortés and his men with the Indians were not peaceful. In Cortés’s letters to his ruler, the Indians are being portrayed as being the instigators of the fighting and the Spanish seemingly fighting back only to defend themselves. From just trying to trade or trying to get provisions

---

<sup>7</sup> Díaz, *A Short Account*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1998), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Online student discussion forum in LAH 4431, Conquest and Colonization of Mexico, Florida Gulf Coast University, spring semester 2015.

for themselves or trying to trade for some gold, [these encounters] . . . ended in violence.<sup>10</sup>

So while the writings of both Las Casas and Cortés can bring valuable insight, the tendency to take either one of them too literally has to be worked out in classroom discussion.

Not all students are concerned with assigning blame in their comments, and it is gratifying when they find something else to take away from the reading, such as this student who wrote that

Cortés talks about how the natives of Cozumel to Yucatan all varied from region to region. He (Cortés) is horrified by their body modifications, like using piercings as tools to stretch their lips. Reading this account shows me that the Spaniards did not see the indigenous people like humans, but more like an interesting new species of animal they found in the new land.<sup>11</sup>

These are some of the considerations I bring to classroom discussions of the first three of the five letters Cortés wrote to King Charles V during the conquest of Mexico. The first letter was written upon the founding of the municipality of Veracruz, ostensibly by the newly appointed town council, although it was almost certainly written by Cortés himself in their names, or at the very least, it was written under his close direction. This letter is traditionally referred to as Cortés's first letter (the letter Cortés himself identifies as the first letter he sent to Charles has never been found),<sup>12</sup> and it lays the groundwork for a legal defense of Cortés's defiance of the earlier revocation of his license to proceed with the expedition. Thus the first letter is important for making students aware of the polemical and legalistic purposes of Cortés's writing. His attempts to win Charles's approval for his unauthorized actions through maneuvers and arguments is probably the single most important thing students can take away from this letter.

The second and third letters are important for maintaining the integrity of the narrative, which is an important feature when using Cortés as a primary source in this course. His letters offer the only narrative of these events actually written at the time of the conquest, and thus bring an immediacy to the events that is almost unmatched. Furthermore, the third letter continues the narrative through the events of the siege of Tenochtitlan and the surrender of Cuauhtemoc, the last native ruler of the Aztec seat of imperial power in Central Mexico. The fall of Tenochtitlan is

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> A document recently published in John Frederick Schwaller and Helen Nader, *The First Letter from New Spain: The Lost Petition of Cortés and his Company, June 20, 1519* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), predates the letter written by the town council. The document published by Schwaller and Nader is an enormously important historical artifact of the conquest of Mexico, but it is not the so-called lost first letter to which Cortés makes reference in his second letter (Cortés, Pagden, and Elliott, *Letters*, 48), nor do Schwaller and Nader present it as such. It is a petition to Charles from the town council requesting recognition of Veracruz as a legally-founded Spanish municipality.

more of a turning point in the process leading to Spanish subjugation of Central Mexico than any other single event, and thus it is the logical closing to the narrative, despite the fact that the Spanish conquest continued for some time beyond it.

In my classroom use of Cortés's letters I have found that the length of the second and third letters produces a temptation for students to read these less thoroughly than they should. Students also tend to cut their reading load by ignoring Pagden's insightful end note annotations and embellishments, and glossing over or even omitting to read the important introductory essays by Pagden and by J.H. Elliott. To address the first two of these problems I assign the reading in short segments that feel manageable to students. To address the third problem, my classroom discussions incorporate as much of the material from the introductory essays as possible.

Having used Cortés's first three letters many times in the classroom, I am convinced of their value as a primary source, despite their carefully calculated characteristics as instruments to win the favor of Charles V. It is not necessarily difficult for students to understand the limitations of such an overtly biased work if it is carefully examined in the classroom, particularly when used in conjunction with *The Broken Spears*, and Las Casas's *Brief Account*. The contradictions among these sources can readily be reconciled in the classroom, and secondary readings such as Hassig, Restall, and Townsend can also be assigned in order to develop students' critical perspectives of the primary sources.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Camilla Townsend, "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico" *The American Historical Review* 108:3, 659-687. For a brief but informative overview of recent historiographical developments in conquest history, see Restall, "The New Conquest History," *History Compass* 10 (2012): 151-160, doi: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2011.00822.x.