

Thought Paper for H21 – 2019 – Maryanne Rhett

In high school chemistry we learn about the Bohr atom model. This is the one everyone probably thinks of when they think about an atom; a nucleus of protons and neutrons around which zoom electrons in neat (knowable) orbits. For understanding Chemistry, at the high school level, this makes sense. When we go off to college we are challenged, however, to break with that model, and revise our understanding of the atom and begin to see it through Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Here we no longer have a neat model we can doodle on our notebooks, we have instead, a mathematical equation and the *uncertainty* created by not knowing the speed and location of an electron at the same time.

In a similar vein, when we go from high school literature to college literature we do something equally revolutionary. In general we are taught a simple way of reading literature in high school, taking the narrative more or less at face value and delving little into the context or author's background. When we reach college we are given the tools to *deconstruct* the novel. We learn about the author's background, the historical context, and the history of allusions and symbols which informed the author's writing and the audience's reading.

In history, all too often we do not make the transition that is made between high school chemistry and freshman level chemistry, or between high school literature and freshman level literature. We tend to save *deconstruction* and *uncertainty* for later in the student's college career. Too often introduction to history at the college level is a repetition of the type of class we had in high school. We, the professors, try, on average, to give them more *gritty* material, but the narrative structure, especially in an introduction to World History class really does not deviate much from that of high school. Reliance on textbooks and the very nature of so many World history classes being taught by contingent faculty (who ask likely as not have only just learned they are teaching the class) means that all of the problems with 'great man' narratives and a lack of diversity are redoubled.

It seems to me that we have to throw out all of the models that rely on textbooks and traditional narratives. We need to do like chemistry and literature and offer uncertainty and deconstruction as they enter the college setting, but at the same time we need to reassure our students that this form of historical engagement will benefit them and allow them to transgress disciplinary boundaries in helpful, tangible ways.

We have, in some ways, a steep road to climb. If there is anything students generally bring to our intro level classrooms, it is likely resentment or frustration. They feel they *have* to be there, and perhaps more importantly, that we don't trust them. We need to trust them. The traditional model of the freshman history indicates a lack of trust on the part of the faculty. "You're not ready to be given adult/real history yet." This point is even more notable in classrooms with high percentages of non-traditional students. Our intro level classroom dynamics are changing, but on the whole our curriculum isn't.

The Michigan State University History 101 approach appears to break with the traditional model in really tangible, attainable, and sustainable ways. I like the idea of introducing students to history at the college level, not as another pulled-from-the-textbook-progressive/linear-narrative, but as one that teaches the historian's craft. The MSU approach breaks down the course into a "long-form answer to the question

‘What is history?’” Focusing on ‘foundations,’ ‘the modern discipline,’ ‘outside the book,’ and ‘history of the present,’ the course is not our grandparents History 101 class.¹

While the energy of trying something new can be tantalizing, I would ask us to consider how we can implement such a sweeping change in our schools, especially those of us teaching at smaller institutions. How do we convince the textbook diehards to, what must feel like to them, step off into the abyss? An approach that asks students to understand the relevance of history to their own lives will not likely be a hard sell to administrations, but selling it to our colleagues who fear seeing students graduate with having never read Plato maybe another thing. Perhaps the potential of the MSU model as sustainable, not only as a flexible course that can evolve over time, but as one that will sustain the love of teaching for faculty, will be one of its biggest selling points.

¹ <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2018/history-101-what-it-is-and-why-we-need-it-now>