The Research-Teaching Connection: Calvinist Preparation and the Graduate Realm

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The notion of Calvinist preparation may be an appropriate metaphor for graduate study and teaching of research in sport history. For the student, graduate work is perhaps comparable to the conversion phase in the life of the Calvinist. It is a beginning, an entry into the questions and methods of sport history. For the instructor, the teaching of graduate students is probably a post-conversion phase, but one tempered by the certain uncertainty, or the uncertain certainty, of that conversion. Just as did the Calvinists, both student and instructor face a number of often unsettling, sometimes mortifying "particular preparations. " These experiences involve the ongoing efforts to raise and resolve doubt, the ongoing efforts to discover in order to learn. For both student and instructor, the outcome of these experiences may be similar to that experienced by the Calvinists after they had completed the fasts, the prayers, and the public confessions. Graduate preparation may leave everybody in doubt, not about salvation of course, but about the nature of historical research and writing and about whether we can learn or teach historical research.

Graduate research work focuses upon three primary and interrelated elements. When combined, these may enable the student to do the "work" of the historian, to probe the contexts of the past. The first and perhaps most fundamental of these elements is that of the question, the lifeblood of the historian. One derives "good" questions via a conceptual engagement, by mediating one's background and abilities, the literature (from history and related disciplines), and the sources. As the student proposes, and culls, questions, he or she clearly anticipates the evidence, the "everything made or recalled" about the past. Most books about historical "method" provide some particular anticipatory preparations for working with evidence, but they often slight the truly thorny problems that a student, and the instructor, must face: the questions of what evidence *is* and of what source *is evidence.* Neither of these is a problem that one can treat lightly or ignore. What one thinks about the evidence affects essentially everything else that he or she does.

After one has interrogated the evidence, the student may think that he or she can begin to write. But there may be a helfpful, transitional preparation between the questioning of evidence and the final writing that instructors can present to students. This is a kind of pre-writing, "making sense" operation. Its object is to insure that a student knows precisely what his or her conceptual whole - what we more commonly identify as a full description, a theme, an argument - is. Unless one's thinking about the evidence is complete and substantial before one begins the final writing, the student may find that writing is either difficult or unsatisfying. This is so, of course, because writing is thinking, and this transitional, objectifying of thought preparation provides a test for the adequacy of that thought. Once one's thought is complete and substantial, then a student can begin the final particular preparation, the composition.

A consideration of what is “good” writing both completes and typifies the circle of work in and doubts about the graduate realm. On the one hand, as instructors, we impart particular grammatical and syntactical “rules” or expectations that guide the making of the “good” composition, rules that derive from a test of historical adequacy. On the other hand, however, the application of such rules and other conventions does not insure that a graduate student’s writing will be universally recognized as “good”. In fact, beyond a few rules and the vague qualities of clarity, simplicity, and aesthetic pleasure, historians do not have a consensual definition of good writing. Despite conventions for writing, in other words, *good writing* remains nebulous; it remains as contingent as is evidence on the individual historian’s theoretical constructs that give even such words as “good” their meaning. And is precisely because of the contingent nature of all that the historian does - as well as of historical “truth” -that I question whether we can teach and whether students can learn to “do” historical research and writing. There is nothing absolute in what the historian does; and perhaps all we can help students to do is to search for the possibilities for questions, evidence, and writing, possibilities that may eventually lead to other questions and to other doubts.