

The Strange Case of Undergraduate Narcolepsy: Or Research That Didn't Belong in the Classroom

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Efforts to bring results of recent research into the classroom can be effective, as student responses sharpen the research agenda and as students feel themselves a part of the discovery process. Still, potential pitfalls are numerous; and special attention to the methods suitable for each specific audience is in order. For example, some kinds of books are less accessible to students lacking a certain breadth of experience or background in readings - cultural and especially intellectual history may illustrate this. Choosing the

right books is, in effect, a matter of choosing the right body of “past research” for the students’ attention. Perhaps research of too narrow or too elaborate a nature does not belong in the classroom.

Keys to determining which research belongs include: the problem of limited “attention span” among too many students; the need to execute careful “market study” and study profile analysis; the question of whether the depth of the research to be used is based on the instructor’s curiosity (or convenience) or on the students’ needs; the issue of how well the objectives of the course are defined and how reasonable the goals are in relation to the “entry level” of the students.

Such tests apply not only to the selection of readings but to the structuring of the course itself and the determination of what methods to use in carrying it out. Personal experience can be used without lapsing into egotism; talking in a matter-of-fact way about one’s historically pertinent experience can enhance curiosity and credibility. Special guests who have made sport history rather than taught it can also become “living history” sources in the classroom. Videotaped presentations may also work well, enjoying more “immediacy” than films. Such methods respond to the popular fixation on celebrity. In addition, other items from the popular culture used as the building blocks or research by cultural historians of sport - such as songs, films, equipment, and many other things-can shape the content of lectures in a major way. In an increasingly non-verbal culture, the essentially non-verbal medium of sport may be well appreciated by means other than words. Another teaching device which fosters the use of research is what might be called “history lab” -such as the testing of old training regimens or past “training table” diets, experimenting with old training devices and medical gear (such as those using mild electrical current), and playing certain sports under their original rules or with equipment in something closer to its original form.

The final choice of what to do and how to teach - how much of one’s own or others’ research clearly shapes a course - must depend on what one hopes to accomplish, what kind of students one may have to work with, and what limits on resources one must contend with. If one occasionally misjudges the appropriate amount and kind of research to use in a course, it is most advantageous to discuss these failures openly with the students and to adopt a functionalist and candid approach. This final lesson to them may then be the most valuable one of all - that honesty is not only the best policy but the best history.



Bill Baker spoke about Jesse Owens in his John Betts Lecture.