

“Uncoverage’ in History Survey Courses,” at *Teachinghistory.org*, Issues and Research, Research Briefs

The emphasis in survey courses is on "coverage"—trying to get through vast quantities of material. This can create routines which, according to [Lendol Calder](#), rarely lead students to develop skills as historical readers, writers, and thinkers. As one of the study participants put it, in history survey courses you listen to a lecture, then you read a textbook, then you take a test. And then you do it all over again. Many teachers, however, acknowledge that covering everything is an impossible goal. But if "coverage" is not the aim of survey courses, then what is?

In this [article](#) from the *Journal of American History*, Calder argues for a new way of teaching these courses. Too often, history survey courses focus only on "what happened," without stopping to consider the work that historians do or to inquire into the writing and reading of history. Calder argues that "uncoverage" (a term used by [Grant Wiggins](#) and [Jay McTighe](#) to describe a way to delve into content instead of just covering it) is naturally suited to history, which is about inquiry, argument, and point of view, and often uses incomplete evidence to construct reasonable stories about the past. Calder claims that plowing through piles of historical facts actually prevents students from connecting with the disciplinary work of history. By emulating the work of historians, students actually retain content better, because they are more engaged in the process of learning and absorbing information.

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Although the article focuses on college-level courses, the uncoverage concept could apply just as well to middle- and high-school classes, which are almost always taught as survey courses.

Framing the Course

Calder begins by asking students to consider reasons for studying history, the problems that arise in the pursuit of historical knowledge, and the stories and patterns from the past. After explaining the nature of "doing history," Calder explains that the class will be focusing on particular "problem areas" from the American past such as "Origins of the Cold War" and "1980s Culture Wars." For each problem area, Calder identifies six historical skills students can develop: questioning, connecting, sourcing, making inferences, considering alternate perspectives, and recognizing limits to one’s knowledge. At the heart of his approach are three modes of inquiry that students should learn to employ: the visual, the critical, and the moral.

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Visual Inquiry

Calder tackles each problem area with a visual inquiry into the period. Through films that focus on historical topics and create an environment rich in information, students can become engaged and begin to ask historical questions. This approach "uncovers" the way historians choose topics to focus on, based on what they find interesting or have questions about.

Critical Inquiry

Next, Calder has his students engage in critically examining the problem area. In a structured history workshop, students examine primary documents and construct interpretations about the period. During this phase, Calder emphasizes questioning what doesn’t make sense, drawing connections to prior knowledge, making inferences, and considering alternate perspectives.

Moral Inquiry

Finally, Calder leads his students into what he calls "a moral inquiry" of the problem area. By this time students are primed to begin reading opinionated secondary sources that seem to "pick a side" in the history they tell. Particularly useful are provocative texts that prompt students to consider how *they* would think or write about interpretations of the past.

In the Classroom

- If you teach a survey class, it's time to take a step back. Don't worry about what you need to "cover." Instead, think about what you want to teach.
- Consider which overarching history lessons students need to know. Ask your students questions like "What is the story of American history?" and "How and why have freedoms expanded (or contracted) over time?"
- Next, consider the skills you want your students to acquire. Calder hoped his students would gain an understanding of how historians do their work. Perhaps you want students to conduct a conversation about how history is written. Or maybe your students could develop concrete skills such as using evidence to support their claims.
- Once you've decided on your ultimate aims, consider what units of instruction would promote them. You'll still be covering content, of course, but in the service of setting bigger goals for your students.
- Leaving out material is hard. But remember, no one can teach everything. Using the "uncoverage" approach, you can explain to students why you're teaching what you're teaching.

Sample Application

Instead of asking them to memorize textbook pages or lecture notes, Calder presents his students with big questions about American history, such as:

- What is the story of American history?
- Who are Americans?
- What have we accomplished?
- How do we judge what we have done?
- Are things getting better or worse, or are generalized statements like these possible to believe in the first place?

From there Calder asks questions about the process of "doing" history:

- How do historians know what they claim to know?
- Why would we want to think the way historians think?

Calder is asking his students to think about *why* and *how* they are studying history. These questions about purpose and process are at the heart of "uncovering" history.

For more information : Lendol Calder, with the assistance of Melissa Beaver, created a [website](#) to accompany his JAH article. Visit to explore his ideas in greater depth.

Bibliography: Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History*, volume 92, no. 4 (March 2006), pp. 1358-1369.
<http://jah.oxfordjournals.org/content/92/4/1358.full>.