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The Rise and Fall of Ancient Civilization

PAUL W. EISENHAURE

The torn and faded pages of man's past chapters are the special realm of historians and philosophers: Historians tell us that great and complex cultures, often built in spite of extreme adversity, at some point were unable to maintain themselves and vanished; philosophers have drawn from these facts moral lessons which, Santayana says, mankind is doomed to relive lest they are remembered. With these things in mind, I begin a personal account of the rise and fall of ancient civilization as I witnessed it.

Torn and Faded Pages

The early 1970s constituted a time of great turmoil and confusion in our nation's schools. Things which had begun happening in the universities several years earlier had reached the high schools by then and were tearing them apart. Walkouts, fights, riots, and constantly-ringing fire alarms led to a near total loss of control, especially in the more difficult city schools. The chaos there was accelerated by the loss of experienced personnel who resigned, retired, or transferred to safer locations. With their loss, aspects of the bureaucratic supply system went unattended, producing shortages of books, paper, and other supplies. Less experienced administrators and staff had to cope with each other while trying to cope with the crisis. In one urban school—let us call it “City High”—there was a one-third turnover in personnel in the early 1970s. That these factors made teaching a near impossibility I know only too well, for during that time I began teaching history at City High.

I committed my share of mistakes in facing the problems at City High, and I gradually learned from them. The situation became even more difficult because an assignment policy frequently thrust teachers into courses for which they were not specifically prepared to teach. In my case, this practice meant teaching two sections of ninth-grade ancient civilization.

As an ancient civilization teacher I left much to be desired, for I possessed only a vague and general knowledge of that epoch, half remembered from my own freshman world history classes in high school and college. But I was low man in the department, and that fact decreed that I should accept the orphans—the courses nobody else wanted. And ancient civilization, even for an orphan, was unloved. So I adopted it, gave it the attention it required, and over the years it became something of a prodigal—or, to use a more exact comparison, it was like a Phoenix reborn amid the fiery times at City High.

The course began attracting attention in the school, and I was not shy about discussing it with interested persons. It gained a general reputation for excellence. My department head continually praised the course. The principal often marveled at the presentation, brought visitors regularly to see my room and my classes, and once introduced me to a local newsman

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as "the best ancient civilization teacher in the city." Perhaps the true sign of success was that an increasing number of students began saving their notebooks after completing the course.

It may be hard to understand, therefore, why this year there is no ancient civilization course at City High. Probably, there will never be one again. The materials and equipment are in boxes literally and figuratively collecting dust. Books are stacked in closets. Maps stand unused. Folders and ring notebooks filled with assignment sheets, transparencies, and readings occupy space in drawers. Occasionally, former students of mine will wander into my classroom to ask how I am and inquire how ancient civilization is coming this year. When I tell them that the course has been eliminated, they look astonished and ask, "Why?"

The Phoenix

Ancient civilization was an orphan because it was not considered relevant by the academic community. Certainly, some colleagues in my department preferred teaching classes dealing directly with current social issues. This general attitude notwithstanding, it became my conviction that ancient civilization was more relevant to the needs of students at City High than almost any other course offered there.

The average student at City High entered with a complete set of non-negotiable hostilities absorbed from the narrow world in which he lived but without facts and skills to make possible a reasoned discussion of these attitudes. The unfamiliar situations presented in ancient civilization, however, developed basic concepts and raised questions of rights and social needs without first having to overcome the student's deeply passionate prejudices. For students unable to read maps or describe a country, and who referred to governments as "he," it was an obvious chance to begin at the beginning. And just as important was the potential appeal of the bizarre and exotic ancient world, spiced here and there with things unexpectedly familiar. The same threads run through ancient civilization as run through the best adventure yarns and can be woven prominently into the fabric of the course.

The course I was handed, however, although long established at the school, came with nothing—not even a textbook. Therefore, I spent my time and money creating slides, transparencies, and replicas, devising readings, charts, time-lines, and homework questions. Most assignments I arranged as part of a cumulative series, each one leading to the next, slowly building skills and information. The continual shift in activity had to compensate for the students' short attention spans without being confusing, so, every assignment had to fit in a set routine. Every item I designed to fit a particular need and a particular place. Some I developed because they helped to explain a historical fact or problem, but most simultaneously compensated for some idiosyncrasy of my students or the school. All kinds of textbooks, for example, were difficult to carry home, and no system existed for returning them or replacing lost ones. Many students understood this problem and scribbled on or tore out pages, hid books or simply threw them away to avoid doing assignments. So, in ancient civilization, I found ways for student notebooks to serve the same purposes as a textbook. I expected students to replace their own lost notebooks and the work they contained. Those who lost notebooks, unlike those who lost textbooks, learned a valuable lesson in the exercise of care and responsibility at little expense to the taxpayer. And in a school where absenteeism totaled about one-third of the students per day, having to turn in a completed notebook each week placed a premium on good attendance.

Illusion and Reality

Earlier I spoke of ancient civilization as being a Phoenix and the times at City High as being

fiery. The times were, indeed, fiery, but not all the fire came from students. Much of it resulted from the way the school was managed: classes were interrupted continually with announcements; classes were called off at the last minute or cut in two to allow time for assemblies planned in advance but not announced; students' programs were always being changed so that oriented students were replaced with bewildered newcomers; sometimes in the middle of a term, one's entire class would be transferred to someone else in trade for theirs to meet some arbitrary numerical criteria; sometimes our supplies of paper arrived weeks or months late; my room was 75 to 80 degrees in the winter *with the windows open* because the maintenance department did not think it worthwhile to fix the thermostats even during the oil crisis (the principal rebuffed my complaints, telling me that City High was not a hotel!).

Such poisoned arrows as these claimed their toll of the structure and continuity I sought to establish in my classes. But the greatest threat of all proved to be the trendy winds of change blowing willy-nilly through education's drafty halls. At times, they reached hurricane strength as they funneled through the narrow minds at the top, cutting wide swaths through the curriculum, and sweeping along with them those in the way. Continual field trips, special outside programs, special inside programs, flexible or rotating schedules, block scheduling and clusters, open electives, mini-courses, and back-to-basics were some of the major gusts that struck during the seven years I worked building ancient civilization. Their impacts were seldom complimentary and frequently contradicted one another. In their wakes they left liaisons, councils, directors, coordinators, committees, evaluation teams, and the like bureaucratic paraphernalia which invested each with varying degrees of after-life in which to spend federal, state, and local money, time, and considerable energy long after the fads which produced them had passed. Off in the corner, sheltered mostly by its obscurity, ancient civilization weathered them all except the last—back-to-basics. Of all those competing impulses, it seems ironic that back-to-basics should be ancient civilization's undoing—but then things are not always what they seem.

Somewhere in the middle of all these wakes, court-ordered desegregation began in our city. No jobs could be filled, no personnel promoted or transferred except under the direction of the court and the community groups it set up. New school district lines were ordered which means several massive shifts of students. The confusion fanned the smoldering embers of the other long-standing crises into flames which burned as never before, fueled by racial confrontations. At one of our high schools the conflagration blazed so that the court assumed control and managed the school directly. If a school flared up, the glare upon its leadership, if caught in the wrong stance, could cast long shadows on their careers. City High administrators seemed more anxious than usual to just follow orders. The best way to escape the heat, however, was to hop aboard bandwagons—that is, to do things no one could think of criticizing. Back-to-basics via reading courses became one of them.

For years, average reading scores of our students remained two years below grade level. Usually, we found one or two almost totally illiterate students in each freshman class and some in higher ones. Naturally, progress in courses depending on written materials suffered because of proofreading habits. Every teacher had to cope with the problem. The sentence by sentence analysis of the outline in ancient civilization functioned as a method of coping, although I did not intend that basically. Certainly the emphasis on vocabulary addressed the need directly. But, to confront the reading problem more fully, each year I also devoted over five weeks out of the middle of the course to reading *A Day in Old Athens* by William Stearns Davis (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1966), a gem of a book I found stacked in the bookroom. I do not know how this reading may have affected my students' average reading scores: I suspect it improved

their reading about as much as it improved their knowledge of history—a reasonable but hardly dramatic amount.

When the head of our history department retired, the most senior history teacher was named by the principal to replace her temporarily (three years, as it turned out). In spring 1977, the temporary department head told me that the principal planned to give all ninth-graders reading courses funded by a federal grant starting the next year. But he said that he thought he could work out a compromise to allow better readers still to enroll in ancient civilization. The catch was that it would have to be entitled a reading course, although I would teach it exactly as I had been doing. I was not at all happy about the charade and said so. Moreover, I declared my intention to ask the principal for written confirmation that I might teach history in a course entitled “reading.” My temporary department head angrily told me that the principal would abandon the compromise if I harassed him that way. If the compromise failed and ancient civilization was eliminated, he told me that it would mean the loss of one or two teachers and named the junior members of the department I would be “firing.” Uneasily, I acquiesced.

When I returned in the fall, two surprises awaited me. First, besides the compromise reading-history course, I was assigned also to teach developmental reading. I had no training or materials, and the students I received offered extreme reading deficiencies. At first, the principal told me just to teach them history, too. But, mostly through my efforts, a trade was arranged with a more qualified teacher and the problem was resolved from my point of view.

The second surprise was that the “new” reading-history course met only four times a week instead of five. That meant a loss of 20 percent of the year and, for a highly integrated course with sequential exercises, that meant extensive reorganization. It was like telling a poet to drop a few lines here and there from his poem. Ironically, the most logical thing to do, now that ancient civilization was a reading course, was to drop its only book, *A Day in Old Athens*. The book represented a large block of time and its elimination did the least damage to the progression of materials and concepts around it. But even this step was not enough. I was still short of time.

The Swan

The next most feasible thing to do to gain time was to turn more of the course into homework. But how? There was no reasonable book and not enough of any book at all. Besides, according to my experience, superficial inspection of reading assignments produced a flock of phony answers to homework questions. With uncertainty, I settled on outlining as the answer. I knew no one could fake an outline, and at the same time I knew that outlining was a useful but difficult art none of my students understood. I faced the following questions in this decision: (1) could I equip students with credible outlining skills, and (2) would the time eventually saved with outlining justify the time spent in teaching it? Without wanting to make the decision seem more dramatic than necessary, it was a gamble. But the gamble eventually paid. The success rate was virtually 100 percent and I was able to finish the year by writing part of each week’s work as an easily-outlined essay. In this way ancient civilization, sans *A Day in Old Athens*, survived intact that year. But as the year wore on I recognized indications that this year would be its swan’s song.

A month or more into the year a new department head finally was appointed who came from another high school and, therefore, knew little of the specific problems and procedures in our building. Furthermore, upon arrival, the new department head, the only minority administrator in a building of primarily minority students, was appointed in charge of discipline rather than of the history department—those duties were retained by the former temporary head.

Under this peculiar arrangement, the person managing the department had no actual power and vague responsibilities, while the actual power rested in the hands of a person with a largely ceremonial involvement in the department. I do not recall that the new department head ever visited my class or discussed ancient civilization with me. But the new department head planned the history offerings for the following year with the principal. Around this secret conclave rumors flew but remained unsubstantiated until the student program forms were distributed near the end of the year.

The first notable feature about the new programs was that they included no study periods and no electives for ninth graders. The second feature was that, although the number of required courses had increased considerably, ancient civilization was not among them. The reason was close at hand—just as English had mitotically produced developmental reading, mathematics had now spawned developmental math, and all four were now required freshmen courses. Math was another area in which standardized tests were given and, predictably, those scores were low as well. The back-to-basics bandwagon had struck again! But what had happened to our basic history course? Finally, upon glancing down toward the bottom of the page, I found ancient civilization sandwiched in with a little group including drums, art I, and theater arts—oddly labeled “electives.”

When the next year began without any ancient civilization at all I sought the reason for its cancellation from the principal, who in reply solemnly wrote:

As you stated ancient civilization has been eliminated from our curriculum. However, I regret to inform you, only two students chose ancient civilization as an elective. . . . Ancient civilization therefore was eliminated not only because of a perceived need on the part of the school administration for more basic courses, but because of a general lack of interest on the part of the incoming student body.

Who could argue with logic like that? Yes, ancient civilization had been made an elective for students who could not take electives (the two who did must have been repeaters). That no one elected it proved it unnecessary. And this proof amply justified replacing it with developmental math. With that, let me add but one small postscript to this bizarre tale: I have been assigned to teach developmental math and to do so without any materials for the first term and only a workbook thereafter. So ends my account of the decline of ancient civilization at City High.

Epilogue

In the opening passages I suggested that this narrative would describe the creative and destructive forces which have acted on civilization. Now I wish to reintroduce that idea because what I have described is a microcosm of the process going on all across the city. To a greater or lesser extent across the city, the thought and determination needed to address the city's classroom problems are sacrificed for money, expediency, and appearance. I have seen this process nurture in my students cynicism for the school, for the value of education, and for the society it represents. And fifteen cities larger than this one contain schools under more or less the same pressures and, no doubt, operating with much the same result. What is it, then, that Santayana would wish us to remember? What lessons have I found?

For me the main and inescapable lesson is that too much goes on in our schools. Yes, too much! Too much federal, state, and local money multiplying the special tangential programs until nobody can figure out what a high school education is supposed to be. Too much advice from too many groups with authority over the schools, making a consensus of action impossible. Too much bureaucracy resulting from groups and programs, postponing even simple decisions for months and years, rendering it nearly impossible to follow what is being

done and who is responsible. Too much pressure and opportunity in the bureaucracy on teachers to escape from the frustration and increasing aimlessness of classroom teaching. Too much emphasis on pleasing interest groups without any actual concern for students. Too much change in general, making long-range planning impossible and the rest discouraging.

So our schools fill with clutter and chaos in the name of diversity, and waywardness masquerades as flexibility. Although these differences have become clear and the results obvious, it is not likely to make much difference in the way schools are run because in the world of public education success and advancement for educators are not determined by the amount of student learning occurring but by innovations listed on one's resume. We reward educators not for educating but for merely documenting their plausible attempts. The first and foremost concern of the administrators I have worked with is to be covered—to give the appearance of having done what was required. Most teachers I know covet nonteaching assignments. Smothered under increasing regulations and responsibilities, this generation of burned-out teachers and administrators have retreated into an unreal world of jargon, committees, and phony courses which displace genuine education today.

In my judgment, the single most effective remedy would be direct accountability from teachers and especially administrators for student progress, fairly and objectively measured. Until job tenure, pay raises, or promotion tie to student improvement, the school will continue to act out empty charades and perform rituals bearing marginal or no relationship to students' needs. Until those in charge hold an overwhelming stake in student performance, these aberrations will continue and, in our schools, more of our culture will fade away like ancient civilization.