

Michael DiClemente

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Historical Thinking: Perspectives on Teaching History in the Secondary Education Classroom

I would like to start by saying I truly appreciate the opportunity to be back at the History Graduate Student Association Conference. I presented here two years ago and was also serving as the Treasurer of the HGSA. At that time I was finishing my master's degree. I received an excellent education here, and I am glad to see the program flourishing. I was accepted to a Ph.D. program but with a young family and a desire to start working I started teaching middle school history. I love what I do and that is what brings me here today; to discuss my thoughts on what it means to teach history, define teaching students' historical thinking, and what should be done to prepare history teachers. I will also be linking my paper to the theme of the conference, Continuity and Change in Doing History, as well as the theme of the panel, A Shared Past: Public Outreach and Interaction.

“Doing” history can be interpreted in many different ways and this is due to the dynamic nature of history as a discipline. Doing history can be research, writing papers, working on a manuscript, putting final touches on a thesis, setting up a museum exhibit, being a tour guide, or teaching. In all these examples historians try to take their passion for the subject and make that clear to others. History needs an audience. Interest in history exists, if not, we would not have outlets like the History Channel. Dealing with an audience who wants to learn about history is one thing, but the ultimate in doing history is taking a group of young people who are forced to

take history courses and teach them to like it (if not love it). Middle school and high school history teachers must wade through vast amounts of material in order to put together lessons that are accessible to young people. A good teacher must not only utilize a school text but must supplement it. School books are often outdated which can be challenging to a teacher. A teacher must also be aware of new scholarship and resources that are available. Not all students will appreciate our dedication to teaching history, but they will all benefit from our diligence in staying up-to-date on both historical and educational practices. This paper serves as a challenge to history teachers to use new scholarship, sources, and resources to bring the best education and historical knowledge to our students: the historians of the future.

I come to history education not from an education background but from a history background. I have spent my fair share of time conducting historical research, and as a result, I know what goes into this type of research. I honestly feel that this is the best way to become a history teacher. Schools need teachers with an expertise in historical thinking to better serve the students. As you take your education courses you can then look at the educational theory aspect of your studies. Look for guidance from veteran teachers, because as Professor Sam Winberg states it; “History teachers must take what they know and create representations of content that engender new understandings among children who often come to school with scant motivation to learn. To do this is an intellectual achievement of the highest order- no less an achievement than arriving at a sophisticated understanding of the content one wants to teach.”

Once you are equipped with your content knowledge you can gather information on teaching history. We are fortunate nowadays because there is a plethora of information on teaching history. One great resource is Professor Sam Wineberg and his Stanford History Education Group out of Stanford University. He has written quite a bit on the subject, including;

Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past

(Philadelphia: Temple, 2001), Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High

School Classrooms (New York: TC Press, 2011), and also his group's website

<http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/teachers/>. There are also excellent resources available

through different organizations such as: American Historical Association, Society for History

Education, National Council for the Social Studies, and National Council for History Education.

So, what do students learn in a history class? New standards have defined skills that students should be learning. As of now the history standards are linked with English Language Arts standards, although the National Council for the Social Studies along with other groups has published standards that are history specific; they are the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. The new Common Core standards have been debated, and there are many people against them but for now these are the standards we must follow. With that there are also the Massachusetts Frameworks which lays out the themes history teachers must be covering. Although this may seem daunting there is a lot of flexibility for teachers to create a learning environment that is all their own. No one gives you lessons or tells you how to teach your class.

The beginning of the year is a great time of year to gauge your students' thoughts on history. I like to start by doing an in-class assignment called "What is History?" This way I can find out if the students understand what history is as a subject. We also talk about what a historian is and how the study of history has changed. We also discuss how historians collect their material and compile it into a readable text, and also how this process has changed over time. In my ancient history class we talk about the great histories written by Herotodus and Thucydides and how they would not hold up in today's academic world. I usually keep this

theme going throughout the year. The students are usually interested in how we know what we know about history. It is necessary to be honest with students and teach them that much of history is filled with opinion and bias. I would like to take the opportunity to pay homage to the Italian historian, teacher, and political activist Gaetano Salvemini with a quote he made in his *Prelude to World War II* on biases in historical work: “There are certain historians and critics sincerely convinced that they are unbiased, impartial, ‘scientific,’ who reject as ‘biased’ any opinion that clashes with their own bias: they are fools endowed with a God Almighty complex. A second group consider themselves ‘unbiased’ because they understand all principles and have none themselves; opportunism is no more admirable in historiography than in daily life. Then there are the wolves in sheep’s clothing- the propaganda agents who boast of their lack of bias. Finally, there are those who frankly admit their bias, but do their utmost to avoid being blinded or side-tracked by it. Impartiality is either a delusion of the simple-minded, a banner of the opportunist, or the boast of the dishonest. Nobody is entitled to be unbiased towards truth or falsehood. Evidence permitting definite conclusions may be lacking, but when a conclusion has been reached, there cannot be two different truths. If one statement is true, the opposite is false.”

So, what skills do students learn and practice in a history class? What is teaching “Historical thinking?” If we look beyond history as just a subject filled with facts, dates, and people we can discover the richness and depth of skills a student can learn. We teach students how to look at a text and dissect it. We teach them to look beyond the words on the page, to discover the real meaning of the people and events and how these may be linked. We teach students how to use the skills of inference and deduction to help fill in the gaps they may find. We teach students how to critically think and use their own judgment to make sound estimations as to how and why events occurred. All the while they are also learning how to discuss and write

out their ideas. In a time when 140 characters seem to be limit one one's thinking we push students to dig deep and really express themselves and their ideas.

I mentioned in the previous paragraph about showing students how people and events may be linked. At times we must explicitly reveal how these links occur. It can be especially helpful to explain things in modern terms. For instance I teach ancient history and we are now learning about ancient Greece. When we discuss how democracy was formed we talk about our own government. We look at ways Athenian democracy was similar and how it was different from our own government. When we talk about war we look at modern wars and the reasons countries go to war. If the theme seems relevant to the students they are more apt to engage in the lesson. Once a week we have an enrichment period. I have some of the more advanced students and we have been talking about persuasive arguments and oratory skills, and how they relate to politics in ancient Greece. The lesson is for them to persuasively argue a topic, but instead of using a topic from ancient Greece I had them make a list of ideas and then we created a class list. My intention was to set the parameters with a topic having to do with school (i.e. school uniforms), but what I got really surprised me. The class list included many school topics that I expected and have gotten in the past, but it also included gun control, cell phone use, fracking, Obamacare (student word choice), and many others that were fascinating. I explained to the students that these issues are hotly debated in the media, and we would have to downsize to two topics. They voted that I pick the finalists. I learned an important lesson; never underestimate the mind of a child. I can't wait to continue this lesson with them.

Another way to draw students into the study of history and help them learn how to make historical discoveries on their own is to use primary documents. By using primary documents you teach students how historians learn about history and you teach them that history is a subject

with discoveries still to be made; it is a living subject. It is imperative we show students that history exists outside a textbook; history is more complex than a textbook makes it seem. Historians spend much time dissecting material and making connections in order to present history. If you come to history with a passion for the subject and a respect for how it is done then this will transfer to the students. Another important aspect of using primary documents is to show how different people may draw different conclusions from the same document.

All our efforts and passion for the subject do not happen in a vacuum. Teaching history is even more complex because students are exposed to history outside the classroom. Another quote from Professor Winberg helps illustrate this point; “Though sharing the fifty-minute format with the geometry or chemistry classroom down the hall, the history classroom differs in profound ways. While discussions on solving equations with two unknowns or the foundations of Avogadro’s number may provoke teachers to ask themselves deep questions about learning and pedagogy, they rarely raise questions about what it means to be human, what it means to answer to powers that dwarf the self. Moreover, the geometry or chemistry teacher does not have to contend with cultural forces that feed young people a steady diet of images and narratives that often seek to anesthetize rather than cultivate thought. Particularly when the history classroom ventures into terrain of ‘lived history,’ events still active in social memory and kept alive by those who experienced them, the history teacher is just one voice, and often a muted voice, in a cacophonous marketplace of MTV, movies, disc jockeys, parents, neighbors, peers, and others.” Being a history teacher means that we must field questions not only about what we are learning in class but also about many topics like contemporary issues. On any given day we could be asked about Obamacare (student wording), is there going to be a World War III with Russia, what happened at the Marathon, etc. It is inevitable that these questions will pop up in any of the

Social Studies classrooms. No program prepares you on how to explain to an eleven year old the complexities of the tensions between Russia and Ukraine in a way they can understand.

This brings me to another important point. I have used both the terms “history” and “social studies.” History teachers are part of the Social Studies department and as such may be called on to teach more than just history. As I mentioned above we will answer questions about contemporary issues, and will be called on to teach classes on this subject. We may also be expected to teach not only one of the history courses, but sociology, economics, law, and psychology. Nothing can prepare someone to have an expertise in all these subjects but a more general training will be helpful. In fact, teaching ancient history in middle school has changed my overall thinking of history. I have begun to look at the connections across large timeframes. I am expected to cover about 4,000 years of history in a school year, so I must help the students make connections as to how and why we look at this particular period. Again from Wineberg; “The history classroom needs generalists, not people who can illuminate a single corner of our past. The explosion of new types of historical research has imperiled our ability to provide a ‘big picture’ of the American past. A spirit of ‘every man his own specialist’ has led to the fragmentation of knowledge and spawned legions of brick-makers with no builders in sight.” This quote is fitting because I know when I was working on my thesis my focus was so fixed that I missed the bigger picture, the bigger connection. This was of course my fault, in that I wanted to study what I found interesting, but as someone who would be teaching this was not the ideal preparation. So I spend much of my free time broadening my horizons, which I enjoy. I would suggest that if a person will be teaching he or she should spend some of his or her preparation with this in mind.

I feel I have laid my thoughts and feelings out about history, teaching history, and preparing history teachers. I am passionate both about history and teaching. Students learn all these so called twenty-first century skills in history courses, and we are even preparing our students for “college and career readiness.” The terminology for these things is always amusing to me, have we not been preparing our young people all along? Did we need those profiting from standardized tests to meet and tell us what preparing our students mean, and furthermore, tell the public they know how to test for “readiness.” And even still there are those who ask, why history? How does studying history fit into our world of testing? How do you accurately test what one has learned in a history class? Of course this is the wrong audience to explain the need to teach history and historical thinking, and also, to explain that the skills learned in history classes are invaluable. The late Paul Gagnon, who taught history at UMass Amherst and later worked with all levels of history educators and became founding dean of Arts and Sciences here at UMass Boston, spent much of his career advocating for history education. I would like to share two quotes from his article “Why Study History?:” “When students, and school boards, ask, ‘Why history? What are we supposed to be getting out of this?’ The best answer is still that one word: judgment. We demand it of all professionals: doctors, lawyers, chefs, and quarterbacks. And we need it most in the profession of citizen, which, like it or not, exercise it or not, we are all born into. Just as surely, candidates for public office need to know that a fair number of citizens possess judgment.... Judgment implies nothing less than wisdom—an even bigger word—about human nature and society.” And second; “History belongs in the school programs of all students, regardless of their academic standing and preparation, of their curricular track, or of their plans for the future. It is vital for all citizens in a democracy, because

it provides the only avenue we have to reach an understanding of ourselves and of our society, in relation to the human condition over time, and of how some things change and others continue.”

The theme of this conference is great because it is important that people get together and discuss the different ways they are “doing” history. It is even more important when we discuss it in terms of “public outreach and interaction.” In many ways we are constantly convincing people that the study of history is fundamental without compromising our historical integrity. Pop history is good as long as it draws people into learning the real history. History is a living subject; there are discoveries yet to be made and new history happening every day. There is no greater pleasure than helping a young person discover what history really is, and what they can actually get out of their history class. As educators we must not rely so much on the textbook provided by the school, but supplement this text to assist students in discovering history. In years to come my students may not remember in which year the first Olympics happened, but hopefully they will remember where our ideas of government and democracy come from. To me this is a victory, and this is why I teach.