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Why High School Teachers should teach History through and beyond Narrative

BY ALVIN L. SMITH MAY 20, 2014 HISTORY, RESEARCH, SKILLS DEVELOPMENT, TEACHING

“History” cannot be spelled, or written, without inclusion of the word “story”. The French phrase *l’histoire* – which to English speakers appears to spell out “history” – actually translates as “story” or “tale”. Purely in terms of language, it would appear that history cannot be told, or taught, without the inclusion of some kind of story or narrative.

According to sociologist James Loewen, high school students hate history simply because it’s too boring.[i] Why do some students dislike learning about history? In a 2010 survey, social scientists WB Russell & Stewart Waters determined that students consider history dull because lectures requiring rote memorization and a passive learning environment keeps them from becoming actively engaged with the topic.[ii] The ramifications of this are more than visible in present U.S. education. In the United States alone less than 25% of students perform above the proficient level in U.S. History, the lowest percentage of all tested subjects. [iii] The purpose of this post is to encourage teachers of history to rethink (if they have not already) their methodology of teaching history at high school level, and to have them consider history as a narrative. The take away by historians should be that teaching history ought not to be about dates or tedious repetition of facts but instead should tell a story about the political, economic, religious or social ramifications of events in history. Furthermore,

this passive learning environment fails to expose the students to the wonders of research.

In this post I’m going to make the case for teaching history as a narrative, that is, through a chronological, cause and effect methodology with an idea of placing the student’s imagination inside the story is the most effective way to teach history. When a narrative can be constructed, the context of historical characters’ actions, or the broader context of historical developments, can help the reader to keep events in chronological order, while understanding the broader context of the story. This encourages the student to think beyond just the single narrative and to delve deeper into what may motivate not only the characters, but the author of the narrative itself.

Teaching history as a narrative is not to support a particular version of history, but to ultimately teach how narratives are created in the first place. Students must learn to understand that multiple narratives are possible depending on the point of view of the particular scholar. This is how students begin to learn to think critically within and beyond the classroom.

Constructing Truth through Narrative

Historians, by the nature of their field and their subject matter, are limited or constrained by the evidence available to them, and the nature of that evidence. Historians writing in a narrative mode must remain cognizant of the pressures and potential arguments between their use of evidence and their use of narrative mode because historians are accountable to the truth. To quote historian Hayden White, “For the narrative historian, the historical method consists in the investigation of the documents in order to determine what is the true or most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence. A true narrative account, on this view, is not so much a product of the historian’s poetic talents, as the narrative account of imaginary events is conceived to be, as a necessary result of a proper application of historical method.”[iv]

The use of history as narrative in the educational field has not been universally accepted as a valid or appropriate method. Both historians and history educators, continue to argue whether history should contain – or be based on – a narrative structure that presents material chronologically. A postmodernist historian would hold that history, and historiography, cannot be simply quantified and determined as one particular narrative with one particular meaning.[v] The problem with this is that non-narrative history typically represents the larger group – the cohort or mass actor. By contrast, a narrative approach to

history-telling is more likely to focus on the individual, a character or narrator who reveals their personal experiences and perhaps their emotional responses to historical events and dilemmas. Students of history can commonly relate more easily to the individual, with whom they may be able to identify common experiences or emotions.

Why we should teach History as Narrative

1. History as narrative is a most effective educational tool when students are enabled to switch between engaging with the narrative itself and building critical understanding of how it is constructed as a piece of historical material. The narrative itself is often accessible and engaging for the individual student or student group; however, the educator should make sure that students are equipped with the critical thinking skills to interrogate and assess the narrative and its function. At the high school level, students should be equipped and enabled to “think like historians” in their interactions with historical narratives. This entails interrogating the evidence presented in the narrative, assessing any narrator bias, omission or fictional filling-in of the narrative.

2. By encouraging students to think beyond the narrative in class they learn to understand that a single story may not be representative of broad historical experience in the era or situation depicted. Providing students with multiple narratives from different perspectives, and different opinions or moral approaches to the same historical event will help contextualize the information. This gives students the opportunity to see various angles or sides of a historical event or development, and to form their own opinions about causation and the interpretation of historical documents and evidence. The presentation of antagonist views through multiple narratives allows students to understand the role of opinion and best guesses in connecting historical data and evidence into a fully-formed narrative. When students engage with mass-media and entertainment-oriented historical narratives in the world outside the classroom, the critical skills refined in the classroom can be used as the basis for informed opinions about the likely bias and accuracy of historical entertainment, historical fiction and popular-media history programs that permeate every-day life.

3. Narratives provide an interesting “hook” to engage a student’s interest, additionally providing a kind of personal relationship between the reader and the narrator. Enthusiasm, even to the point of subjectivity, can be an asset in a historical narrative. Narratives connect information and provide a relationship between historical events on a particular timeline. The shape of students’ individual lives – from their social media “timelines” to their written accounts of recent experiences or histories – will tend to follow a narrative and chronological format. As long as students are made aware that a historical narrative is not necessarily an entirely objective piece of material, they can easily engage with the material presented in narrative form. An understanding of history is best developed through knowledge of causal relationships and historical development over or across generations.

History as narrative allows for such an overarching view and understanding. Therefore, a narrative approach to history education allows educators to harness students’ natural and established interest in narrative structure. History as narrative is the proper, and most effective, method of teaching history in the twenty-first century classroom.

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POLITICS EDUCATION DAY AREA CHICAGO TEXAS

U.S. Students Remain Poor at History, Tests Show

By SAM DILLON
Published: June 14, 2011

American students are less proficient in their nation's history than in any other subject, according to results of a nationwide test released on Tuesday, with most fourth graders unable to say why Abraham Lincoln was an important figure and few high school seniors able to identify China as the North Korean ally that fought American troops during the Korean War.

Over all, 20 percent of fourth graders, 17 percent of eighth graders and 12 percent of high school seniors demonstrated proficiency on the exam, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Federal officials said they were encouraged by a slight increase in eighth-grade scores since the last history test, in 2006. But even those gains offered little to celebrate because, for example, fewer than a third of eighth graders could answer even a "seemingly easy question" asking them to identify an important advantage American forces had over the British during the Revolution, the government's statement on the results said.

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Footnotes

[i] James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me : Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, Touchstone trade pbk. ed.(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 1.

[ii] WB Russell and Stewart Waters, “Instructional Methods for Teaching Social Studies: A Survey of What Middle School Students Like and Dislike About Social Studies Instruction,” *Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences* 14, no. 2 (2010).

[iii] “The Nation’s Report Card “, in *The National Assessment of Educational Progress*, ed. National Center for Education Statistics Institute of Education Sciences(2010).

[iv] Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and theory* (1984).

[v] F. R. Ankersmit, “Historiography and Postmodernism,” *History and Theory* 28(1989): 137-53.

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