

LIVING, BREATHING HISTORY CLOTH: TEACHING HISTORY K-6

by

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J In a Washington, Iowa classroom in 2004, twenty students sit cross-legged on the floor in a discussion. For several weeks, the students have studied African-American history. Now, as a new week begins, their teacher asks the students to think about prejudice today. Does it exist in this classroom? The students raise a chorus of “No!” The teacher tilts her head thoughtfully and says, “Hmm, I wonder. Just the other day a group of you came in very upset about an injustice during the break.” The girls in the semi-circle cry out, “It was the boys! They wouldn’t let us play basketball.” Indignant, the boys bounce to their knees. “We said they could play with us!” Interrupting the ensuing general outcry, one girl leaps to her feet, points to a chart of the 15th Amendment of 1870 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on one of the classroom walls, and exclaims, “It’s just like the voting thing! They say we can play but they won’t throw us the ball!”

On a final day of this Segregation History unit, each student takes a turn to answer a question from a Laws, Addy Books, People, or Important Words category. While stumped by a few of the Addy book questions, the students readily answer questions about literacy tests, easily identify Civil Rights leaders and laws, in detail describe the mission of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and with little or no hesitation define various political and legal terms. Exclamations of “That was easy!” follow questions about Booker T. Washington, the 15th Amendment, Harriet Tubman and the Constitution.

As you read this account, did you make an assumption about the students’ grade level? Would it surprise you to learn this was a typical 3rd grade class, un-tracked for academic ability, and that other Washington 3rd grade classes had similar learning outcomes? If you are wondering how such young children learn and internalize fairly intricate history topics, the short answer is this: their teachers are committed to helping their students do history, to helping students construct their own knowledge of history from many and varied sources.

In their recent odyssey toward knowledge of various African American experiences in U.S. history, 8 and 9 year old Washington students read stories of life in Africa and of the slave-trade. They interpreted photos depicting people’s experiences under slavery and Jim Crow laws. They read laws in-

tended to establish citizenship, equality and justice for all Americans. And they charted how an 1870 U.S. Constitutional Amendment guaranteeing African American men the right to vote was subverted for almost 100 years, until it was enforced by Civil Rights legislation of the 1960's.

Which brings us to another question: do these activities -- reading stories, interpreting photos, and charting the evolution and enforcement of laws -- resemble your own study of history when you were a child? Did you spin living, breathing history cloth from evidence of cause-and-effect and change over time, and real people's experiences? Did you dye the cloth; color it with your empathy for the people you studied, with your shock and hope and outrage and pride in their stories? Did you feel the cloth's strands woven forward into your life today?

If you answered yes to these questions, chances are good you enjoy history, you feel comfortable when you hear the word "history." Your knowledge of the past enriches your awareness of the world and informs your perspective on social and political issues. If, on the other hand, you cringe when confronted with the prospect of studying or teaching history and you perceive history as an enormous, boring Trivial Pursuit© game, rife with isolated facts, the names of dead politicians and singular dates all irrelevant to your life today, your history class may have consisted of a teacher reading from his/her notes while you read from a fairly dry text. The text's authorship was never discussed and therefore you got the impression that history is factual dictation from some omniscient source/being. And your engagement with the material likely consisted of answering ubiquitous end-of-the-chapter questions from which were created ubiquitous multiple choice quizzes.

Such an engagement is, of course, no engagement at all. It rarely sticks with students or makes them excited to learn; it offers no authentic encounter with the nature of history. But what is that nature? Crossroads: A K-16 American History Curriculum offers an insightful description:

History is at least two different things -- the past and the study of the past. The following generalizations apply to both understandings of the term:

History is Human. It is both the record of what human beings have thought, said and done in the past and the accumulated body of work expressing what human beings think and have thought about history.

History is Incomplete. We will never know everything about the past...

History is Contemporary. Our present concerns have a lot to do with ... how we examine, describe and interpret the past...

History is Contingent. It need not have happened the way it happened...

History is Uncooperative. The past does not easily yield its secrets...

History is Pluralist. There is no single explanation for a historical event.

What historians do is to look at the past (or what we can glean or salvage of it), try to figure out what we can describe or explain, and do it as honestly and responsibly as we can, knowing that other historians will disagree and that we in turn may come to change our minds.

In the light of this complex description, read-the-text-and-answer-the-questions becomes an especially misbegotten teaching strategy for history. A multi-faceted subject is better met using multi-faceted classroom strategies. If students are to interpret the past rather than simply memorize names and dates, they need experience reading critically for understanding and background knowledge, and analyzing photos and documents for historical meaning. Questioning should be their first instinct when they encounter a piece of evidence – who, what, when, where, why? And students need familiarity with timelines -- their simple reminders of cause and effect.

An impressive list, certainly; unfortunately it crosses the line and becomes a daunting list for the progressive high school history teacher who would have his/her tenth grade students try to do history. For the process of teaching all those skills in one or two semesters drastically erodes the time available for students to actually use the skills to engage the past. History teachers must gaze longingly at their compatriots teaching algebra across the hall. Math students arrive with years of practice in addition, subtraction, division and multiplication. In contrast, the high school and junior high history class all too often begins with student blank slates. Or worse, with students that have "Boring!" scribbled on their slates, the legacy of prior experience with that omniscient history being.

A remedy for this condition brings us back to Washington, Iowa. There, in the Kindergarten through 6th grades, students are learning history by learning to do history. In the process, they are gathering skills and content knowledge that will hopefully empower them in junior and high school to grapple with historical issues at a more nuanced, sophisticated level than they could have without an early, systematic introduction to the methods. This gathering of skills doesn't take place all at once, but gradually. Day by day and year by year students are on their way to synthesizing disparate sources and types of information into history they construct themselves. They are on their way to drawing an analogy between poll taxes and literacy tests, and dynamics between the girls and boys on a playground.

So what does history look like in a Washington kindergarten classroom?

It looks like what the children know: their own lives. The students gather and examine objects from their pasts, ornament their life timelines with those objects, and eventually study how those objects were the same and different for children of long ago. In first grade, students look a little farther outward and begin to study their school and community, but already, from Kindergarten, they have a history vocabulary: artifact, document, letter, photo, timeline, map. By fifth grade, students are compiling stories of the World War II Home Front, stories based on: actual ration books and recipes, timelines of the European and Pacific war theaters, letters between soldiers and their families, newspaper accounts of shortages, photos of scrap metal drives, statistics on women in industrial jobs, stories and photos from the Japanese Internment prisons, and photos of victory parades.

Washington teachers report activities that ask children to construct history are extremely effective motivators as well. Typically high-achieving students enjoy the activities as expected. More surprisingly, students that have been difficult to engage in more traditional social studies activities noticeably spark on doing history. They seem to enjoy the detective-like nature of constructing knowledge using both secondary and primary sources, and to thrive on expressing history using art, drama, writing or combinations of all three.

The benefits of this K-6 experience with history are potentially far-reaching. Students should be better-prepared and motivated to study history when they reach middle and high school. And not just better-prepared for history, but for any subject that demands critical thinking, or geography, or research skills. If we step outside the classroom and the school, though, we may find the most important justification for teaching history early and with constructivist methods. For when students learn to question documents and photos for knowledge, to read a historical fiction story for context, to construct a timeline of related events, and to spin history cloth from those various threads, they become comfortable with history and familiar with its many-faceted nature. Their knowledge of the past enriches their awareness of the world.

References

The following bibliography includes several important titles in the body of research on teaching history, with an emphasis on the elementary grades. It is by no means a complete list, but rather an “author’s picks” for introductory reading.

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Elise Fillpot is Director of the Bringing History Home grant project awarded to the Washington Community School District in Washington, Iowa in cooperation with the University of Iowa. To access the Bringing History Home K-5 curriculum adopted by the Washington, Maquoketa, Perry and Creston Community School Districts in Iowa, please visit <http://www.bringinghistoryhome.org/>.