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Teaching for Meaning Pages 42-45

Reading and Rewriting History

Students learn to read critically as they plunge into primary and secondary sources looking for historical fact.

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Several years ago, we toured a swanky new middle school rising on the broken asphalt of an urban parking lot. This public school had a mission statement that read like a recruiting poster for a high-tech start-up: Students would gain the skills not only to cope with the “information demands of the digital age” but also to “flourish in it.” A 13-year-old guide led us to a classroom gleaming with computers where the teacher circled among students working on reports on different countries.

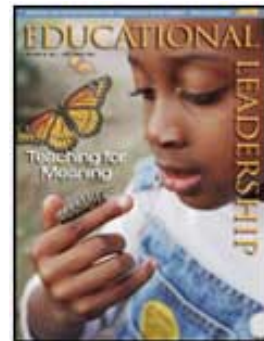
We sidled up to one group huddled over textbooks and a stack of printouts from the Web. In neat letters at the top of a “knowledge poster,” we spied the word “Pakistan” and the phrase “parliamentary democracy . . . religious freedom for all.” We posed a straightforward question to the group: “How do you know that’s true?” A pigtailed girl with a gleam in her eye—clearly this quartet’s leader—grabbed her book and thrust it under our noses: “See,” she said, using her finger to locate truth. “Page 242. It says it right here.” We persisted: “How do you know that’s true?”

Judging from this student’s quizzical expression, we might as well have phrased our question in Martian. A second girl came to the rescue by summoning us to her laptop. “Look,” she said, pointing to the government of Pakistan’s official Web site. “It says it here, too.” We continued, unmoved: “But what if we went to India’s Web site, and it said that Pakistan was a totalitarian regime that oppressed Hindus and other religious minorities? What then?” The students put their heads together and in an instant arrived at their response. “We’d vote,” they said.

Judging the Quality of Information

We begin with this vignette because it captures a truth that we have encountered time and again during our school visits. In social studies classes, students amass piles of information and sometimes become quite articulate about what they have learned. But the moment the discussion turns to assaying the quality of information, voluble students turn mute. Asked to exercise judgment, they throw up their hands and vote.

We recognize that some would cry foul at our question, claiming that the ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of a textbook is beyond the ken of the typical middle school or even high school student. Young people, according to this view, should first learn the facts. It’s only later



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on, when they take an Advanced Placement class or a college seminar, that students would learn that historians argue over competing interpretations of history and sometimes even question the veracity of widely accepted facts.

Back when the world presented itself in measured doses—the daily newspaper at our doorstep, the big three networks on TV, the weekly visit to the public library—such a stance might have sufficed. But this Rockwellian world has long since vanished. Ask any middle schooler with a research project how to spell the word *library* and you'll get a six-letter response: G-O-O-G-L-E.

And what happens exactly when we cede to Google the role of quality control? Try typing *Holocaust* and *crematorium* as keywords, and your surfing will eventually take you to an official-looking Web site for the Institute for Historical Review, its home page proclaiming “truth and accuracy,” with a dedication to “promoting greater public awareness of key chapters of history” and a dispassionate statement of its “501(c)(3) not-for-profit tax-exempt” status. Follow a few links and you'll soon learn that, contrary to what you might have believed, the Holocaust never happened. In our age of new technologies, every crackpot has become a publisher. The ability to judge the quality of information can no longer be considered “extra credit.”

Weighing the Evidence

The place to teach students to ask questions about truth and evidence in our digital age is the history and social studies classroom, and we should not delay. Consider a unit we designed for the 5th grade, the students' first systematic encounter with U.S. history in the curriculum. Our approach begins with a unit on Pocahontas, John Smith, and Jamestown. This unit was designed as part of PATHS (Promoting Argumentation Through History and Science), a National Science Foundation-funded project that aims at helping elementary school students understand the nature of evidence in history and science.¹

It turns out that elementary schoolchildren know a lot about Pocahontas. Many can recite specifics: Pocahontas saved John Smith, she was an American Indian “babe” and princess, and she was daughter of a chief. In fact, the knowledge that students bring to the classroom about that topic shows the reach and potency of one of our most successful contemporary storytellers: The Walt Disney Company. The Disney version of this story tells of Pocahontas, a svelte, free-spirited 19-year-old, and John Smith, a dashing hunk of a colonist, who fall in love, flouting orders that there be no contact between the Indians and the colonists. In this tale's dramatic climax, Pocahontas prevents her father, Chief Powhatan, from cudgeling Smith to death. Pocahontas's act of courage leads both sides to lay down arms and ushers in a new era of understanding between two warring cultures. In the movie version, the characters are visually stunning, the plot straightforward, and the moral lessons clear.

Yet this dramatic climax—Smith's rescue—may never have happened. The only eyewitness who left a paper trail was Smith himself, and his two accounts are riddled with inconsistencies. The first was written in 1608, the same year in which the event supposedly occurred (Tyler, 1907). It makes no mention of the threat to Smith or of his rescue, and it uses words like “friendship” and “kindness” to describe meeting Powhatan:

He kindly welcomed me with good words and great platters of sundry victuals, assuring me his friendship, and my liberty within four days.

The second account, written 16 years later, uses words like “barbarous” and “fearful” and includes the claim that Pocahontas “laid down her own [head] upon his to save him from death” (Smith, 1624).

Why is the rescue mentioned in one account but not in the other? Was Smith concerned about being viewed as less of a man if the truth came out that an Indian girl rescued him? In the first account, was he merely trying to describe this new land and its unfamiliar peoples, choosing to omit personal stories? In the second account, was he capitalizing on Pocahontas's fame after her move to London as Indian princess and wife of John Rolfe? Her death in 1617 probably meant that this second account would have gone unchallenged.

In this unit, students compare Smith's two accounts. They read his words and identify factual differences and similarities. They struggle to explain the differences they see in the primary evidence. Only then do they turn to historians' accounts of this event (see Adams, 1867; Barbour, 1969; Lemay, 1991; Lewis, 1966).

There, more puzzles await. Students examine four interpretations of this alleged rescue. Two historians assail the veracity of Smith's later account on multiple grounds, such as the lack of corroborating sources and the inconsistencies between the two accounts' flavor and detail. Other historians take Smith at his word, although they claim that he missed the point: This “rescue,” according to them, posed no real threat to life or limb but was actually a tribal ritual meant to signify death and rebirth, symbolizing Smith's assumption of a new tribal identity under Powhatan's patronage.

What are the facts of the story? What do these facts mean? There are no easy answers. Designed to teach the interpretive and evidentiary nature of history, this unit pushes students to delve into the evidence themselves. Students read, evaluate, and synthesize primary and secondary source material through carefully constructed lessons that include guided worksheets and structured discussions. They use a timeline to calculate that Pocahontas was only 10 or 11 when the supposed encounter with Smith occurred—hardly the Barbie-in-deerskin of the movie version. Students consider parallels between how people might go about investigating historical stories and how their principal, for example, might investigate some recent occurrence in school, such as a cafeteria food fight.

In one classroom in which we piloted our materials, 7th grade students responded indignantly to the movie version of the Pocahontas tale, expressing outrage at being fed a distorted, if not patently false, story. At the end of the unit, they vented their frustration by writing letters of complaint to Roy Disney, who was at that time chairman of the Board of Directors of Walt Disney Productions. Anna, an articulate 13-year-old, wrote the following:

I am sure that you know the basic facts: Matoaka (Pocahontas's real name) was 10 or 11 when the capturing of John Smith in Virginia took place. She married John Rolfe and died in England. Instead of showing Pocahontas as she was, Disney instead chose to perpetrate the myth of a handsome man: Captured by Indians in North

America and about to get his brains smashed out, John Smith is saved by the typical media-fashioned woman (almost naked), with whom he falls in love. What confuses me is that Disney must have done extensive research before making this movie. So why does it seem like just another cartoon? Maybe instead of taking true stories and straining the truth out of them, Disney could create a story with realistic people (especially women) and an intelligent plotline that tries to tell the truth.

The Role of Reading and Writing

Reading primary and secondary sources constitutes the heart of such an investigative curriculum, but reading is only one part of a two-part equation: It must be accompanied by writing. As a capstone to this unit, students are thrust into the role of authors, rewriting their textbook accounts so they more accurately reflect the truth of the story. For example, textbook accounts almost never mention that when Pocahontas was 17, a group of Jamestown ruffians treacherously abducted her and held her hostage for more than a year.

Literacy is the key word here, because the teaching of history should have reading and writing at its core. Years ago, this may have been the case, but that time is long gone. In some underfunded schools, teachers struggle to cope with low reading levels by reading the textbook aloud to students so they at least “get the content” (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). In other classrooms, writing in social studies is increasingly being replaced by PowerPoint assignments, complete with bullet points and animation. But we can no more defend an argument on why the USSR disintegrated using bullet points than we can journey to Moscow on the wings of a Frommer travel guide. Working through successive drafts of the cause-and-effect essay—making sure that paragraphs reflect a logical procession of ideas and that assertions are backed by evidence—is hard and inglorious work, but there are no shortcuts. No celebration of multiple intelligences or learning styles that takes the form of skits or illustrated knowledge posters equips us to answer those who would deceive us the moment we open our browsers. Skits and posters may be engaging, but leaving students there—engaged but illiterate—amounts to an incomplete lesson that forfeits our claim as educators (see Wineburg, 2001).

We are aware that we have crafted a decidedly old-fashioned message for a technologically savvy world. We are also aware that our message differs from what one hears in the tired battles known as the “history wars.” There, the focus immediately shifts from *why* teach history to *which* history to teach: either a so-called “critical” history of broken promises and false hopes (where everything is up for grabs except this kind of narrative’s underlying assumptions) or a story of flawless heroes that prepares youngsters for an adulthood of History Channel reruns. Neither narrative begins to capture the complexity of United States history or prepares citizens to function effectively in the future.

We need an approach to teaching history where the criteria for success have less to do with intoning loyalty oaths (to either side of the political aisle) than with students’ ability to participate in the literate activities that our society demands. This means teaching students to be informed readers, writers, and thinkers about the past as well as the present—a goal all

parties should be able to embrace. Our democracy's vitality depends on it.

Endnote

¹ Principal investigators in the PATHS project were Sam Wineburg, Reed Stevens, Leslie Rupert Herrenkohl, and Philip Bell. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors only.

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