

IMPROVING HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY TEACHING: A MODEST AGENDA*

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Nearly One thousand students, teachers, professors, and parents jammed the auditorium and patiently waited through a few short remarks by invited guests. Then the anxious waiting was over; the director stepped to the podium and began announcing the winners. Third place, in the essay category for the Senior Division, from Ames High School in the state of Iowa with a paper entitled: "The History of Soper's Mill", Chris Smith! A loud cheer went up. The cheers continued as third, second, and first place winners were announced for essays, performance, media presentations, and projects for the Junior and Senior Divisions. Cheers for history, you must be dreaming.

But it was not a dream. In fact, it happens many times each year at more than four hundred district, state and national History Day contests.¹ No one can witness a History Day contest without sensing an excitement and enthusiasm for history. The purpose of this paper is to make history exciting, not just for those student lucky enough to be involved in History Day but for every student.

The history of social studies reform makes it clear, however, that change in high school history teaching will not likely result from any grand design adopted and implemented by educational policy makers.² Change will occur, if it occurs at all, in small increments implemented by classroom teachers who receive encouragement and an occasional nudge by curriculum consultants, supervisors, and administrators. Grand designs, however, can serve a purpose by poin-

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1 National History Day is a National Endowment for the Humanities Youth project and has grown from a modest three state regional event in 1977 to a national contest with students participating from more than 40 states.

2 Hazel W. Hertzberg, *Social Studies Reform, 1880-1980*, Social Science Education Consortium Boulder, CO., 1981, passim; See also John Jarolimek, "The Social Studies: An Overview," *The Social Studies* (80th Yearbook of National Society for the Study of Education, 1981), pp. 3 - 18.

ting out the direction for change. This paper proposes both an "immodest" agenda that looks ahead and a more "modest" and practical agenda that answers the question asked by most teachers: What do I do on Monday morning?

These remarks are not intended, however, for those high schools where the teacher's first concern each day is getting through it. This paper assumes a reasonable degree of classroom decorum, where indifference and boredom rather than hostility are the major problems faced by the teacher. The teacher to whom this paper is addressed has gone beyond the need for survival skills and wants to bring some sparkle into the classroom.

Those classroom teachers concerned about the teaching of history face two closely related problems: determining what history ought to be taught and determining how to teach what ought to be taught effectively. The first part of this paper addresses the first problem; the second part presents practical suggestions for the second. Although these problems are treated separately in this paper, the problems are, as shall be evident later closely entwined.

This discussion will draw, for the most part, upon examples from the teaching of early United States History so I can utilize my own background as much as possible. At first glance, this decision may seem too confining, especially since the problem with teaching world history are probably greater than those for United States history. It is my belief, however, that suggestions that are proposed here are easily adaptable to most history classrooms and hopefully will serve as a catalyst for each teacher's own thinking. When faced with the dilemma of whether to use specifics from my own experience or that of others, it has always seemed better to use the first approach.

WHY STUDY HISTORY?

It may be argued that while history's role in the high school curriculum may not be alive and well in the eighties, it is far from dead and may indeed be on the verge of finding new life. For despite the continuous attempt during the last quarter century to replace history by more contemporary oriented courses, history, especially American History, has demonstrated a surprising staying power. This does not mean as shall be discussed later, that history is being taught, for much of what passes for history is not history at all.³ The point to made here is that history's place in the high school curriculum apparently is safe, not

3 William Carrol, et. al., "The Teaching of History in the Public High Schools," Unpublished Report, August, 1979; Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," *The Journal of American History*, (September, 1975), pp. 557 - 570.

because historians are such a powerful interest group but in spite of the profession's neglect during the last twenty five years. American History has remained in the curriculum because most Americans acknowledge the important role played by history's content and methods in a person's education.

Almost every book on the study and teaching of history provides its readers with a laundry list of reasons why one ought to study history.⁴ While the specific wording may vary, there is general agreement that studying history is necessary because it provides through its unique content the perspective and through its methodology, the skills needed for evaluation and decision making in any society. Carl Gustavson combined these two ingredients into the term "historical mindedness" that he described as a "way of thinking," a form of reasoning when dealing with historical materials and present-day problems. According to Gustavson "historical mindedness" is characterized by seven qualities as: having a natural curiosity as to what underlines the surface appearance of any historical event, gravitating toward the past in studying any problem, discerning the shapes and contours of the forces which are dynamic in society, stressing the continuity of society in all its forms, acknowledging the importance of change, approaching a subject in a spirit of humility, preparing to recognize tenacious reality rather than what one wishes to find, and knowing that each situation and event is unique.⁵

The qualities of historical mindedness do not exhaust the reasons for studying history. It also "... provides a way of weaving together the threads of learning — current, traditional, analytical — into whole cloth."⁶ Consequently, according to the Council for Basic Educa-

4 For example, see James Howard and Thomas Mendenhall, *Making History Come Alive*, Washington D.C.: Council for Basic Education, 1982, pp. 7 – 24; Doug Alder, "Why Am I Teaching History Anyway?" in Glenn Linden and Matt Downey, eds., *Teaching American History: Structured Inquiry Approaches*, Boulder: Social Science Education Consortium, 1975, pp. 1 – 6; Edgar Wesley, ed., *American History in Schools and Colleges*, New York: MacMillan, 1944, pp. 14 – 24; Norman F. Cantor and Richard I. Schneider, *How to Study History*, Arlington Heights, AHM, 1967, pp. 1 – 17; Walter Nugent, *Creative History*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967, pp. 23 – 32; Robert Daniels, *Studying History: How and Why*, 3rd Ed., Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1981, pp. 6 – 17; Donald Gawronski, *History Meaning and Method*, 3rd Ed., Glenville, III.: Scott, Foresman, 1975, pp. 1 – 8; Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student Guide to History*, 2nd ed., New York: St. Martins Press, 1979, pp. 1 – 12; Carl Gustavson, *A Preface to History*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1955, pp. 1 – 11; Lewis Paul Todd, "Opportunities for American History" in Richard E. Thursfield, ed., *The Study and Teaching of History*, Washington D.C.: NCSS, 1946, pp. 1 – 10.

5 Gustavson, *Preface to History*, pp. 5 – 7.

6 Howard, *Making History Come Alive*, p. 9.

tion's recent report *Making History Come Alive*, history is one of your basic subjects.⁷ Lewis Paul Todd argued in the NCSS's 17th Yearbook (1946) that "... from history and history alone, comes the inevitability of change. Without this essential understanding, men's minds become rigid."⁸

Finally, many of us love history because it has all the qualities of a good story or a mystery. There is drama in outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the human condition. It's no wonder, and perhaps even more remarkable to remember, that this historian, as a fifth grader, penned the following:

History, History, the best subject to me
English, English, the one I can't see
In all the subjects big or small
History tops them all.
It tells of things New and Old
and all the things that should be told.

For some, the love of history is acquired but for others it must be result from a "strange" and perhaps even a defective mixture of the genes.

PART 1

DECIDING WHAT OUGHT TO BE TAUGHT

Improving the teaching of history in the secondary schools requires that we "teach better history" and that we "teach history better."

Teaching better history will be the most difficult of the two tasks for it will necessitate action on a grand scale. Perhaps it is too ambitious a goal for this report, but several recent events have propelled me to change what started out several months ago as only a "modest agenda" into what must now be labeled as an "immodest agenda" of curricular reform.

There is a new sense of urgency in the need for educational reform. Three recent reports by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, by the National Task Force on Education for Economic Growth and by The College Board have called for a wide range of changes in curricula and educational standards. If we continue the decline in educational excellence, stated the Commission on Excellence in Education, the country will soon, if it hasn't already, squander all the gains in achievement made in the wake of Spudnik. In the

7 Howard, *Making History Come Alive*, pp. 7 – 10.

8 Todd, "Opportunities for American History," 6.

area of Social Studies the Commission on Excellence recommended a minimum of three years of during four years of high school. If the Commission's recommendation is widely accepted, it will undoubtedly mean an increase in social studies courses in many schools. It is imperative, therefore, that those of us concerned about the status of history in our schools speak out so that the social studies curriculum will be or continue to be centered around the teaching of history.

Our first task is to reverse any tendency to adopt the kind of social studies hodgepodge currently under consideration for the state of New York. The proposed recommendations for the state of New York would seem to offer ample proof for the National Commission on Excellence in Education's observation that secondary-school curricula has been "... homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect," said the Commission's report, "... we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and deserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses." Social Studies reformers must recognize that history is and must continue to be the core of any social studies curriculum.

Maintaining history as the core or center of the social studies curriculum, however, will not be easy. Historians can no longer afford the luxury of sitting on the sidelines, as they have during the last four decades, ringing their hands or pointing accusative fingers at others for the decline in the status of history. The degree to which history continues to be taught, as previously mentioned, owes little to historians but instead to the public's perception of history as an important part of a child's education. Historians should not rely on such good will; they must return to the active role in social studies curriculum development they once exercised. The consequences of complacency are too important. Too many educators seem ready to convert the social studies into a "here and now smorgasbord" devoid of recognized content.

Teaching better history will surely require the teaching of more history. More history is needed because, first of all, there is simply more history to teach. Historical research in the last few years has greatly increased the dimensions of history. Secondly, the explosion of nationalism in the Twentieth Century makes it exceedingly difficult to focus solely on western or even American civilization. Our cultural roots have grown enormously over the last century and our immigration patterns attest to and reflect the diversity and social turmoil of our shrinking world. The existing social studies curriculum sequence in history, in place for three quarters of a century, resulted from a 1916 modification of an 1899 American Historical Associa-

tion study.⁹ This curriculum in history has simply not kept pace with history.

Teaching more history will require a thorough revision in the social studies scope and sequence and a change in the current perception of what history courses ought to be.

A radical departure in the scope and sequence now practiced in the secondary schools is needed so that the teaching of history can be made more cohesive. We can no longer afford the luxury of teaching American History in the 8th grade and then repeating it in the 11th Grade, still the most common curricula pattern in social studies today.¹⁰ Instead we must combine our energies and resources in such a way that a single more integrated series of world and American History courses is possible. There should be, in grades 7 – 12, at least a three-year sequence of world and American History that is taught in consecutive years. In those school districts that already teach three years of history in grades 7 – 12, the proposed curriculum does not mean adding any more history courses, but it will require a rearrangement and restructuring of existing courses.

The scope and sequence described here would begin the seventh and eighth grade with two years of behavioral sciences. The seventh grade course begins with the student's own origins and community. This placement makes sense since students at this grade level can more easily grasp geographical, social, and anthropological concepts than the more abstract political and economic ones required in most history courses. A recent survey of social studies educators, for example, confirms this idea.¹¹

The ninth grade course would consist of a world history course that ends with the time period around 1500 – 1600. This should be more than a western civilization course. It should be taught in a way that is similar to the approach used by Greek historian Herodotus in his history of the Persian War. It would be a western civilization oriented course that begins in the middle east and spreads throughout the Mediterranean and into Europe. Asia and Africa would be brought into the course as Europeans developed continuous contact with those areas. This approach makes better sense than attempting to show, for example, what the world was like in 500 B.C. Using an

9 Hertzberg, op. cit., p. 14.

10 Douglas P. Superka, Sheryl Hawke, and Irving Morrisett, "The Current and Future Status of the Social Studies," *Social Education*, May, 1980, p. 364.

11 See Wayne Herman, Jr., "Scope and Sequence in the Social Studies: What Should be Taught Where?" *Social Education*, Feb., 1983, pp. 95 – 98.

horizontal rather than a vertical approach often adds confusion as well as breaking the continuity of western civilization.

American history would then become a two-year sequence but with American history placed within a world history context. The first year of American history would begin with the age of exploration. America's ancient civilizations, including the numerous theories about the early contacts between the peoples of the two hemispheres, would be taught in the course after Europeans established continuous contact with Native American Civilizations. Placing American history into a world context makes it possible to portray a more realistic view of the world. The first year's course would stop sometime around 1900. The second year would focus on the Twentieth Century and, reflecting the growing interdependence in the world, become increasingly a world or "global" history course rather than only an American history course.

The twelfth Grade would consist of a semester of American Government and a semester of Economics. Placing these courses at the twelfth grade makes sense for two reasons: it takes a certain degree of intellectual maturity to understand many economic and political concepts. Secondly, most seniors are or will soon be eligible to vote and/or enter the job market, there is, therefore, a degree of relevance to the subject matter. The American government course should emphasize process as well as the structure of government. Economics should not focus on theoretical concepts but stress such topics as consumerism, labor, and the workings of the market place, including the role played in the economy by various levels of government.

This curriculum argues, as does the recent report by the Council on Basic Education, *Making History Come Alive*, that history should be the core of the social studies curriculum.¹² Maintaining history as the "center piece" of the social studies, however, will not be easy. There are some social studies educators who would, like the late Edgar Wesley, eliminate history as we know it from the curriculum. In an article entitled "Let's Abolish History Courses!" Wesley argued that history courses ought to be abandoned, because history met no "... needs that pupils can appreciate." History, according to Wesley, should be changed from a course to a resource. "No teacher at any grade level, however, should teach a course in history as content. To do so is as confusing, unnecessary, frustrating, futile, pointless, and as illogical as to teach a course in the World Almanac, the dictionary or the Encyclopedia. The content of history is to be utilized and ex-

12 Howard, *Making History Come Alive*, pp. 7 – 10, p. 63.

ploited — not studied, learned, or memorized.”¹³ Wesley’s article might well have served as the intellectual underpinnings for New York State’s curriculum proposals mentioned earlier.

A more radical change in the role of history than the New York State proposal has been made by the Social Science Education Consortium. Their curriculum proposal, called SPAN (Social Studies/Social Science Education: Priorities, Practices, and Needs) grew out of an NSF study of social studies Education from 1955 – 1975. Span’s goal was to answer the question: What should social studies be like in the nation and why should it be so?¹⁴ Span’s conclusion challenged the traditional place of history within the school curriculum. It put forth an agenda for reform that would radically alter the social studies curriculum and orientation within the schools. It recommended that the K-12 social studies curriculum be built around social roles, “... through which most young people and adults participate in the social world — citizen, worker, consumer, family member, friend, member of social groups and self.” At the elementary level, the expanding environments’ pattern” would be replaced by a “spiraling development of the social roles. The seventh grade course would focus on the more personal roles — self, family member, friend, member of social groups.” The eighth grade course would change from a chronological approach to a topical treatment of social roles. At the ninth grade students would focus primarily on the society roles of citizen, consumer, and worker. The secondary course structure would be retained but with a different emphasis. The United States history course at the eleventh grade would focus on social roles around a chronological framework. U.S. government with its focus on citizenship would remain a semester requirement at the twelfth grade. A series of interdisciplinary electives and social action courses focused on one or more societal roles should be offered. Disciplined based courses could be made available, “particularly for college-bound students.”¹⁵ While SPAN suggests a radical departure from the present social studies curriculum, it could also be accused of echoing the Progressive Educator’s agenda of the 1930s and perhaps extending its roots as far back as the Seven Cardinal Principles of 1918.

13. Edgar B. Wesley, “Let’s Abolish History Courses,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, September, 1967, p. 3. See also S. Samuel Sheris, “Six Myths Which Delude History Teachers,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, September, 1967, pp. 9 – 12.

14. Irving Morrissett, Douglas Superka, Sharryl Hawke, “Recommendations for Improving Social Studies in the 1980s,” *Social Education*, Dec. 1980, pp. 571 – 572.

15. Morrissett, “Recommendations,” pp. 571 – 172.

The debate over the role of history in the social studies curriculum continues. It is possible, however, to over estimate the influence of curriculum projects and the rhetoric that accompanies them, for little of the debate seems to reach the classroom teacher. Despite the large expenditures on curriculum development during the 1960s, little impact was made on the school curricula.¹⁶ Still the status of history is not assured as the New York State Curriculum proposals readily testify. Those concerned with maintaining history and other areas of the humanities as recognized disciplines in the schools must continuously argue their case in the literature and before state and local policy makers. The time seems ripe to reverse the trends of the last few decades but it will not take place if historians and other disciplinarians continue the present posture of being neglect.

Teaching better history will also require many teachers to reconceptualize what history is. During the last few years, courses, labeled as history have often not been history courses at all. They often reflect a hodgepodge of topics designed to make history seem relevant. Although there is some evidence to suggest that traditional courses are returning, too many examples can be found where history has been converted into a series of mini-courses or units on current events.¹⁷ As a result, history often becomes fragmented to such a degree that students acquire no sense of history at all but instead acquired a sort of "pervasive presentism" that re-enforces the here and now.

The "balkanization" of the history curriculum resulted from several important influences during the sixties and the seventies. The first factor was a genuine response by the history teachers to include minorities in traditional history course. The demand by Blacks during the sixties found a responsive cord among curriculum planners. Since most textbooks presented what was regarded as WASM (Male) P history, the clamor for a multicultural approach became louder. This demand by the Black community seemed to be best met at the time by creating special courses or units. The demands of Blacks and later other minorities were legitimate and the response by the schools genuine. Many School districts poured money into curriculum development. Universities provided new courses on Black History or the Black Experience. Black Studies programs sprouted up in

16 O.L. Davis, "Understanding the History of the Social Studies," *The Social Studies 80th Yearbook*, National Society for the Study of Education, 1981, 23 - 33.

17 Howard, *Making History Come Alive*, pp. 14 - 24; Carrold, *The Status of History in Iowa*, op. cit.; Richard S. Kirkendall; "The Status of History in the Schools," *The Journal of American History*, September, 1975, pp. 557, 570.

university after university. Other minority groups also demanded similar treatment until the whole year of American history often became fragmented into mini-courses or units on blacks, Indians, ethnicity, Chicanos, and women.

Along with the demand specialized courses, there also arose a demand by curricula reformers to make school more relevant. Students they argued wanted schools to be responsive to what they viewed as student needs. The mood shifted away from the concept of a core curriculum or basic requirements toward a curriculum based on demand where students developed their own course of study. This view reflected what Tom Wolfe has called the "me generation" attitude. In an effort to become more relevant, schools went into the business of offering mini-courses (6 or 9 week units). Course requirements for graduation and entrance were eliminated or drastically cut at all levels of education.

In addition, Federally funded social studies curricula projects (known as Project Social Studies) during the sixties and the early seventies advocated a methodology that encouraged the abandonment of a survey approach in teaching the various disciplines in favour of the inquiry method. The inquiry method, out of necessity focused on the use of area and case studies. Problems were selected because they related to some current issue. The Revolutionary war for example, was studied around the concept of loyalty because it examined what the authors of what one social studies project called persistent issues.¹⁸ By focusing on the concept of loyalty, the central idea of the American Revolution, Why the Colonists Decided to abolish their Colonial Status with Great Britain? seemed to get lost. Historical roots of the conflict were often ignored in favor of more relevant issues. The mini-course approach has also contributed to the pervasive presentism because courses about such topics as biography, westward movement, black issues, civil rights, history were often taught without reference to the historical context. The relations among social, economic, and political events went unnoticed. As a result certain events in history were given weight far beyond their historical significance. This resulted in a distorted view of the past.

The increasing specificity in the study of history has also contributed to the fragmentation of the traditional survey course. The "new history" with its emphasis on quantification and/or racial, ethnic, family, and sexual topics have balkanized history studies even

18 Fred M. Newman and Donald W. Oliver, *Clarifying Public Controversy: An Approach to Teaching Social Studies*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1970, pp. 242 - 243.

more. As a consequence the increased variety of course offerings at the college level, it has become increasingly difficult for students to take a broad course that integrates these topics. Perspective teachers have little opportunity to learn to integrate these fragments into a survey course they are supposed to teach at the secondary level. Instead teachers concentrate on units and topics in which they feel adequately prepared. Lack of adequate preparation may also explain why when survey courses are taught at the secondary level, teachers, slavishly follow chapter and verse from the textbook.

These factors have all worked toward a “balkanization” of history and the acquisition of what Daniel Boorstin has called a “contemporary myopia.” Without historic mindedness, the student has little knowledge for determining what has been important or is important today. Historical mindedness also provides a necessary perspective. Events, whether they are latent events (those that accumulate over time, like social mobility) or manifest events (like revolutions and elections) that might seem enormous without a sense of history, quickly fade when considered alongside other developments. Without this perspective our judgments lack balance and often become too emotionalized. Historic mindedness provides us the tranquility needed for making better judgements and decisions.

The failure to emphasize what history does best of all, develop a sense of time and space leaves students handicapped by contemporary myopia. They lose perspective and have no way to differentiate between the significant and the trivial. A report written by the AHA Committee on the Status of American History described the need to acquire historical perspective as follows. History referred this idea as a “... stabilizing influence ... that keeps him from being blown about by the winds of despair. Young people, when they are not thinking that everyone of their ideas is new and everyone of their successes unique, are apt to be thinking that every misfortune is unprecedented, every loss irretrieval, every suffering unparalleled.”¹⁹ Such skills cannot be learned in an environment that substitutes contemporary issues for historical content.

History, it seems, must be taught in a way that maintains the integrity of chronological development. But chronology does not mean the recitation of events without any conceptual framework. But where do teachers acquire such a framework. They should get it from college history courses. History departments, however, seldom offer courses that help teachers conceptualize all of history. Also few

19 Wesley, *American History in Schools and Colleges*, p. 20.

historians write on the grand sweep of history. Where then do perspective teachers find the opportunity to synthesize what they've learned. Perhaps all teachers who receive certification to teach history ought to develop a course syllabus — a sort of senior thesis — in at least one recognizable year-long history course and then be prepared to defend it in a seminar or even oral exam. The syllabus should include content, resources, and some thought about methodology.

Historians can help in other ways too. In 1943 historians engaged in a comprehensive study of the status of American History in the schools and colleges. One chapter was devoted to content of an American history course and identified themes, dates, people, and skills that students should learn from such a course.²⁰ I think historians owe it to teachers of history to give direction by identifying what most historians think students of history ought to learn.

RETURN TO SURVEY APPROACH

One remedy for the problem listed above is for history teachers return to a modified version of the traditional survey approach in teaching history. History loses one of its more important intellectual components, “a sense of time and place” when it is taught any other way. This does not mean, however, that the teacher should not make judgements regarding the selection of content. Neither does this mean that teachers must cover every period or chapter in a textbook in chronological order. It does mean, however, that some judicious pruning and selection must take place. Units must be developed around key historical issues that provide focal points for two or three week periods. Nevertheless, teachers often get bogged down during the early part of a history course so that the period after the 1950s becomes merely an after thought to world War II.

American History teachers must face the unending task of content selection. For world history teachers the task becomes impossible. One of my student teachers was recently asked to teach European History to 1914 in three weeks. She asked me what she could do. Would you believe we arrived at a lesson plan. We decided to divide the class into groups and give each group the task of selecting the five most important events and personalities in an assigned category: political, economic, social, or cultural. Each group had to develop a newspaper page describing their events and then present a 10 minutes newscast as a way of sharing their five selections with other students. Selecting what to teach is frustrating at any level. As a colonial historian, I find my decision to give only a cursory glance

20 Wesley, *American History in Schools and Colleges*, pp. 74 – 84.

to the development of British North America in the above outline appalling. Nevertheless it had to be done, partly because of the assumption that the Age of Discovery, Exploration and Colonization of the New World receives considerable attention at the eighth grade. If teaching a two-year sequence of United States History in a world setting is unrealistic, then the least that can be expected would be to teach American History for two consecutive years perhaps at the ninth and tenth grades rather than in the eighth grade and then repeat it at the eleventh grade as is the most common pattern today.²¹ Such a change makes sense. It would avoid much of the duplication and make it possible to include units that more deliberately address the role of technology, migration, religion and culture in the development of American Society.

PART II: TEACHING HISTORY EFFECTIVELY

Teaching history better is an easier goal to implement than teaching better history because it relies on no grand designs that have to be adopted and implemented by policy makers or does it require teachers to retool or restructure courses. Teaching history better can also begin immediately by a single teacher trying a single innovative idea.

Since the art of teaching ought to be eclectic teachers may not find all of the suggestions described below feasible for their class situations, in fact, good teachers may already be doing many of them. It is hoped, however, that these teaching strategies will serve as a catalyst for the imaginative and the innovative. If this discourse succeeds in suggesting one or two useful ideas then this "modest" agenda will have served its purpose.

Critics of education have lamented the lack of rigor and expectations for students, the trivialization of course content, the replacement of critical thinking by passive acceptance and regurgitation, and the absence of intellectual striving. There is simply not much going on in too many history classes. Too much time is spent on meaningless tasks. When the Commission on Excellence urged that the school day and school year be extended, one might first ask why extend the school day and school year to do more of the same. Extending the school year for Master Teachers would be a good idea because they could utilize the time preparing materials and strategies for next year's classes. The school day can actually be extended in most schools at no cost to the taxpayer by merely requiring students to do homework. There is a pervasive attitude in most schools that suggests all

21 Douglas B. Superka, et. al., "The Current and Future Status of the Social Studies," p. 364.

assignments should be completed on school time. The reason given for such an attitude is that so many students work. Working should confront students with a choice between work and leisure time activities instead of the choice between work or schoolwork.

When students list their favourite subject, social studies is always place near the bottom.²² When they are asked why they place social studies so low, students answer that social studies courses are boring. When asked why they liked other subjects better most students responded that the other courses provided for more involvement.²³ The suggestions that follow are designed to make history come alive but within a framework of intellectual integrity. History can be taught better, made interesting and exciting, and still maintain rigor and substance. Reversing the trend toward mediocrity does not have to be dull.

TEACHING THE "WHYS" OF HISTORY

If we fail to excite students about history, it may be because we teach history in a way that implies certainty. By using such a matter of fact approach we are robbing our students of one of the great motivational tools available to teachers, that of mystery. Rather than approaching history as a finished story that often occurs when we utilize narrative history, we must teach history as an unfinished story. Narration must not be totally ignored, however, for it provides the necessary interest to tickle the student's imagination. But then the teacher must find ways to get at the great mysteries by reaching beyond "what happened" to "why it happened". This is what makes history so inferential because answering why usually requires an exploration of motivation, to read the minds of those who participated in the historical drama. Teachers can, at times, think of themselves as lawyers or prosecutors building a case for or against the accused. As in a criminal trial, an historian's verdict usually results from circumstantial evidence.

In keeping with the practice of offering practical rather than theoretical ideas, let me suggest a classroom strategy that employs mystery as a motivational device.

If students were considering the question: Why did the colonists want to be independent? A lesson employing "mystery" would begin

22 J.P. Shaver, O.L. Davis, Jr., and S.W. Helburn, "The State of Social Studies Education: Implications from Three NSF Studies." *Social Education*, Feb., 1979, pp. 150 - 153.

23 See Table 5 and 6, Mark C. Schug, Richard Todd, and Robert Beery, "Why Kids Don't Like Social Studies," Paper Presented at NCSS Conference, Nov. 23 - 27, 1982, unpublished, pp. 20 - 21.

by asking students to speculate on reasons why people might want to be independent. Student suggestions are written on the board without comment. “Well,” asks, the teacher, “which of these do you think applied to the colonists?” “Which do you think affected the most colonists?” “How do we know?” “Can some of these be dismissed as irrelevant?” Okay if we were detectives, what evidence could we find for building a case for any of these suspects, i.e. speculations about why the colonists wanted to be independent.

At this point the teacher can use anyone of several teaching strategies. Students could be divided into groups and given the task of building a case for or against a particular view of “suspect” as we called the speculations listed on the board. The class might even be turned into a courtroom with students acting as witnesses for or against a particular “suspect”. Or a class discussion could be held on one or more of the “suspects” with students contributing evidence obtained from the reading. A social drama, using role playing, could also be used. Whatever the method employed, members of the class should be active rather than passive participants, reaching their own conclusions rather than becoming uncritical absorbers of information that is merely parroted back to the teacher upon examination.

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

The lesson described in sub-section A requires the student to be an active inquirer. One of the crucial goal of historical instruction is to help students develop critical thinking skills.²⁴ When asked to describe the goals of education, Ernest Hemmingway put it as succinct as anyone has. The purpose of education, he said, was to provide students with genuine “crap detectors.” History can do this as well, if not better, than any other discipline because “crap detecting” implies the evaluation of evidence and good history teaching constantly grapples with contradictory evidence.²⁵

Students do not learn to think critically by chance. It results from activities that systematically introduce, instruct, and continually re-enforce critical thinking skills. Lesson A illustrates one way to teach critical thinking.

24 See *Essentials of Social Studies*, NCSS Publication, 1982; 1971 NCSS Guidelines, *Social Education* 35 December, 1971, pp. 853 – 969; “revising NCSS Social Studies Guidelines,” *Social Education*, April, 1979, pp. 261 – 278.

25 The most definitive list of skills I’ve ever used was developed by Edith West for Project Social Studies, University of Minnesota. Since the project was never published, her position paper entitled, “Developing Social Studies Skills”, is difficult to obtain. A good concise list can be found in the appendix of NCSS Bulletin #15, also out of print.

It is not always necessary to use written documents to teach students to evaluate evidence. In a lesson on the cause of the American Revolution, for example, the teacher should begin by simply asking: "If you could go back to the colonies for the purpose of determining why the colonist wanted to break away from Great Britain, who would you talk to? What information might you expect to get from such an interview?" You might then have students, individually or in groups, make a list of five persons they would want to interview. This question can be followed by asking students what they expect to learn from each person on their list? The questioning continues by asking students when they think it would be the best time to talk to the persons on their list? Such a discussion both personalizes history while establishing a criteria that historians use for external and internal criticisms of contemporary accounts.

The transition from fantasizing about historical sources to the reality of using historical documents give the teacher an opportunity to dramatize the tentativeness of historical interpretation. Historians, it can be pointed out, are engaged in the business of inferencing, often from a limited data base. While this approach may produce a healthy dose of skepticism, it must also be pointed out that not all opinions are equal, an attitude that students often develop they engage in activities that lack adequate closure.

Students need to learn that information can help them make judgments. Decisions based on limited data are often no better than guesses but as more data are obtained our decisions become more accurate. Playing poker or Mastermind testifies to that.

One strategy that I've found useful to help teach critical thinking is to employ the "complete lesson" format. The complete lesson consists of three parts or types of student activity. First students acquire data in any number of ways such as reading, listening, or observing. But obtaining data is not sufficient if students are going to do much more than regurgitate it. Consequently, in the second or application phase of the complete lesson, students use data to develop some kind of product. This product may be written or oral preparation for a class or group discussion, an essay, a project, or dramatization. The activity works best, however, when students use data to make and defend a decision. During the final phase or analysis, students review and evaluate the thinking used in the development of their product. If, for example, a group of students has taken and defended a position answering the question: Why did the Colonists decided to break with Great Britain? a teacher might raise the following questions: What assumptions about human nature are implied in your decision? What data did you find most useful in reaching your decision? Are there

other data that you could have used? If so, what Did all colonists hold the same opinion? How would you know? Were reasons for colonial independence similar to more recent independence movements? Would you say your reasons for why the colonists wanted independence reflect latent or manifest events?²⁶

USING TEXTBOOKS EFFECTIVELY

Since the textbook still dominates history instruction, it is unrealistic to propose any change in the teaching of history that does not include ways to improve the use of textbooks.²⁷ Textbooks in themselves are not bad. Despite the criticisms leveled by Francis Fitzgerald in *American History Revised*, textbooks have done more to promote a multicultural/non-sexist interpretation of history than any other teaching medium. The major problem associated with the dominance of the textbook is that they are viewed as the goal of history teaching, not as a place to begin teaching. Suppose the data in the textbook could be taken in capsule form, what would history teachers do? Good teachers, of course, would feel relieved because they could now help students learn history. If viewed as a common of information for use during the acquisition phase of the “complete lesson”, then textbooks can help students develop critical thinking. Textbooks should be viewed as a source of information, but only as one source.

Perhaps the most useful role that a textbook can play is that of a foil. Students must learn to challenge the textbook’s interpretative statements. Textbook authors must be viewed by students as historians with frame of references similar to any other historian. Bad textbooks in the hands of skillful teachers can provide better learning experiences than good textbooks in the hands of poor teachers.

Because about thirty percent of a high school history text consists of graphics — charts, pictures, graphs, tables, maps — they provide the skilled teacher with numerous opportunities to teach many visual skills such as interpreting graphs, tables, and pictures.²⁸

PERSONALIZING HISTORY

Good history teaching develops empathy with those persons in the past who faced crucial dilemmas in their lives. One important aspect

26 For further development of this idea see Clair W. Keller, *Involving Students in the New Social Studies*, Boston: Little Brown, 1974, pp. 26 – 27.

27 Shaver, et. al., “Status of Social Studies”, p. 151.

28 For an excellent lesson showing how to teach students to read pictures see Martin W. Sandler, “How to Read Pictures,” *Improving the Use of Social Studies Textbook*, Williams E. Patton, ed., National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin #63, 1980, pp. 27 – 34.

of developing an historical perspective is the knowledge that many crucial issues often found good and honest people on both sides. Such a perspective enables a person to explain events rather than judge them. By personalizing history, students can explore the moral dilemmas in much the same way as those who lived before them.

I've used numerous methods for personalizing history. Instead of a typical research paper, for instance, students are assigned to write imaginary interviews of person who could have lived in a particular historical period and who faced a crucial decision, i.e. whether or not to support the rebellion against Great Britain.²⁹ The use and citation of primary sources such as memoirs and diaries is still expected but instead of the traditional expository paper, students use a question/answer format. Another useful assignment is to have students assume a particular lifestyle or character and write an imaginary diary or letterbook.³⁰ The diary or letterbook, like the interview, utilizes and cites primary sources. The student plays two roles, that of the diarist or letter writer and that of a an editor. In the latter role, the student explains terms and adds other clarifying information. At other times, I've personalized history by playing a role myself, dressing in an eighteenth Century costume and conducting an imaginary press conference. After opening remarks, students assume the role of reporters, and ask questions.³¹

Another successful method for personalizing historical dilemmas is through the use of two-part biographical sketches of people who faced decisions such as whether or not to join the rebels in 1776 or ratify the Constitution of 1787 or even less rendering decisions like where to settle when migrating to the North American colonies in 1750.³² In this activity, students receive a biographical sketch depicting the person's life to the point where a decision has to be faced whether by choice or by circumstance. First, students identify data in the sketch that provide clues whether the person would be pulled in one direction or the other. They then hypothesize as to the decision made by the person portrayed in the sketch. After the decision has been made by the students, they are provided with the second

29 Clair W. Keller, "Giving Students an Alternative to the traditional Research Paper," *Network News Exchange*, Fall, 1982, pp. 6 – 8.

30 Clair W. Keller, "Using Creative Interviews to Personalize Decision-Making in the American Revolution," *Social Education* 43 March 1979, pp. 217 – 220.

31 For more information on these strategies, see Clair W. Keller, "The Lecture as an Interview," *The History Teacher* 4 May 1974, pp. 271 – 272.

32 Clair W. Keller, "Using Biographical Sketches in Decision-Making Activities," *Indiana Social Studies Quarterly*, 32/33 Winter 1979 – 80, pp. 75 – 79.

part of the sketch describing what actually happened. During the final or analysis stage, students compare their decision with that made by the person in the sketch. The purpose of the activity is not necessarily for students to guess the right decision but to explore the various factors influencing such a decision.

GETTING STUDENTS TO DO HISTORY ASSIGNMENTS

One of the frustrations facing any teacher is the lack of student preparation for class assignments. Social science and history teachers have a particular disadvantage because their assignments are normally long ranged or sufficiently vague so that homework can be put off. That is not the case for other subjects, especially for math and lab sciences. Most students will complete math assignments first because they know there is a daily accountability. On the other hand, assignments in history classes usually consist of reading for or five pages for participation in class discussion. Accountability for history assignments does not take place until the chapter examination. This general approach enable students to put off homework in history classes. To confirm this, simply follow a group of history students from a social studies class into a math class. The difference in student expectations and accomplishment is astounding. If history is to compete with math, history teachers must adopt some form of daily accountability.

Teachers can use several methods for making students accountable for daily preparation. Math teachers check homework daily by having students go to the board and work out problems, so why can't history teachers do the same thing. If students are given several questions to answer from a reading assignment, teachers should have students write their answers in complete sentences on the chalkboard. Students, for examples, could be asked to identify and show the significance of certain persons in relation to a period or topic. These are limited to twenty five words or less which forces them to write in their own words. The several students write their statements for the same person on the chalkboard while others are asked to comment on them. If students statements vary then a discussion can attempt to determine the most accurate or best statement. The best statements could receive "Keller bonus points." This teaches writing, preciseness, conceptualization and historical interpretation and at the same time provides for peer review and pressure. In ten minutes of class time students have learned to be accountable.

At other times, students can write out the answers to different questions, with perhaps two students writing answers to each question so their answers can be compared. Those students who do not write on the board are assigned to evaluate the answers written on the board

by other students. In this way, everyone in the class is involved and accountable. On other occasions, students can be divided into groups, asked to either pick the best answer from among the group or write their own answer. These are then shared. On another day, the teacher may want to check study questions, either by turning them in or by having, as is done in math, students evaluate each other's work. A reward system should be used to recognize students for adequate preparation.

In every instance homework must be considered as preparation for further discussion and not an end in itself. Good class discussion usually results from student preparation and commitment and well-phrased questions that take student preparation and experience into account.

The suggestions described above are designed to encourage students to do their homework so class discussions can go beyond the regurgitation level. This means the teacher must also be prepared by being able to answer a methodological question: How can the data be used to achieve further thinking? Good teaching seldom comes by chance, it usually requires systematic preparation and/or a great amount of experience.

CONCLUSION

Individuals, whether teachers, administrators, professional educators or not can make a difference in the teaching of history within classrooms, schools, districts and even on the national level as attested by David Van Tassel's role in the development of National History Day.

Teachers, of course, can begin immediately simply by trying any of the above suggestions. But these ideas are really designed to serve as a catalyst, helping to create ideas for a teacher's own class circumstance.

Administration and professional educators can also play an important role in implementing change. Good curriculum leadership requires that administrators convey in word and deed the importance of what takes place in the classroom. An administrator can begin by bringing these ideas to the attention of history teachers. Teachers can be encouraged to discuss these ideas by asking if they think any of the suggestions might work in their classrooms. Then the administrator should follow the meeting by expressing at a later time an interest in any results. Did, indeed, history come alive? If nothing else, bring National History Day to the teachers' attention.

Non-professional educators will have a more difficult task in changing the way history is taught. Educators often view suggestions

from outside the profession as interference and tend to react defensively. Parents, however, have the right, if not the obligation, to ask questions about teaching techniques and content. This paper should help the non-professional ask intelligent questions. Parents also have a right to inquire why students are denied the opportunity to participate in such programs as History Day. The tone of one's questions as much as their substance can make a difference.³³ If nothing else, bring this article to the attention of school board members or educators. Show an interest in what happens in the classroom. Write teachers a note when you discover that history actually came alive. Teachers seldom hear from parents when they are doing a good job.

Finally, a word about teacher preparation. The public's concern about teacher preparation has led thirty six states to adopt some form of Competency Assessment programs that require prospective teachers to pass some type of test before being certified.³⁴ Part of this concern may have resulted from the trend during the last decade to prepare social studies teachers in the broad areas of the social studies rather than to major in specific disciplines.³⁵ This tendency has resulted from a desire by administrators to hire teachers who are certified to teach several subjects. Consequently, most states provide for generic certification, i.e. social studies, where the teacher may be certified to teach history with only a little preparation in history. The prospective teacher faces a dilemma when deciding a type of certification because to prepare well in one or two subjects may decrease chances for employment. The need for generic certification is increased by declining enrollments in small high schools where only one or two social studies teachers are needed. The teaching committee of the American Historical Association has recommended a minimum of thirty semester hours in history. The National Council for the Social Studies guidelines have called for a least forty percent of an undergraduate programme be in History and Social Sciences, although the mixture is not stipulated. In the final analysis it is the administrator and not certification standards that often dictate the quality of the teacher being employed. As the study on the status of history in Iowa showed, adequate preparation of subject matter is not always the first consideration when hiring social studies teachers. Whether or not a new teacher can coach a

33 Keller, *Involving*, pp. 109 – 216.

34 J.T. Sandefur, "Teacher Competency Assessment Plans 'Little Short of Phenomenal,'" *AACTE BRIEFS* 3 November 1982, pp. 8 – 9, p. 11.

35 Eva C. Galambos, *Certificates in Georgia with Comparisons with Other States*, Georgia Professional Standards Committee 1981, p. 4.

particular sport may be the determining factor in hiring a new teacher. During the last few years only a few of my students who could or would not also coach have found jobs. The implications for women entering the social studies field should be abundantly clear as shown by a study of hiring practices in Iowa.³⁶

Many critics, some of them in this report, find the schools of education easy targets when it comes to establishing the blame for poor history teaching.³⁷ This criticism is misplaced. The argument that teachers take too many “pedogical” courses is invalid since only about twenty percent of a student’s preparation in secondary education takes place in the College of Education. The implication is that if students could take more courses in the disciplines rather than education, teachers would be better prepared. While it is true that studies show little correlation between the number of education courses taken and good teaching, studies also show little correlation between subject matter preparation and good teaching. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the way in which a perspective teacher has been taught history is important in the way a teacher teaches history.³⁸ In other words, the burden for “Making History Come Alive” lies with history departments not Colleges of Education. Still, few Departments of History take their teacher training role seriously. How many college or university history departments, for instance, offer perspective history teachers any approach besides the lecture/discussion method? Not many, if a survey of history requirements in Iowa’s colleges and universities is any indication of the national picture.³⁹ History departments must become partners in the process of training history teachers if any long-range solutions are to be achieved. Departments of History must take an active role in training teachers by offering courses specifically designed for history teachers.⁴⁰ Few history departments

36 Rober I. Wessel, “Athletics and Their Effects on Female Teachers in Public Schools in Iowa,” *Iowa State Journal of Research* Feb., 1981, pp. 245 – 252.

37 Howard, *Making History Come Alive*, pp. 39 – 40; The proposed NCSS Guidelines on certification recommend 20 percent of undergraduates preparation be in education and psychology.

38. Karen B. Wiley and Jeanne Race, “The Status of Pre-College Science, Mathematic and Social Science Education, 1955 – 1975: (A Literature Review),” *The Status of Pre-College Science, Mathematics and Social Studies Educational Practices in U.S. Schools*, Washington D.C., 1978, p. 42.

39 Clair W. Keller, “Certification and Teacher Preparation,” Paper delivered at SIGHT Conference, History in the 1980s, Preliminary Draft, (unpublished), November 23, 1982, Table 2.

40 Howard, *Making History Come Alive*, p. 40.

discuss the needs of teachers when developing their curriculum). The two-year sequence entitled *United States and the World* suggested earlier raises a serious concern about preparing teachers for such a course. How will teachers prepare to teach such courses, let alone find adequate materials for use with high school students.

History departments, as mentioned earlier, have contributed to the fragmentation of the traditional survey courses through the emphasis on the specificity of their course offerings. Where, then, do teachers find the opportunity for synthesis as history majors. Perhaps all history students involved in teacher training should be required to take a senior seminar designed to help them put "humpty dump-ty" back together again.

History can be made to come alive but not for all students. For some students we may get no more response than the casual remark: "I didn't mind this class today" or "This was certainly more interesting than". More, we hope would say "I like this class because we never know what's going to happen." Others might comment, "This is my favourite class because it makes me think!" A few might even exclaim "Until this year I never liked history, but I sure do now. It's my favourite course with my favourite teacher!" These comments are not unrealistic expectations for most students in a good class with an enthusiastic teacher. Some students do like history. Many more can be made to like it or at least tolerate it. But to do this, history must be made more exciting than what takes place in most classes today. I taught in one high school where the student newspaper wrote an editorial thanking the history department for making history "exciting". It happens but not often enough. One hope for this presentation was to help teachers make it happen more often.