

## Thinking Historically, Teaching Historically: Perspectives on the Professional Development of Teachers from a Teaching American History Grant

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WHICH ADJECTIVES would best describe our idealized history classroom? They certainly would not be the ones some students use to characterize their experiences learning history in school, with “boring” chief among them. How many teachers and professors of history have stared back at the anguished look of an adult after revealing they teach history for a living? “Oh,” some wince, “I hated history in school.” These poor scarred souls are conjuring from their memory’s depths remembrances of school lessons gone bad, droning lectures on events seemingly disconnected from anything that might interest them, and assignments crafted during the “dark ages” which were designed, they are convinced, to inflict punishment for crimes real and imagined. “Come now,” we protest, “It’s not as bad as all that.” But our friends sulk away, still twitching.

This melodrama often confounds history teachers and professors who see in history a vital and enlivening subject. In our idealized classroom, the one we imagine ourselves teaching, students are abuzz with questions. They are eager to jump into a serious analysis of primary sources. They relish additional opportunities to engage historiographical debates. They are, as we like to say, “thinking historically.”

While there are few easy ways to create these idealized classrooms, the experiences of one Teaching American History (TAH) grant revealed

several lessons that might help strengthen the professional development of K-12 teachers. In doing so, we might come closer to the sort of classroom we see ourselves teaching.<sup>1</sup>

The Wayne Finger Lakes Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), in collaboration with the State University of New York at Cortland (SUNY Cortland), received a TAH grant in 2004. Unlike most grants funded by the TAH program, this project, called “Crossroads of Change,” focused on a particular period of American history and developed an unusual approach to professional development for history teachers. “Crossroads of Change” immersed teachers in the antebellum period by focusing on the history of a single community and its connection to broader national themes. The community was Seneca Falls, New York, a modest-sized village in a region made famous by a small band of reformers struggling to win for women certain rights they believed inhered in them, not as women, but as individuals. Working with a core group of teachers in the first year, the project ran a series of graduate-style seminars focused on the broad themes of the era. Teachers were then challenged to help write an online course using primary sources and artifacts from project partners, including the Seneca Falls Historical Society, the National Women’s Hall of Fame, and the Women’s Rights National Historic Park.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the course was to help other teachers become knowledgeable about the history of the United States by viewing it through the lens of a “crossroads” community. “Crossroads” drew heavily on the work of historian Judy Wellman, whose *The Road to Seneca Falls* asked why Seneca Falls became the locus of such enormous reform activity when it did. Wellman—and subsequently the teachers—traversed important topics such as the market economy, the transportation and communication revolutions, the history of evangelicalism and moral reform, women’s history, the history of race and slavery, political history, and, of course, biography.<sup>3</sup> These themes were essential to understanding the history of this small “crossroads” community. By looking at Seneca Falls, they saw America.

Two other online courses we created focused on the skills of the historian and teaching skills and strategies. The goal of these courses was to introduce teachers to the basic skills they would need to develop authentic teaching materials for classroom use. Video interviews with historians introduced teachers to various primary sources, the pitfalls and challenges such sources present, and the questions historians ask of the sources to make best use of them. Another segment on evaluating websites helped teachers make informed judgments concerning the reliability of primary source collections they found on the web. Courses emphasized the process historians follow when interpreting the past. Equipping teachers with these skills might embolden them to use the census, maps, diaries, and artifacts in the

classroom. We hoped that teachers, now imbued with a feel for historical methods, would help their students understand perspective, chronology, context, causation, and significance when using primary sources.

As a capstone experience, we asked teachers to use the elements of the online courses to create a lesson plan, but we required them to frame the lesson around a historical question. We asked teachers to articulate a problem that needed solving. By compelling our teachers to raise questions, we forced them to think about a topic's significance. We modeled Wellman's question: "Why did the Women's Rights convention take place in Seneca Falls in 1848?" Her question excites one's curiosity: What sort of place was Seneca Falls in 1848? Why 1848 and not 1838 or 1858? What sort of person attended the convention? What were the results? By framing the lesson as a question, other questions spring to mind and suddenly, a conversation begins, a research agenda develops, and a teaching strategy emerges.

Our experiences working with teachers yielded a number of lessons that might guide other professional development programs and historians working with in-service and pre-service history teachers. *First, historians working with teacher professional development programs must emphasize a definition of the past as something to be discovered, not memorized.* By framing the past as a series of questions, teachers and, ultimately, their students come to a more exciting appreciation of history. In their book, *The Presence of the Past*, the late Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen discovered that, contrary to popular assumptions, most Americans were connected to the past.<sup>4</sup> Americans frequently engaged in the past: researching family history, attending family reunions and sharing stories and photographs, visiting historic sites and history museums, organizing scrapbooks of family milestones, reading history books, and watching history documentaries. (They found, curiously, that many Americans warmed to the "past," but not to "history," which carried connotations of school lessons).<sup>5</sup> No doubt, it was a curiosity about their family's experience that pulled these ordinary Americans back into the past: asking a grandmother how she survived the Great Depression, asking a dad why his family moved north when he was a child, asking an uncle what he saw during World War II. These are the questions that lead Americans back into the past. Historians and teachers should use students' natural curiosity about the past to hook them into the past they want to teach. Historians and teachers need to use questions as a vehicle for framing our explorations of the past.

Framing the past as a series of questions teaches students an important lesson. The past is a conversation about interpretation and they are invited to join the discussion. Historians need to make explicit what they take as a normal part of their work: the past is an open-ended conversation with

tentative conclusions but few definitive answers. The past is knowable, but modesty is a virtue. A historian's conclusion is often challenged by competing interpretations. History is, essentially, an argument about the past, not a game of memorizing names and dates. However, in emphasizing the tentative nature of these answers, historians need to be careful not to entrap students and teachers in a postmodern nihilism that might, by calling everything into question, render the work of history superfluous. If one person's past is as valid as another person's past, then whose past do we accept? Like Joyce Appleby and her colleagues in *Telling the Truth about History*, historians can model the "republic of learning" they envision. Like the American republic, which imposes certain obligations on its citizens, the historian's "republic of learning" imposes an obligation to participate in a debate about the meaning and truth of the past. As they note, the informed dialogue and debate, where ideas are kicked around, challenged, and contested, can lead to the truths everyone seeks about the past and themselves.

*Second, historians and even teachers should be more transparent in their practices.* This is a lesson encouraged by Bob Bain in his very exciting research on history teacher professional development. Students cannot help but think of the past as fixed and immutable if historians and teachers merely profess truths from the lectern. If, however, they use the lecture as an opportunity to show how they work out a particular historical problem (why they chose to ask *that* question, why they chose to use *that* source, why they chose to pick *that* date and *that* person, etc.), then students will come to appreciate history as a process and not as a package.<sup>7</sup>

Edward Ayers and Fritz Fischer emphasized a related point when they called on history departments to recognize the future teachers in their classrooms. While not all departments of history include formal programs of teacher preparation, most history classrooms probably enroll students who will become history teachers. It is important, then, to be self-conscious in our practices so that our students see what we are doing when we organize a lecture, begin and end a course at particular moments, and organize the history curriculum in specific ways.<sup>8</sup> The point bears repeating. History as sleight-of-hand, where the teacher presents the past as "Thing Known," encourages students either to tune out or to accept the past as one story to be learned and recapitulated. By drawing back the curtain that shrouds the inner workings of the historical process, we invite students to help interpret the past and awaken them to the interpretive possibilities and debates that are the heart of our profession. Professional development projects, such as the TAH grants, can be leaders in this effort by providing opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively with historians so that they see how the past gets interpreted.

Teachers in the “Crossroads of Change” grant, for example, became co-authors of the online content course in American history. During the year, and culminating in an intensive five-day summer institute, teachers joined project historians in creating, selecting, and framing primary and secondary resources. The project brought teachers into the process. They debated which primary sources could best reveal particular points we wanted emphasized. We discussed periodization: at what point in time does it make most sense to begin and end a particular story? Teachers became sensitive to issues of causation. The selection and organization of sources, they discovered, shaped the ultimate interpretation or argument we made. A different selection of sources with a different emphasis might change that interpretation. Finally, we discussed narrative. We debated the “story” we were telling with the choices we were making. By inviting teachers “behind the curtain” to see the authorial choices historians make, we help teachers think historically. Teachers might then invite their own students into the historian’s work. The result could be a reorientation of the way teachers and students think of history.

*Third, historians’ work with teachers must be on-going, intensive, and intentional.* One or two workshops unconnected to each other cannot provide the sort of training that will make a difference in teacher practices. In a second grant awarded July 2007 to the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES, we deliberately built in mechanisms to provide teachers with a coherent and enduring experience. Monthly graduate-style seminars culminating in a summer institute are supplemented by mentoring partnerships between our historians and our teachers. These relationships inspire collaboration, foster a community of history professionals, and keep teachers focused on improving their practices.

*Fourth, assignments should employ active-learning strategies through purposeful projects that emphasize history as an argument based on evidence.* We hope to accomplish this by inviting our teachers to create video history documentaries. These documentaries draw on the same skills historians use to create their versions of the past: asking good historical questions, identifying appropriate primary sources, interpreting evidence, and arranging conclusions into a logical order. Assignments such as these can highlight the authorial decisions historians make in creating their interpretations of the past. Teachers will come to understand that it matters what evidence they choose to include and exclude, which individuals they choose to privilege and ignore, and which events they choose to emphasize and slight. Ultimately, we hope the training our teachers receive will embolden them to take on similar assignments with their students.

*Fifth, effective professional development for history teachers must be based on projects that have immediate utility for teachers and that come*

*from their own curricular needs and interests.* TAH-funded projects can be most helpful by inviting teachers into their planning, by providing a variety of opportunities to develop materials and classroom resources, and by recognizing that teachers have different needs and interests. No single outcome will work for all teachers. Building assignments that teachers define and shape, however, will give them the latitude to explore relevant topics and teaching strategies. Teachers should be able to create authentic teaching assignments for their students. It should be just as important for professional development programs to provide relevant and useful opportunities to teachers.

*Finally, effective professional development must become part of a culture of self-improvement and institutional capacity building.* OCM BOCES created a Social Studies Leader Network for developing turn-key training in social studies throughout the schools. We are training a cohort of teachers who will revitalize history teaching across the region and embed a culture of professional development to carry on the work when the TAH grant ends.

This same imperative to sustain a project should motivate historians in their work with history majors. Ultimately, historians want the training they provide students in the classroom to have a life beyond their years in college. By treating undergraduate teacher candidates as incipient professionals, historians foster an ethic of work that may encourage a self-perception as life-long learners. The goal is the same for TAH grants working with teachers. We want nothing less than a radical reorientation of history as experienced in the schools. By emphasizing the process of history and by encouraging teachers and students to think and teach historically, we might render its study more enticing to those who still twitch at the faint memory of their school days lumbering under the weight of dead facts.

## Notes

1. Since 2001, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded more than 1,000 TAH grants totaling \$1 billion to local educational agencies working with K-12 teachers of American history. The U.S. Department of Education's site includes additional information: <<http://www.ed.gov/programs/teachinghistory/index.html>>.
2. TAH courses are administered by AccelerateU.org, the online professional development initiative sponsored by The Project Accelerate Consortium. Search for "Teaching American History" at <<http://accelerateu.org/indexGroup/index.cfm?fuseAction=yourCourses.Main>> to preview courses.
3. Judy Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First*

*Woman's Rights Convention* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

4. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

5. Ibid., 6.

6. Joyce Appleby et al., *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), chapter 8.

7. Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 333-336.

8. Edward Ayers and Fritz Fischer, "The Next Generation of History Teachers: A Challenge to Departments of History at American Colleges and Universities," <<http://www.historians.org/pubs/Free/historyteaching/index.htm>>.



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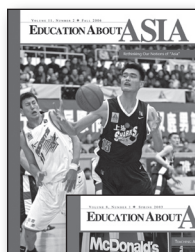
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