

**REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD
TEACHING HISTORY NOW: SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

Sarah Drake Brown

- Contributors: *Todd Beach, Eastview High School, Apple Valley, MN*
Kristy Bruger, University of Oklahoma
Lendol Calder, Augustana College
Karen Carroll Cave, National Humanities Center
Frederick D. Drake, Illinois State University
Stephen Kneeshaw, College of the Ozarks
Bruce Lesh, Maryland State Department of Education
Jodie Mader, Thomas More College
Donn Neal, National Archives and Records Administration
Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Iowa State University
Raymond Screws, Arkansas National Guard Museum
Wilson J. Warren, Western Michigan University

The personal reflections offered by history educators working in schools since *Teaching History* debuted in 1976 acknowledge tension between change and continuity in teaching. The majority of the submissions were largely positive with respect to the evolution of history teaching, especially in terms of secondary education. At a practical level, contributors recalled the purple ink of ditto machines and their experiences transitioning to the digital age, noting the challenges and thrills of using primary sources with students in both contexts. History educators remarked on the early promise of internet resources that unfortunately resembled the unregulated "Wild West," and they celebrated the ways in which sources from locations such as the Library of Congress and the National Archives revolutionized classroom teaching.

Several submissions emphasized the "paradigm shift" in history education in recent decades which demanded that instructors "bend and grow with the job." For many, this change reflected a "synergy between research and resources" as the internet emerged at the same time as burgeoning scholarship pertaining to "historical thinking, historical literacy, and historical investigation." Such developments encouraged many history teachers to reimagine their role in the classroom to include an emphasis on the skills and methods associated with historical cognition. While none of our contributors referenced important changes to historical content or interpretations, many of the submissions from individuals who focus on secondary history teaching alluded to the emerging commitment to developing history's "habits of mind." Much of this commitment stemmed from professional development associated with Teaching American History grants, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and the National Council for History Education. Others pointed to innovative curricula from the Stanford History Education Group, the Choices program, and the DBQ Project.

Such developments created, at least on the secondary level, "a strong sense of community around [non-traditional] practices" that challenged the history teaching dominant in the early years of Larry Cuban's career. As one teacher explained, "History education has transformed from what we know to why we know, from what we remember to why we remember, from what we understand to why we understand."

Importantly, while most contributors described a field shaped by positive change, a few submissions balanced optimism with comments about how the "conversation" about teaching history needs to evolve past "anecdotal evidence" toward the sort of systematic collection and analysis of history teaching and learning associated with the growing field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). For these history teachers, the continuity of history education centered on the need for further research to better understand teaching and learning about the past. Finally, several contributors noted the influential role standards have played with respect to history education. The three essays that follow capture the optimism that endures regarding secondary school history teaching and the challenges that remain.

Wilson J. Warren

I have taught history in the middle and high school grades as well as the undergraduate and graduate levels over more than thirty years. In the fall of 1983, I took the required social studies methods class as part of the teacher credentialing requirements at the University of Iowa. Each student in the class was required to produce a unit lesson plan. I did mine on "How to Conduct and Present Local History Research." It was a very detailed three-week plan aimed at helping high school students produce local history research projects that reflected significant national themes. In the spring of 1984, I did my student teaching at Iowa City West High School. I primarily taught ninth-grade U.S. History and was able to try out some of the unit with the students.

Starting in 1994, I began teaching social studies methods courses, first at Valley City State University in North Dakota, then Indiana State University, and now Western Michigan University. Over time, I abandoned lessons on historical research. I did so not because I lost interest in the value of high school students doing historical research, but largely because emphasis in secondary-level history classes increasingly shifted to addressing the specific historical content associated with standards-based instruction. In the past twenty years, state history standards have become virtually identical with curriculum. The flexibility that teachers had before the standards movement to engage students in historical research, if they chose to do so, has been lost in the push to focus on content. Even in AP and IB history classes, students rarely have the opportunity to pursue in-depth historical research projects. They might analyze some primary sources, but seldom are they allowed the freedom and time to produce lengthy research papers.

Larry Cuban's assessment of history teaching over the past half-century emphasizes continuity in instructional practices: lecture, whole group discussion, textbooks, worksheets, and so on. He notes that perhaps one of every five secondary-level history teachers today emphasize historical reading and writing skills. I have no doubt that his assessment is on target. However, given the shift to increasingly specific standards, including those that have incorporated the Common Core, teachers who would like their students to spend three weeks on doing local history research projects would not be able to do so without sacrificing attention to significant content objectives.

Todd Beach

In the summer of 1896, John Dewey visited several supply stores across the city of Chicago searching for classroom desks and chairs for the soon to be opened University of Chicago Laboratory School. While explaining to one dealer how he envisioned teachers and students would use the furniture, the man replied, "I am afraid we do not have what we want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening."

In many ways this statement speaks to Larry Cuban's ideas and subsequent research and work in the classroom pertaining to the teaching of history in American schools. While there remain examples of students in social studies classrooms passively completing exercises of rote memorization, there are also instances where teachers and students are actively engaged in historical inquiry and reasoning as they develop the knowledge and skills needed to be thoughtful citizens in our society.

The Standards of Literacy in History/Social Studies that were legislated as part of the Common Core are one reason for optimism. The standards detail the cognitive skills expected of students similar to those outlined in *Teaching History Then and Now*. Teachers are expected to help students learn the skills of sourcing, contextualization, and comparison, and to report these findings in written form using credible evidence.

Another reason for optimism is the recent redesigned history curriculum by the College Board for the Advanced Placement program that is similarly focused on students demonstrating skills of historical inquiry and reasoning. While Cuban acknowledges these changes in his book, he incorrectly focuses on the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the controversy surrounding illustrative examples (or more specifically a lack of the "right" examples) for the AP U.S. History curriculum.

It is actually the College Board that owns the AP program. The redesigned history curriculums (U.S., European, World) underwent a lengthy review process involving college/university history professors, high school teachers, as well as representatives from College Board and ETS, which engineers the assessments. The outcome of this process, as well as the efforts by others such as the Stanford History Education Group,

also mentioned in the text, closely resemble the ideas Cuban and colleagues attempted in the 1950s and 60s.

The most recent developments are why I am optimistic about the teaching of history in our schools.

Frederick D. Drake

I was a history educator for over forty years, beginning in 1969 in a Midwestern rural high school where I taught students for twenty years and concluding my career at a Midwestern university where I prepared history teachers for their classrooms. When I began teaching, I felt I could experiment and did so by telling stories, formulating lectures, asking questions to discuss historical issues, and integrating primary sources with historians' interpretations. I faced challenges: I was told "students can't handle primary sources" and that "students only want facts;" administrators often questioned my emphasis on primary and secondary sources and wanted me to focus only on preparing students for a job; and useful sources were very difficult to find then. The internet was unavailable, and the few textbook companies that offered sources were not always the "ore" of history I found interesting. Nevertheless, I was able to flesh out sources by roaming the stacks of a university library. I enjoyed editing the primary sources for classroom discussions and, similarly, editing historians' interpretations to get at the heart of their respective arguments concerning historical issues. Teaching in a rural high school for twenty years offered me leeway to experiment with sources in history and to develop the craft of telling stories and narratives that provide a meaningful framework to organize human experiences.

When I began preparing history majors to become history teachers in 1989, I wanted future teachers to embrace the use of sources. Today, primary sources are in abundance in books and available through well-shepherd and respected internet sites. In recent years, research on historical thinking has exploded to help teachers and students. That has made teaching history more exciting and demanding, and it makes me optimistic for the future of the discipline. Standards have caused administrators to consider history important, though their real appreciation for the discipline might still be related more to vocationalism and the testing/accountability culture rather than a learning/assessment culture. And that is troublesome. We might be using primary sources for different purposes now—not as the ore of history but to justify history's acceptance as an important subject to pass standardized tests. By relying on standards as a pathway to achieve importance in the curriculum, we might have placed ourselves in the position of the sorcerer's apprentice, unable to control the forces it unleashed.