

THE CHALLENGE OF RETHINKING HISTORY EDUCATION

On Practices, Theories, and Policy

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CHAPTER 1

Seeking a More Potent Approach to Teaching History

Fifty-three years old on his next birthday and from solid Anglo New England stock, Bob Brinton has been teaching U.S. history for almost three decades. By some lights, he is a master. Much admired and respected, he heads up the social studies department at Oak Hollow High School in a large suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic region. The district adjoins an urban core. Once a predominantly wealthy suburb with a panoply of country clubs and spacious homes surrounded by smartly manicured lawns, the portion of the district served by Oak Hollow has slowly evolved as the urban environment next door expanded, seeping over its invisible geographic borders into its suburban neighbors' backyards. As a result, Oak Hollow's student population grew increasingly less European-American and more African, Asian, and Latino/a American. Despite these rather profound demographic changes, Bob Brinton's teaching has remained largely unaffected. He approaches his U.S. history classes much as he has done throughout his long tenure.

Brinton's favorite historical period is the American Civil War, largely because he so admires Abraham Lincoln. Brinton is somewhat the Lincoln aficionado. He has read most of the best-sellers on Lincoln and finds him a true, red-white-and-blue American hero, who historian John Bodnar might refer to as a quintessential patriot of the officialized history of the nation.¹ Brinton spends 12 class sessions on Lincoln. In fact, his entire treatment of the Civil War turns on Lincoln's axis. Little is said about the war itself, the lengthy military campaigns, the profound death, destruction, and dislocation, the soldiers who gave up their lives on both sides of the line, or of the raft of causes historians have explored for why the war was fought. Rather, Brinton entreats his charges to Civil War history as Lincoln biography, beginning with his early years in Illinois and ending with his assassination.

What drives Brinton's curricular and pedagogical choices is his conviction that America has lost its connection to the patriot-statesman—hero, one, on his view, perfectly epitomized by the life and presidency of a man commemorated in the massive edifice anchoring the west end of the Mall in Washington, DC. Brinton sees his role as refurbishing and then burnishing that patriot—hero archetype in the minds of his high school students. He labors intently to show his pupils how great leaders, such as Lincoln in particular, have shaped what he considers to be the most incredible national experiment known to human kind, the creation and development of the United States of America.

Brinton is unapologetic about his flag waving and the trafficking he does in American exceptionalism. He wants to burn the image of Lincoln—the savior of the Union, the slave emancipator—onto the neural networks of those 16-year-olds sitting in front of him. He wants them to cherish Lincoln as much as he does, to understand the sacrifice such great patriot heroes are willing to undertake in service of the nation. He has no difficulty noting that we Americans have not seen a national leader of Lincoln's caliber since, perhaps (and only perhaps), Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He laments the loss of such great American leaders and appears to be in the business of challenging his students with the memories of the Lincoln he narrates to embrace the archetype fully as a means of kindling the embers of national leadership so long lost.

Brinton, unsurprisingly, loves to talk about Lincoln to his students. It might be better said that he talks at them, for most of the 12 class sessions are spent with Brinton telling stories about the humble Lincoln of lore who rose from the lowly log cabin to reside in the White House and preside over what Brinton believes was the most dangerous threat to American national development the nation ever faced. Brinton has a well-worn notebook containing almost 75 pages of lecture notes that frame his talks to his students, although he seldom cracks the notebook's cover anymore. He can recount the stories the pages contain at will. Students spent a good share of the time taking notes on Brinton's talks, following a time-honored tradition in history courses.²

Brinton is a powerful storyteller; always has been. His students generally report enjoying his talks, feeling stimulated listening to his verbal nuances and dramatic flourishes. Students regularly vote him as their favorite teacher and clamor to get into his sections. Rarely is there a seat left open in his classroom of 32 chairs. However, students can be heard occasionally to complain about how his tests are difficult because he is so picky about details, especially true with regard to the 40-item multiple-choice exam at the end of the Lincoln unit. Brinton also is known to complain that his students do not do as well as he would like them to on that test. He

wonders why their memories are so thin, especially since his stories are so rich and vivid.

A good measure of students' difficulties in doing well on Brinton's test on knowledge of the Civil War can be traced to his insistence that they carefully read the textbook, *The History of the United States*, Daniel Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley's treatment of the subject. This treatment spans almost 30 pages and deals with much more about the Civil War than Lincoln's role in it alone. Because Brinton devotes so much of his classroom time presenting Lincoln, he relies on the textbook chapter and his students' consumption of it to fill in missing details that round out the story. It is a pedagogical choice rationalized on the basis, he says, of the importance of Lincoln and his role in preserving the nation and ending slavery. For their part, some students confess that they find the textbook sleep-inducing and therefore do not attend to it well enough to score successfully on the roughly one-third of the 40-item exam that deals directly with textbook substance not discussed in class. They say that they wish Brinton would either take time in class to review the textbook chapter, or dispense with assigning it altogether and simply test them on his Lincoln narratives.



Directly across the hall from Bob Brinton, Nancy Todd teaches five sections of the same U.S. history curriculum every day to students who were not lucky enough to get into one of his sections. Todd has been teaching for six years and has been mentored by Brinton since her arrival at Oak Hollow. Brinton likes her very much and enjoys mentoring her. He remains puzzled, however, by her teaching practice, largely because she approaches it much differently than he does. She spends less time on Lincoln per se and focuses more on the historical scholarship surrounding the causes of the Civil War and what its conclusion portended for those who experienced its destructive consequences.

Todd sees Lincoln as a complex man, very much a person of his time, conflicted about race, slavery, and its impact on the union of states, but also someone who adhered to a view of African-Americans that was imbued with a sense of their intellectual and personal inferiority. He pitied them and lamented their condition, but was far from understanding them as the equal of whites. In her three-period pedagogical rendition, Lincoln is neither glorified nor commemorated, but treated as a man thrust into an untenable situation, who chose to do what he thought he had to in order to solve what appeared to be intractable national problems. Yet, and much unlike Brinton, she seldom shares her view of Lincoln directly with

her students. Instead, she insists that students read Lincoln “in the flesh” as it were and begin building their own interpretations of the man and the sixteenth President.

She begins her three-session treatment of Lincoln, much as she did many historical topics in the school district’s U.S. history curriculum, with questions: Who was this man, Abraham Lincoln? Are the labels, “Savior of the Union” and “The Great Emancipator,” fair and accurate ones? Like Brinton, Todd keeps notebooks. However, in her notebooks, Todd had collected and collated selected source documents, speeches Lincoln had made, archival records, newspaper accounts and editorials, descriptions of Lincoln’s policies and their effects, written by historians both more recent and at some remove from the present. Students are given copies of these source materials and invited to read them carefully.

Todd teaches her students that history involves an exercise in which investigators, armed with perplexing, but intellectually fertile questions of the sort just noted, pour over documents and the *residua* from the past as they work to answer their questions. The documentary record is to be understood as a form of evidence for making claims about, say, who Lincoln was and whether or not the labels and descriptors often associated with him—modest and unassuming, brilliant and perspicacious, national savior, emancipator, patriot—are valid. It is the students’ task to study some of this source material with an eye to building an interpretation or understanding of Lincoln and his role in the Civil War. Claims about and interpretations and understandings of Lincoln that develop from the sources she supplied need to be supported by evidence drawn directly from those sources.³

Convinced that they are all capable of such efforts, Todd teaches her students how to build arguments relying on such evidence-based claims.⁴ In short, she models for them how historical accounts are written, a practice that characterizes activity in the discipline of history. Students then get a turn to write their own. The invitations to write concern Lincoln vis-à-vis the questions she presents to them that guide their perusal of the source material. She assesses the students primarily on their capacity to build an evidenced-based account and demonstrate budding prowess in citing sources. She is preparing them for the appearance of just such a question on the unit exam.

It seems that there was always a student or two, perhaps in an effort to condense and simplify their task, who ask about drawing from the Boorstin and Kelley textbook. Todd reminds these students that the textbook holds no privileged epistemological status in her classroom and needs to be understood as only one additional source. She also cautions about relying too heavily on the textbook, for, on her view, it contains

no traces of the source material its authors had used to build their account, despite its authoritative, omniscient tone.⁵ There would be no way to check the accuracy of its claims short of going to other source materials, many of which she just gives them anyway, she often gently needles.

After one class period and a portion of the next, during which she roams the room observing how students are using the sources and providing guidance where she thinks necessary, she brings the class back to frontal attention. She begins with the label “Savior of the Union.” She calls on a student, asking her to address whether the label is accurate. After this student provides a response, several others are summoned to do the same. After 15 minutes, Todd has covered the chalkboard with student interpretations of Lincoln. With what remains of this class period, an intense debate frequently ensues. Students differ in their assessments of Lincoln. Some believe that Lincoln indeed deserves the label while others find it exaggerated, preferring to draw in other historical agents as also important to the effort at preserving the union. As students offer their assessments of the label’s accuracy, Todd sometimes pauses to remind them to indicate the sources upon which they are drawing.

In the class period that follows, time is spent judging the claim that Lincoln was the “Great Emancipator.” Students’ evaluations almost always vary. Some insist that Lincoln’s own words betray his racist sympathies, that he saw the slaves as intellectually and morally inferior. Others note that Lincoln appeared increasingly uncomfortable with the ways slaves were treated. While not necessarily disagreeing with their classmates’ claims, another cluster of students argues that the Great Emancipator label was more, rather than less accurate because, after all, Lincoln did spearhead an effort that would later result in the end of slavery. A student will typically remark that Lincoln was only responding to a long line of abolitionist rhetoric, and, being the pragmatic politician that he was, believed that to salvage a union of states, he had to play the abolitionists’ game.

During such discussions, Todd guides and occasionally cajoles students. She typically says little other than to ask questions about evidence for claims and query students about where they think the preponderance of the evidence lays. Near the conclusion of this sort of class, Todd brings the discussion to an end by observing two matters about which she has often reminded them: that it was often in the nature of historical investigations to end in some dispute with multiple accounts competing for attention, and that it is exceptionally important to make every effort to judge historical agents such as Lincoln in the context of their past, rather than from the viewpoint of our present. She then will spend five minutes describing the unit test that would occur the following day.

Here again, Todd's pedagogical choices differ from Brinton's in crucial ways and, as her mentor, a bit to his ongoing chagrin. Although U.S. history courses are not tested under the state's accountability regime, the school district in which Oak Hollow sits has pursued a long-standing policy of centralized unit exams. Curriculum specialists in each subject domain develop test banks. Teachers are required to base 80 percent of their unit tests on test-bank items. But teachers are free to develop items of their own for the remaining 20 percent. All items in the history test bank are multiple choice, focusing students principally on recalling (or recognizing) correct details from a list of distracters. Because the history curriculum must be standardized in order to standardize items in the test bank, the history textbook serves as the central repository of details, ideas, and historical figures around which items are written. Brinton draws all of his items from the test bank, exercising his 20 percent professional latitude by using all the Lincoln questions available. He also has been known to submit Lincoln questions to the curriculum office, successfully getting on average one or two questions accepted every year.

Todd uses her degree of professional freedom to invite her students to write. Typically, her unit exams include one or two items in which she supplies students several excerpted source documents, often containing conflicting perspectives or otherwise discrepant accountings. She then poses an investigative question. Drawing from the accounts and citing them as evidence, students are to craft an argument that stakes out a position vis-à-vis that question. The Civil War unit exam she often uses contains one such prompt on Lincoln:

Some claim that Lincoln can be understood as the Great Emancipator. Others claim that this label exaggerates his legacy. Using the documents I have supplied you and drawing from them to support a position, address the following question:
Is the label Great Emancipator an accurate one in describing Lincoln and his policies?

As she was wont to do, she tells students that the question is designed to be provocative, but can create the sense of a false dichotomy, and therefore students are free to stake out middling positions as long as they adequately defend their stance with documentary evidence. Students sometimes wonder if they can cite sources beyond those provided on the exam. Todd will note that this is acceptable and encouraged, but such sources must be identified.

Todd reminds students that she will be relying on the scoring rubric she often uses in grading these interpretive essays, one she always lays out

for them early in the semester. Because the prompt effectively requests the assumption of a position for which there was no definitive correct answer, Todd's rubric contains criteria focused more on procedural components. It hinges on four categories:

- (a) Stakes out a position and argues it effectively;
- (b) Defends position by clearly citing evidence from documentary sources;
- (c) Shows evidence of having assessed the reliability of sources; and
- (d) Demonstrates understanding (of events, persons, and ideas) by displaying the capacity to reason within the historical context.

Each category is scored on the three-point system with 2 being the highest score and 0 being the lowest. By this point in the semester in which they deal with the Civil War, and following persistent pedagogical effort on Todd's part to that point, students are typically averaging scores between 6 and 7 relative to the maximum 8 possible points they could attain on such essays.

Although Todd chooses to focus her students' attention concerning the Civil War around investigative issues and complex, thick historical questions (e.g., What was the impact of the abolitionist movement on the outbreak of the war? Should the South have been permitted to secede from the United States and form a separate country? Why did Southerners believe their cause was just, despite the apparent ravages of slavery?), her students consistently do somewhat better on the standardized multiple-choice test items than do Brinton's students. The only exception to this rule is with regard to the Lincoln items, over which Brinton's students most often hold a slim edge. This only adds to his mild vexation for he is convinced his students should perform much better than Todd's, especially on the Lincoln questions. Despite getting somewhat better grades on average and finding her investigative approach engaging, Todd's students often grumble about how hard her course is, how much work and writing they have to do to succeed. In private moments, though, a number of them concede that they learn much, find the investigative approach engaging, and believe that they develop a much deeper understanding of history through Todd's efforts. Nonetheless, some of them say that they would prefer to take the course with Brinton, if only because they think his version is easier to master.

FROM COMMON TO UNCOMMON TEACHING PRACTICES

Those familiar with the research on history teaching will recognize Brinton's approach as fairly common pedagogical practice.⁶ His efforts

might be even construed as better than average. Students clamor to get into his sections. They claim to find his Lincoln lectures interesting and believe that with average effort they can do well in his course. He is a compelling storyteller, whose delivery and cadence keeps students awake and reasonably engaged. His take on Lincoln is in line with the most high school textbook treatments and with common public memories and understandings of his greatness as a leader during a deeply troubling period in American history.

As such, Brinton traffics largely in an inspiring, commemorative, heritage-infused approach to teaching U.S. history. After Maurice Halbwachs,⁷ we might call it part of a collective-memory project, one in which school-based versions of United States history play an important role in socializing and Americanizing the young, habituating them to celebrating and revering national heroes who sacrificed much to fuel the development of the most powerful (some might also say exceptional) nation on Earth. Along with the typical United States history textbook, teachers such as Brinton can serve as crucial conduits through which the schools' version of collective-memory is delivered.

This collective-memory project, to use this term as shorthand, can be characterized in its school form by a nationalist-oriented commitment to rendering the history of nation building in the United States as one of relentless progress in overcoming the difficulties that beset a democratic experiment, one bent on wresting *unum* from *pluribus*. Respect for the difference that beliefs in *pluribus* allow underwrites southern states exercise of secession from the union, for example. In valuing *unum* over *pluribus*, Lincoln's greatness lies in the ways in which he draws the line, refusing to acknowledge Southern secession, and going to war to preserve the nation as constituted by its amalgamated states. This is Brinton's view at least. Lincoln becomes the patriot hero because he prevents the nation-building experiment from crumbling. The *United States* triumph over forces designed to render them *Divided States*. On Brinton's view, there may be a no more important national leader than Lincoln in this regard, the likes of whom are desperately needed to arrest the country's twenty-first-century slide toward political and cultural polarization.⁸ Brinton's narrative register puts the importance of a strong, unified nation at the center, with patriot heroes such as Lincoln (along with Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and FDR) orbiting in tight, commemorative arcs around that center.

It is probably fair to say that thousands of U.S. history teachers across the country put this narrative register on display in some form every day. That register is reinforced by the textbook, by local and national history assessments, in the media, and by national leaders with about equal frequency. The narrative is official United States history and that official

history is the narrative. It is crucial to the maintenance of the collective-memory project and its role in birthing distinctive American identities. Without it—that is, the capacity to recount at least the rough contours of the nation-building narrative arc and the heroes responsible for its progress and success—one cannot claim that identity fully, or so the sentiment goes.⁹ History teachers such as Brinton are deeply and unapologetically complicit in the project's instructional design and delivery.

Not so Todd, which is what most profoundly perplexes Brinton. Todd is a rare iconoclast in her treatment of United States history, someone who seldom appears in accounts of research on history teaching.¹⁰ Although there is an implicit narrative arc to her treatment of U.S. history because she follows the textbook's general periodization scheme, it is more nod to chronology than narrative. Rather than simply retrace the officialized narrative, Todd wants her students to openly investigate the American past on which that narrative is based. She asks questions and requires her students to ask and then address those questions with her. How was it that African slaves ended up in Jamestown in 1919? What was their experience like? What can be argued were the causes of the American Revolution? What happened at the so-called Boston Massacre, and what effect did it have? Why are Lewis and Clark so celebrated in American history? Was Andrew Jackson really the "people's President"? What was life like for average workers and ex-slaves in the south after the Civil War? We Americans talk a lot about our freedom birthright, but why were indigenous Americans repeatedly denied this birthright? Is the idea of Manifest Destiny a positive or negative force in American history, or both? If such questions disrupt the narrative arc in some ways, Todd accepts it because she finds that the narrative borders on possessing powerful ideological components and to present it without question participates in subtle indoctrination. In spite of firm convictions in this regard, she has not dared to share these views with Brinton.

Like many teachers who teach against the grain of common practice, Todd closes her classroom door, asks her meaty historical questions, provides her students with source material they can use to investigate and address those questions, and they have at it, so to speak. She also quietly but deliberately teaches her students how to go about this process, what sort of epistemological stances they will need to adopt to understand sources as evidence (rather than as what really happened), to identify and attribute them, assess their perspective, and judge their reliability and value in making historical claims. Her classroom functions frequently like a history seminar in which participants debate ideas, cite evidentiary support for their positions, dispute others' claims, and, in the end, agree to disagree. In contrast to the collective-memory tableau that primarily infuses Brinton's

practice, Todd could be said to be engaged in a disciplinary approach, one history specific that looks on the former approach with some skepticism. Two very different teaching approaches, distinguished by visions of the American past that are partly at odds and marked by disparate understandings of what students need and are capable of, residing a mere 30 feet from one another on the second floor of Oak Hollow High School.

VEXING DIFFERENCES?

What can we say about the differences in these two approaches, the ones epitomized by Brinton and Todd? Such differences trouble policymakers and educational reformers. How can two teachers, both professionally certified and licensed in the state of their practice, conceptualize the very same subject matter so differently and go about it as though they had never encountered one another? Of course this is not the first time such questions have animated discussions about ways of teaching history. Over 40 years ago, following the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, the threat that the United States had fallen behind its Cold War arch enemy rattled the nation. What students were learning in schools and how they went about it became the focus of educational reformers, largely on the assumption that changes in practices and approaches were direly needed if the United States was to catch up to its rival. Much of the reformist energy was targeted at the study of mathematics and science. However, education in the social sciences and history did not escape attention. With respect to history education, and specifically American history, the most notable attempt to reformulate how the subject was taught and learned took place under the aegis of the Amherst Project, with Richard Brown as its director.

RETHINKING HISTORY EDUCATION: THE AMHERST PROJECT AS ANTECEDENT

In an address to the annual convention of the National School Boards Association in 1965, Richard Brown observed, "I do not need to tell you people who are so closely connected with education that there is raging on every side nothing less than a revolution in American education." He then observed, "The revolution is, in fact, long overdue, nowhere more so than in the teaching of history. As a nation we have little sense of our history. We have less sense of what history is. What passes for it far too often is a frightful blend of antiquarianism and patriotism." Amplifying his critique, Brown added, "The critical qualities, the reasoned temper and