

Teaching History to Adolescents

A Quest for Relevance



John A. Beineke

Introduction

It was as an adolescent that I first became enamored of history. The motivation was a set of novels my mother owned by the now-forgotten historical novelist Thomas B. Costain. Costain was a newspaper man from Canada born in the nineteenth century. He came to the United States to continue his journalistic career as an editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*. Upon reaching the age of fifty-five, Costain shifted careers and ventured into the field of history and historical fiction. Beginning in 1940, until his death in 1965, he wrote bestselling books—eleven novels, six volumes of history, a biography, three young adult books—and edited several collections of short stories. His historical novels were my entrée into the world of history. Costain’s works, usually written about little-known historical figures from European and Canadian history, led me to other writers and I became hooked on history.

This book began as an expansion of my chapter in *Adolescent Education: A Reader* (Peter Lang, 2010), edited by Joseph L. DeVitis and Linda Irwin-DeVitis. Using the works of three progressive educators, this book will suggest ways to make history “mean something” to adolescents through how it is taught. John Dewey spoke of “interest and effort”—if there was interest on the part of the student, then effort by the student would follow. William Heard Kilpatrick made his own variation on Dewey’s thought with the phrase “activity leading to further activity.” This, according to Kilpatrick, should be the primary goal of every classroom teacher. And William Van Til believed the major goal of education was to

teach students to solve real problems with real resolutions both inside and outside the classroom. The intention of all three thinkers was to connect the learner to the subject at hand so that the motivation to learn would be, as much as possible, internal rather than external. A quick note on the subtitle to this book—*A Quest for Relevance*. It is borrowed from *Curriculum: Quest for Relevance*, a volume of readings edited by Van Til that I used in graduate school in the 1970s.¹ Van Til was a progressive educator and curriculum specialist from the mid-1930s until his death in 2006. It is my hope that these pages will contain, as Van Til advocated, practical and relevant ideas for educators.

John Dewey, in 1916, also spoke to the issue of how subjects such as history can lose their educational purpose by being reduced to compilations of information. Dewey advocated that subjects like history needed to “enrich and liberate the more direct and personal contacts of life by furnishing their context, their background, and outlook.”² This is both a lofty goal and serious challenge for those who would teach history to adolescents in the twenty-first century. Another giant of education, Ralph Tyler, wrote in 1949 that even subject matter specialists, such as historians, should be concerned with how “the subject can contribute to the education of young people who are not going to be specialists” in a field, how that subject can “contribute to the layman, the garden variety citizen.”³

Emily Style has referred to curriculum as both a “window and a mirror.”⁴ Volts, Sims, and Nelson see Style as saying that for students “windows look into a world that is different than their own and a mirror reflects their own image.” They have also suggested that “many students often see school learning as foreign to their everyday concerns, it’s our challenge to help learners see how what they study in schools is connected to something that is relevant for them.”⁵

Research has established that when teachers focus on the contemporary relevance of history, then students will also see its importance for understanding the present. By the same token, when history teachers center their teaching solely on content, then students follow suit and concentrate on learning a body of information to the exclusion of making connections to present-day issues. Although research on the classroom outcomes of history instruction exists, it has been suggested that even more research is needed on how students engage with the past in less formal or academic settings such as listening to the stories of relatives, visiting museums or historical sites, and discussing politics with peers. In this way it is hoped that students will find relevancy in both their formal and informal study of history.⁶

This book will use recent research and the best in contemporary practices to inform and enrich the teaching of history to adolescents. A plethora of sources on effective schools’ research and practice provide often-similar lists of conditions needed for a successful educational experience. In no special order, these include qualified teachers who know their subject matter and the age group they

are teaching; a rigorous curriculum; a reasonable teacher-student classroom ratio and usually a small-school setting; time-on-task or significant student engagement in the material being studied; an organized, safe, and fair environment; extracurricular opportunities; supportive parents or guardians; access to health care; and the availability of current learning materials and technology. The list is by no means complete, but it does encompass a variety of essential school-based practices, factors, and resources that provide a foundation for students to succeed.

An underlying assumption of this book is that the academic discipline of history and the act of teaching history should be partners in the endeavor to educate our youth. While I was a program director at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we often said that most issues and debates were not a case of “either/or” but of “both.” (I have certainly used that piece of wisdom once or twice within the pages of this book.) If we love teaching history, then we need both the subject matter expertise and the pedagogical knowledge to make the endeavor a successful one. Writing this book has simultaneously informed me in both areas. And it has allowed me to engage in my two professional passions—teaching and the study of the past.

One of the overarching aims of education in the United States is to prepare students for life in a democracy. To do this, Nel Noddings notes that students must be allowed to make choices in what they study, especially history and social studies. “Having the opportunity to choose,” writes Noddings, “is important in itself because of its connection to motivation.” Having students make well-informed choices, she adds, is critical.⁷

This volume is not a methods book per se. It does include, however, numerous ideas, reflections, suggestions, and strategies on teaching history to adolescents. But a major goal of the book is to be a resource for history teachers in gaining professional, intellectual, and resource knowledge for their professional development. The suggestions of resources and ideas are made for the teacher as well as for the learner. The book also will practice what it preaches in terms of the use of history. The teaching of history has its own history and vignettes. These and other examples from history will be drawn from and intertwined with the narrative to shed light on the experience of teaching history and on adolescence itself.

While I intend history to be relevant, at the same time I have been cautious not to relate every historical episode directly to a current event. There are in many cases similarities between the past and present, but one needs to be careful when drawing parallels. With the occasional lapse, every effort has been made not to make references to what can be seen on the nightly news, read in daily newspapers or weekly magazines, or viewed over the Internet.

The connections, however, between past and present are readily evident. As the alleged Chinese curse stated, “May you live in interesting times.” The times are indeed filled with much that will make history. As this book goes into production, the United States is deeply engaged in two long-lasting wars, with soldiers

and civilians being killed every week. We have our first Black president in the midst of his first term, and the two political parties are as deeply and rigidly divided along partisan lines as at any time in our history. The nation's increasing diversity has become politically charged, especially in the area of immigration. The nation finds itself in an economic downturn (the "Great Recession") that has been likened to the Great Depression. We also have a Supreme Court evenly divided and entrenched along ideological lines, making every new nomination to the high court a political mêlée. And with all of this occurring, the nation is dealing with the worst environmental disaster in its history. We do indeed live in interesting times, and most of the above issues and events have similar precursors in our past.

A word about an organizational conundrum that arose during the researching and writing of this book. Chapters usually indicate a logical attempt at coherent divisions, but history and ideas about teaching history do not always occur in orderly fashion, no matter what the author's intentions were. It became apparent on several occasions, that it was not easy to compartmentalize every piece of research, every idea, or every topic into a particular chapter. The reader needs to be aware that autobiographies often found a home in the chapter on primary sources, and the selection of subject matter became entwined with professional development. Higher-order thinking, diversity, and controversial topics seemed to find homes in several chapters. And references to textbooks and film will materialize in various chapters.

For example, the article I used from *Rethinking Education* by Karen Park Koenig, "It Was So Much Fun! I Died of Massive Blood Loss!", raised a number of issues, such as why the reenactments were being done and what did the students take away from the exercise.⁸ Should this piece reside in the public history chapter on reenactments, in the controversial issues chapter or in another chapter with a section on simulations and role playing? (It eventually landed in the section on simulations and role playing in the last chapter.)

As a former middle-school educator and also a teacher of high school freshmen and seniors, I have on occasion inserted a few of my own ideas, drawn from my own experiences, into the book. I have also had the opportunity to hold a joint appointment in both education and history at three college-level institutions, teaching survey courses in American history. These courses have allowed me to continue my love of history by teaching freshmen and sophomores. And, as someone has said, the only difference between a high school and a college student is a ten-week summer vacation.

Johnson and McElroy in their *The Eductainer: Connecting the Art and Science of Teaching* echo Van Til's ideas on connecting classroom material with the real world and real problems. Learning must be made relevant, they maintain, and applicable to the students' lives. "It is human nature," they write, "to take an interest in things that are relevant to our own lives. Since practically every

aspect of education is in some way relevant to students' lives, it is important for the teacher to make the connection because you can't assume that the students will make the connection of the relevance by themselves." They also contend that teachers should personalize their own stories in their classrooms. Not only should the issues being examined be real, but the teacher herself needs to be real. A final suggestion they make is that teachers have an enthusiasm about the subject and the classroom.⁹

History is about real people, real events, real issues. If history cannot be made relevant for adolescents, then no subject can. Not all students will find history as important to their lives as the author or many who have chosen to read these pages. But it is my firm conviction that many more adolescents can become engaged in history through creative teaching by knowledgeable and energetic teachers in the modern classroom.

Let me mention that what may seem an irregular practice in the area of capitalization has been employed in this work. I have chosen to capitalize the words Black(s) and White(s), drawing on the expertise of two experienced and informed multicultural educators, Sonia Neito and Patty Bode. As they recommend in their most recent book, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, "We have capitalized the terms *White* and *Black* because they refer to groups of people, as do terms such as *Latino*, *Asian*, and *African*. As such they deserve to be capitalized."¹⁰ I have followed their example.

I want to especially note and thank the contributors to the sections titled "The World of Practice." The contributors were William White, Ruth Baize, Ray Boomhower, Don Maness, Paul Shaddox, Caryn Ellison, Prentice Chandler, Richard Graham, and Linda Merillat. These sections contain not only wise and informed descriptions of current practice but come directly from the real world of practice as related to the study of history. The contributions are from a variety of practitioners closely connected to the chapter topics that contain their work. I have been fortunate to have prize-winning teachers, historians, curriculum specialists, authors, and experts from various fields join in this venture. I am in their debt. The book will be stronger due to their wisdom, knowledge, and expertise.

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—John A. Beineke,
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Endnotes

- 1 Van Til, William. *Curriculum: Quest for Relevance*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.
- 2 Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. New York: Free Press, 1916/1966. 212.
- 3 Tyler, Ralph. *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949. 26.
- 4 Style, Emily. "Curriculum as Window and Mirror." from the *Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity Project on Inclusive Curriculum*. Wellesley Center for Women. Retrieved 21 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/presrvcel/pe300.htm>>.
- 5 Voltz, Deborah L, Michele J. Sims, and Betty Nelson. *Connecting Teachers, Students and Standards: Strategies for Success in Diverse and Inclusive Classrooms*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010. 83.
- 6 Barton, Keith C. "Research on Student's Ideas about History." Eds. Linda S. Levstik, and Cynthia A. Tyson. *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 250 and 245.
- 7 Noddings, Nel. Foreword. *Teaching Social Studies That Matters: Curriculum for Active Learning*. By Stephen J. Thornton. New York: Teachers College Press, 2005. ix.
- 8 Koenig, Karen Park. "It Was So Much Fun! I Died of Massive Blood Loss!" *Rethinking Education*, 2009, 23. 4.
- 9 Johnson, Brad and Tammy Maxson McElroy. *The Edutainer: Connecting the Art and Science of Teaching*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2010. 23–4.
- 10 Nieto, Sonia, and Patty Bode. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. 5th ed. Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2008.34.