

Bridging the Gap: On Ways to Improve Collaboration between Secondary Teachers and University Professors

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THE IMPORTANCE of content-focused professional development for high school teachers has been widely recognized by educators and legislators. Professionals in education at all levels have long argued for more contacts between secondary and post-secondary instructors as one important way to improve subject matter mastery. In response to this call, professional development activities that emphasize collaboration between high school teachers and university faculty have increased significantly in recent years.¹ In California, one excellent example of active cooperation is the California History Social Science Project, a collaborative program that provides professional development for history/social science teachers at all school levels across the state through workshop series and summer institutes on specific topics aligned with the California standards.² The project is based on the ongoing collaboration of teachers, university faculty, and associated scholars with the shared goal to promote teacher development and improve History education. At California State University, Northridge, the History Department has a long tradition of involvement with teacher training. Faculty from the department have provided credential advisement to teacher candidates for many years, several of its members have been involved with Teachers for a New Era, and History instructors teach the capstone course for prospective teachers in the Social Science subject matter program.³ In conjunction with these efforts that address

the needs of teacher candidates, members of the History Department have always been interested in ways to improve teacher training by reaching to those already teaching. How do we bridge the gap between university and secondary education? How do we foster greater communication between high schools and college level institutions? How can we create and consolidate a sustainable and ongoing learning community of secondary and post-secondary educators? Underlying these questions is the certainty that knowledge of subject matter is as important to good teaching as pedagogy is and that collaboration between high school teacher and university instructor is not only essential for the successful teaching of history, but is also indispensable to keep the curriculum current.

One opportunity to strengthen academic links between secondary and post-secondary instructors emerged in 2009. The College of Social and Behavioral Sciences made available resources for the creation of a pilot program intended to foster collaboration between the History Department at CSUN and high school teachers in the San Fernando Valley area. The major component of this effort included the organization of professional development workshops for teachers. Funds from the College enabled one faculty member from the History Department to devote an entire semester to coordinate and organize the workshops as well as to develop other activities intended to reach those teaching in high school institutions.⁴ The model was built on and benefited from experiences, so there is no claim of originality here.⁵ Nevertheless, although inspired by the goals and success of the CHSSP and CSUN's traditional involvement in teacher training, the program is adapted to our own reality and shaped by today's budget limitations. This essay reports on the results of the pilot project, with the hope that it will facilitate the job of others contemplating the creation of similar programs. After addressing the main aspects surrounding the program's organization, the last section of the report focuses on some adjustments made during the second year. As a result of ongoing funding from the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences and the positive response from teachers and faculty, the pilot has become a continuing program in the College and entered into its third semester in 2010.⁶

In a nutshell, the Spring 2009 Professional Development Series for High School Teachers consisted of a series of workshops that addressed specific themes drawn from the World History curriculum. The main goal was to create an effective ongoing teacher training program devoted to enhance mastery of subject matter. Since content knowledge was a central feature of the program, it was housed in the History Department, and those involved were trained historians with expertise in the field of World History.⁷ The workshops had two main goals. First and foremost,

we decided that it was important to focus on subject matter content as we intended to offer high school teachers an opportunity to get access to current scholarship on the topic. At the same time, workshops were also conceived as a means to provide a hands-on experience to participants and a chance to discuss and examine primary source material that could be used in the classroom.

The choice of World History seemed to be the right one for a number of different reasons. As a historian, I am trained in Latin American history, which places my field of expertise within the “world” category, so I am particularly interested in contributing in any way possible to the development of the World History curriculum at both secondary and post-secondary levels. Besides the purely personal, other more compelling reasons made World History the right choice. In the last decade or so, World History has been gaining ground in high school programs across the country.⁸ As Robert Bain and Tamara L. Shreiner clearly pointed out, “the most dramatic indicator of world history’s popularity has been the development and growth of the College Board’s Advanced Placement (AP) world history course.”⁹ According to the 5th Annual AP Report to the Nation, World History ranked in tenth place in the AP exams taken by the largest numbers of students from the class of 2008. While in 2004, a total of 20,698 students took the AP history exam, in 2008, the number nearly quadrupled, increasing to 81,412 students. In California, AP World History still lags behind AP U.S. and AP European History. However, the available data suggest that soon enough, students in the state will follow up on national trends.¹⁰ Finally, the National Assessment Governing Board announced that in 2012, it will start testing 12th grade students in World History as part of the national assessment program.¹¹

Despite its increasing importance in the high school curriculum, it is safe to argue that most high school teachers are more proficient in U.S. and European History than in World History. Since World History is a field that has grown in popularity only in recent years, those high school teachers who attended college many years ago were barely exposed to the “rest of the world,” which means that experienced teachers have little or no formal training in the field. Even today, a history major at CSUN in his/her path to become a teacher may end up getting his/her teaching credential after taking only two courses focusing on any part of the “world.” Therefore, in many cases, a recently graduated teacher may go into the classroom with some competence in World History although at a very basic level. It became apparent to us that focusing on World History addressed the imperative needs of many teachers, both new and experienced, who had been asked to teach this class without having the experience or the training necessary to undertake such a task.

The major components of the pilot program included assessment meetings to address teachers' needs, three workshops on specific topics drawn from the World History curriculum, and one follow-up retreat with some of the participants to discuss future directions for the project. The first step was to identify the needs and interests of the teachers. This assessment was done both formally and informally during the semester prior to the workshops. The History Department at CSUN has a significant number of teachers enrolled in its Master's program, so during the fall semester, we invited our current students as well as alumni to discuss their needs and ideas for professional development. These informal meetings provided a wealth of information that helped us decide on a number of topics as well as on the structure for the workshops. The second step entailed identifying teachers and schools that could be interested in participating in this experimental phase. Therefore, we invited five teachers to be part of an ad hoc committee that assisted in the choice of topics, determined the dates and format for the workshops, and became the liaison between CSUN and their institutions.¹² Since this was a pilot program, we decided to keep the number of participants limited to a few public high schools in the area with the idea that in the future we will be able to expand to all our "feeder" high schools from the San Fernando Valley area.¹³

The institutional environment and teachers' schedules were important considerations at the time of setting up the workshops. As most teachers in the country, attendants to our workshops work long hours five days a week and have limited time for extracurricular activities. Therefore, workshops were scheduled on campus, once a month, on a weekday, and for approximately three or four hours. A total of twenty-six teachers from six different high schools in the area signed up. The average attendance was fourteen participants per workshop.¹⁴ A survey done at the beginning of the workshops gave us information about our participants that is worth sharing in this report. Participants showed significant disparities in terms of their qualifications and experience. All but one of our participants had already received their teaching credentials. Almost half majored in History and less than one-third held M.A. degrees in Education or History. This seems to indicate that there is no particular correlation between degree and attendance. Participants taught Social Science courses with a large majority teaching History classes. Only two of the teachers attending the series taught AP courses. There was a significant disparity in participants' teaching experience, which ranged from six months to twenty-five years, a clear indication that these workshops are equally attractive to those who have been teaching for a long time as well as to those with little experience.

The main goal of these workshops was to increase content knowledge for high school teachers in World History.¹⁵ After careful consideration, the

topics selected for the workshops were the Great Depression, the Cold War, and Revolutionary Movements in Latin America. In all three cases, topics were to be examined from a global perspective. In the choice of topics, we followed teachers' suggestions but we also kept in mind the expertise of those colleagues in the department who had generously volunteered to run the workshops. Each session started with the specialist giving a well-crafted and articulate lecture on the topic of choice. In this lecture, presenters provided alternative approaches to the analysis of the topic that relied both on recent scholarship and more traditional literature. Lectures lasted for about seventy-five minutes and were organized along similar lines as those used for a conference presentation, which enabled presenters to offer both content and historiography in a palatable manner.

The content component of the workshop was extremely attractive to participants, but teachers also expressed interest in getting access to primary sources and any other classroom-ready material that they could use with their students. To accomplish this goal, sessions combined lectures with a hands-on approach. Participants received textual and pictorial sources and were asked to discuss alternative strategies to incorporate them in their teaching activities. In this open discussion, teachers explored and shared approaches and methodologies to examine the different materials in their classrooms. The analysis of actual sources enabled them to engage in meaningful discussions about subject matter practice and pedagogy. Although teachers did not produce lesson plans, this exchange resulted in extremely productive conversations on how to explain complex topics to students as well as on new ways to think and view the past that can be subsequently applied in the classroom. Therefore, workshops offered not only content, but also provided a forum to actively discuss correct pedagogy. We believe this is an effective model, as using this format allowed us to address teachers' demands for content and classroom-ready material while at the same time encouraged collaboration among peers.

When thinking about the lectures, one issue that emerged was to what extent presenters should adjust the content of their presentations to the History/Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools. After careful consideration, we arrived to a compromised balance with lectures that revolved around themes aligned with the standards but that included in-depth examinations of specific topics that could be used by teachers to illustrate aspects of the standards discussed. For example, in my lecture, I examined revolutionary movements in Latin America with a focus on the early 19th and 20th centuries. Rather than providing a brief overview of many revolutionary scenarios, I chose Mexico as my case study, which enabled me to cover at least two standards from 10th grade while at the same time present an in-depth analysis of a Latin American

history topic.¹⁶ To organize my presentation, I relied on recent and traditional scholarship on the topic. I examined relevant aspects of colonial society, the wars of independence, *caudillismo*, Porfiriato, and the Mexican Revolution. Throughout the lecture, I used a number of different pictorial sources such as the castas paintings, Mexican murals, and photographs of the revolution. I also relied on textual sources such as first-hand reports on the revolution, travelers accounts, and the Constitution of 1917, just to name a few. Finally, Mexican *corridos* provided an additional primary source to examine the revolution. Attendants received all these digitized materials as well as a short “webliography” with information on sites that contain a wealth of primary materials in Latin American history. Participants left with not only a greater knowledge of the period discussed, but also with materials and greater familiarity with the available resources to assist in their structuring of the lesson plans.

As it entered its third semester, the program received very positive responses from both participants and administrators.¹⁷ During the second year, we made some adjustments in response to the feedback received from the teachers and our own assessment. One significant addition was the incorporation of participants from more high schools as we extended the invitation to more schools in the San Fernando Valley area. Teachers from ten different high schools signed up for the second year of workshops and, needless to say, their participation has significantly enriched the discussion and ongoing conversations.¹⁸ Another important addition to the program was the incorporation of an online component that enables us to upload teaching materials more effectively as well as to encourage virtual discussions of those materials. We envision this program as a means to consolidate a sustainable and long-lasting learning community, an ongoing forum that promotes and encourages the collaboration and exchange of ideas between secondary and post-secondary educators. The online component assists us in fulfilling this important goal as conversations continue after the actual workshop is over.

The methodology presented here is still evolving, but we hope to have offered some basic ideas for other universities to adopt and adapt to suit their own and their teachers’ needs. We believe this is an alternative and effective model as it offers an opportunity for intellectual reinvigoration that benefits the teaching community at both secondary and post-secondary levels through the creation of a regular, collaborative, and active learning environment for the discussion of content knowledge and pedagogical expertise. For high school teachers, these workshops give them a chance not only to access new content, but also to become more aware of the current state of scholarly debates, thus enhancing subject matter knowledge. By attracting both the veteran and the newly minted teacher, workshops

create an ambit for the exchange of ideas among teachers from different schools and with different expertise levels. Although teachers sign up on an event-by-event basis, regular meetings provide continuity and offer participants the possibility to meet and develop relationships with post-secondary faculty that extend beyond the workshop setting in the form of discipline-specific support and mentorship. For us, rarely do university professors interact with high school teachers. By providing a way for university faculty to learn teaching strategies and to understand how history is taught in high school, these workshops have encouraged conversations among us on the need to rethink parts of our curriculum.

The case for supporting cooperation and increased communication between college and high school educators arises from the fact that it represents a fundamental commitment to teacher education. These activities represent a way to foster and consolidate partnerships in the form of long-lasting learning communities that benefit both secondary and post-secondary educators. The Professional Development Series for High School Teachers were conceived as an effort to create opportunities to develop K-16 collaboration through professional development and the pilot project presented here represents a successful first step towards that path of collaboration between California State University, Northridge and high school teachers from the San Fernando Valley area.

Notes

This paper was originally presented in April 2009 at the Southwestern Historical Association meeting in Denver as "Bridging the Gap: Preparing Secondary Teachers to Teach World History." I am grateful for the keen comments made by Annika Frieberg and the audience. The support of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences and the History Department made this program possible. I am also deeply grateful to my colleagues Thomas Devine and Miriam Neirick for their generous assistance and insightful advice.

1. See for example Leon Fink, "Affecting the Great Continuum of K-16 Education," *The History Teacher* 33, no. 3 (May 2000): 297-302; James J. Lorence, "Collaboration in History Teaching," *The History Teacher* 33, no. 1 (November 1999): 79-89; Matthew Downey, "Responding to the Winds of Change in History Education," *The History Teacher* 34, no. 1 (November 2000): 21-28; John Shedd, "Why and How Should History Departments Train Social Studies Teachers?" *The History Teacher* 34, no. 1 (November 2000): 29-33; Donald Schwartz, "Using History Departments to Train Secondary Social Studies Teachers: A Challenge for the Profession in the 21st Century," *The History Teacher* 34, no. 1 (November 2000): 35-39; James Carpenter, Thomas Dublin, and Penelope Harper, "Bridging Learning Communities: A Summer Workshop for Social Studies Teachers,"

The History Teacher 38, no. 3 (May 2005): 361-369; and Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted, "The Wisconsin Collaborative United States History Professional Development Program," *The History Teacher* 36, no. 2 (February 2003): 221-230.

2. The CHSSP is one of eight Subject Matter Projects funded by the State of California and the University of California Office of the President. Sites for the project are located in CSU Chico, UC Davis, UC Berkeley, CSU Fresno, UCLA, CSU Long Beach, CSU Dominguez Hills, and UC Irvine.

3. In 2002, California State University, Northridge was selected to participate in Teachers for a New Era, an initiative to improve teacher training programs funded by the Carnegie Corporation in New York, the Annenberg Foundation, and the Ford Foundation.

4. Since the main goal was to increase communication and to foster stable relationships between secondary and post-secondary educators, other initiatives within the project included invitations to high school students to attend lectures at CSUN, the organization of guest lectures given by CSUN faculty to high schools in the area, and the development of a reading seminar in world history that aligns with the California standards for those students in the M.A. program who are teachers or are currently enrolled in the Credential program.

5. I am particularly grateful to Mary Miller at UCLA who generously shared her time and ideas with me. Conversations with many colleagues during the AHA meeting in New York also assisted me in creating this pilot project. At the national level, the NEH summer institutes and the work done by recipients of the Teaching American History grants greatly influenced the model pursued at CSUN.

6. The Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences will provide re-assigned time for the coordinator and funds to continue the program in the following years.

7. The call for History Departments to become actively engaged in teacher training has been made on numerous occasions from the pages of *The History Teacher* and panels at the American Historical Association annual meetings.

8. In California, world history is taught in 10th grade.

9. Robert Bain and Tamara L. Shreiner, "Issues and Options in Creating a National Assessment in World History," *The History Teacher* 38, no. 2 (February 2005): 241.

10. Tested for the first time in 2002, AP World History was taken by 2,542 students in public schools in California. By 2008, the number of exams had increased to 14,756.

11. The field will join U.S. History, Economics, and Government. For more on this issue, see Bain and Shreiner.

12. I am very grateful to Laura Arrowsmith, Sally Ashton, Elva Guzman, Earl Niño, and Francisco Ortega for their generous support and insightful suggestions.

13. Teachers from the following schools participated in the pilot program: Monroe, Chatsworth, Granada Hills, Northridge Academy, and San Fernando Middle School from LAUSD and West Ranch High School from William S. Hart Union High School District.

14. A total of 26 teachers signed up initially, although only 19 participated in one, two, or three workshops. The average attendance per workshop was 14. Topic seemed to have had some significance only at the time of signing up. The Cold War was the workshop that received the largest response in terms of enrollment, but it was the lowest in attendance.

15. Efforts to increase content knowledge are not limited to World History. In Fall 2009, the Moorpark Unified School District received a Teaching American History grant for a project entitled: All Americans. Andrea Davies Henderson, Assistant Professor in the

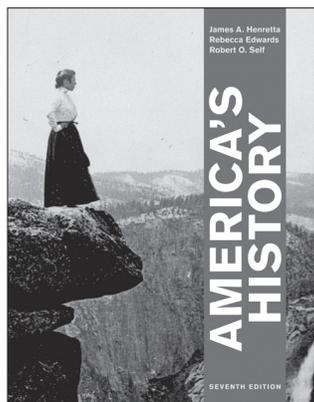
History Department, is participating as the Academic Director of the project. The three-year grant will help teachers examine American history through the lens of immigration and internal migration, looking at the interaction of peoples, cultures, and ideas.

16. California History/Social Science Standards 10.2: “Students compare and contrast the Glorious Revolution of England, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and their enduring effects worldwide on the political expectations for self-government and individual liberty” and 10.4: “Students analyze patterns of global change in the era of New Imperialism in at least two of the following regions or countries: Africa, Southeast Asia, China, India, Latin America, and the Philippines.”

17. Please see: <<http://www.westbranchhighschool.com/Newsletter%20October%202009.pdf>>.

18. In addition to the previous year’s participants, teachers from Birmingham, Canoga Park, Cleveland, El Camino Real, High Tech LA, and Panorama High signed up for the series in 2010.

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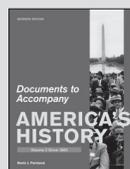
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