

# Historiography in the Methods Course: Training Preservice History Teachers to Evaluate Local Historical Commemorations

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DESPITE MORE THAN A DECADE of groundbreaking research on the advantages and need for more historical thinking and historiography in middle and high school history classrooms, many students continue to receive only modest exposure to these teaching concepts and related strategies. Research indicates that middle and high school students who are not regularly engaged in historical thinking, including the practice of historiographic analysis, often lack skills to process, analyze, or evaluate the past.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising that studies also show students commonly respond to history content and concepts with a general apathetic detachment, and may fail to develop critical understandings of the human condition, past and present.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence suggests this apathetic response among students may be traced to testing schedules and the manner in which massive amounts of seemingly disjointed history content is presented.<sup>3</sup> However, it may also be traced to preservice teacher preparation. Although it is likely most secondary social studies methods instructors now introduce concepts and strategies related to historical thinking and historiography, many preservice teachers continue to encounter barriers that dissuade and distract them from honing these skills when they enter the classroom. There are two overarching problems that continue to obstruct a broad implementation of these new ways of perceiving

and studying history: 1) many preservice teachers do not have deep backgrounds in historical thinking and historiography, and 2) many middle and high schools do not present preservice teachers with an environment conducive to new or nontraditional—and often time-consuming—strategies. This paper is intended to discuss these and other challenges the author has encountered as a methods course instructor when training preservice teachers in the use of historical thinking and historiography, and to share a project developed to encourage preservice teachers to think historically and engage in historiographic analysis on their own, so to better enable them to engage their students with these dynamic strategies.

### **Addressing the Challenges of Historical Thinking and Historiographic Teaching**

As an instructor of secondary history/social studies methods courses, my observations of preservice teachers in my class and in the field have revealed that some of the most significant challenges include low levels of confidence and little experience with “doing history;” marginal, if any, support from cooperating teachers; expectations or even mandates to present material in predictable, traditional manners; and inadequate class time to implement new, often time-consuming, strategies. Informal discussions with preservice history teachers about their experiences have also revealed fears or apprehensions about inadequate or incomplete training in the use of historical thinking and historiography strategies.

These challenges often hinder preservice teachers’ development and discourage them from trying new approaches and engagement strategies.<sup>4</sup> By default, many conform to traditional expectations, entering the classroom as professionals who present history just as their predecessors did; as a grand narrative or a series of “facts” to be memorized.<sup>5</sup> We are all aware of the problems and limitations of conformist, identity-building history that is packaged and presented as a grand narrative. This rudimentarily deficient and factually sterile approach contributes to the general disconnectedness and apathy of middle and high school students,<sup>6</sup> often perpetuating broad misunderstandings about the purposes of history education.

Neumann suggests that teachers gain insight into planning effective instruction if they view these challenges as fundamentally intellectual, involving conceptual knowledge and historiography.<sup>7</sup> I concur, and add that if we as instructors of methods courses hope our preservice teachers will become agents of change and facilitators of critical and higher-order historical thinking in middle and high school classrooms, we must train them to be willing and able to emphasize the development of skills related to historical comprehension, bias recognition, data interpretation and

analysis, and historical decision-making. In other words, we must assure they are capable of and empowered to engage their students with historical thinking and historiography. Meaningful historical knowledge should include not only understandings of facts, but also understandings of how facts, historical narratives, and arguments are “constructed.”

To accomplish this, instructors of history/social studies methods courses should engage preservice teachers in the practice of interpretive historical thinking and historiographic evaluation. Various in-class activities can help methods instructors focus preservice teachers’ attention on development of these skills. Inquiry-based and investigative strategies encourage historical thinking by prompting preservice teachers (as well as their students) to gather a variety of historical sources, and then use those sources to develop and defend answers to historical questions. Old history textbooks can serve as great resources for teaching about the evolution of historical interpretation. Some libraries and schools maintain collections of old textbooks that instructors may use to facilitate this evolution.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, activities should be made up of more personal explorations of recent, relevant historical events or eras, for the purpose of engaging students in making historical analyses of events and eras that impact their lives.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that if we are to produce teachers who are capable of being “agents of change” in middle and high school history classrooms, methods instructors should design course projects that challenge preservice teachers’ perceptions of history, their approaches to presentism and the presentation of historical content, and their development as knowledgeable and empowering professional educators. Part of this professional preparation can come in the form of activities that encourage development of preservice teachers’ own historical thinking and historiography skills, and challenge their overt and covert preconceptions of historical objectivity.<sup>10</sup> With these understandings in mind, I instituted a project to help develop preservice history teachers’ own historical thinking and historiography skills.

### **A Historiography Project for Preservice Teachers**

Research indicates that projects related to civil rights and similar social history are rich in potential for historical thinking and historiographic evaluation.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, the semester-long project centered on local and regional social history related to post-Civil War race relations and the American Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South. Participants were graduate students enrolled during spring 2011 (n=14) and spring 2012 (n=12) in my sections of CSE 564: Advanced Methods: Improving Social Studies Instruction. CSE 564 is a required course for secondary history/social studies candidates in the Teacher Education Program at the

### Historical Thinking and Historiography Report Project

The purpose of this semester-long project is to allow each of you to work independently and collaboratively to explore and practice historical thinking skills and engage in historiography so as to enrich your approaches to social studies content, and better prepare you (individually and collectively) to teach middle/high school history in a more enriching, engaging manner. Early in the semester, we will read and discuss several seminal works on historical thinking and historiography (the study of history). We will engage in theoretical discourses on these concepts, focusing specifically on practical applications in the secondary history/social studies classroom, advantages and challenges to teaching with these strategies, ways of implementing more historical thinking and historiography within the confines of the established curriculum, and expectations for preservice teachers.

After critical discourse on historiographic analysis and evaluation, preservice teachers will accompany me on a historiography field trip, where, as a group, we will visit and study a site of regional historical significance that encompasses certain historical perplexities and has been the subject of some debate in recent years. While there, we will hear conflicting histories about the site and engage in a group analysis of the existing commemoration.

Upon our return, you will use what you learn from the readings and the field trip to conduct your own historiographic analysis. You will select a similar local/regional historical era, event, individual, or group related to **20<sup>th</sup>-century race relations in the Deep South or the American Civil Rights Movement** that is commemorated with recognized sites, landmarks, roadside markers, or similar. Then, you will follow James W. Loewen's approach for critiquing the historical presentation and commemoration. In essence, your primary focus will not be on the historical era, event, individual, or group, but rather the way information is commemorated (or not) and presented (or not).

This project will culminate with a Historiography Festival at the end of the semester, during which each of you will present a historiography report and introduce a related, original lesson or mini unit (see below). Remember, historiography is the study of history. **Your report** should include a paper (approximately 2,500 words) and accompanying visual display that addresses each of the following components:

1. a critical discussion of the historical presentation,
2. the accuracy of the commemoration,
3. the agenda of the agencies responsible for placing the commemoration,
4. the "take-home" message (your opinion), and
5. how students might perceive the display/history.

**Your lesson plan** should be crafted with specific attention to engaging students in historical thinking about your topic and should comprise at least three of the five historical thinking benchmarks identified by the National Center for History in the Schools: 1) chronological thinking, 2) comprehension, 3) analysis and interpretation, 4) research capabilities, and 5) issue-analysis and decision-making.

**Figure 1:** Description for the Historical Thinking and Historiography Report Project from the CSE 564: Advanced Methods: Improving Social Studies Instruction syllabus.

University of Alabama. All participants were simultaneously engaged in student teaching assignments, or other fieldwork experiences, that had them in direct contact with students in area public middle or high schools.

Early in the semester, preservice teachers read Sam Wineburg's *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (2001), Bruce VanSledright's *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy* (2010), and James Loewen's *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited about Doing History* (2010). During class sessions, we discussed these books with particular attention to each author's observations of practical teaching challenges regarding "doing history," student engagement, analyzing primary sources, confronting presentism, and student empowerment. I included an activity description of the Historical Thinking and Historiography Report Project in my course syllabus (Figure 1).

### **Learning by Immersion: The Historiography Field Trip**

Research shows the benefits of academic field trips and learning by immersion, particularly in the context of history and historiography.<sup>12</sup> Near the end of the first month of each semester, preservice teachers accompanied me on a historiography field trip to New Orleans, where we studied the history, location, and commemoration of a little-known but tragic event in America's past. The commemoration of the "Battle of Liberty Place," as the event has come to be known, presents an interesting intersection of social and paramilitary history, politics, civil rights, power, and teaching opportunities. It continues to evoke controversy today, thus, it made for an ideal topic for this exercise.

This "battle," which began near the intersection of Canal and St. Charles Streets on September 14, 1874, could more appropriately be entitled an "armed insurrection" or even a "riot." Members of the powerful Crescent City White League, who had rallied at the Henry Clay statue that stood at this location, confronted and attacked supporters and representatives of the city and state Reconstruction governments, namely, the racially integrated New Orleans Metropolitan Police and state militia. The violent clash lasted less than half an hour, yet left more than 30 dead and nearly 100 wounded.<sup>13</sup> Less than a decade later, when the city was once again under the control of white Democrats, the area was renamed "Liberty Place," and in 1891, a large concrete obelisk was placed to commemorate the tragic event. The original inscription on the monument included only the names of the White Leaguers who were killed in the "battle." In 1932, during a time of great racial unrest in Louisiana, the following text was added:

[Democrats] McEnery and Penn having been elected governor and lieutenant-governor by the white people, were duly installed by this overthrow of carpetbagger government, ousting the usurpers, Governor Kellogg (white) and Lieutenant-Governor Antoine (colored). United States troops took over the state government and reinstated the usurpers but the national election of November 1876 recognized white supremacy in the South and gave us our state.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the monument at the foot of Canal Street served as a rallying point for various fascist and white supremacist organizations. Protests to remove the monument have been unsuccessful to date, but the incendiary language has been removed and replaced with the following indeterminate sentence fragment: “In honor of those Americans on both sides of the conflict who died in the Battle of Liberty Place: A conflict of the past that should teach us lessons for the future.” In 1993, the monument itself was moved to a more inconspicuous location, only a block away, at the foot of Iberville Street.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to our departure for New Orleans, participants were directed to review the activity description in the syllabus and were told that we would be conducting a historiographic evaluation of an event in social history. At this point, they were given no background on the event or the monument itself. Prior to our arrival, I presented each participant with a short, textbook-style narrative summary of sentiments and activities leading up to the “battle,” critical events during the bloody exchange, the immediate aftermath and casualties, and the subsequent monument and commemoration. The summary also incorporated primary documents in the form of brief eyewitness accounts. I asked each participant to read the summary independently, to forego sharing what they had read, and, instead, to use the information provided, along with her/his historical sense, to interpret and draw conclusions about the event. I did not inform participants that I had distributed several very different summaries from three different modern-day perspectives: one from a Republican, one from a White Leaguer, and one from a nonpartisan observer. Each account included expected, though mildly worded, biases from each of the quoted observers. Excerpts of two of these embellished eyewitness accounts are included here:

*Account #1 (from John Giles, African American state militia trooper):*

As they [White Leaguers] came around Poydras to Canal [Streets], we could tell they were ready for a fight. They poured out into the street by the hundreds, shouting and waving guns in the air. They approached our lines like a pack of wild dogs. We attempted to hold, but the force was too great. They fired into our ranks, and many of our men broke and ran.

*Account #2 (from Colonel George Williams, commanding officer of a detail of White Leaguers):*

We approached their ranks, marching in step with guns at the ready. It was clear we had them outnumbered. I saw General Longstreet directing the militia from atop his horse, but as we moved forward, we fired one volley, and their line broke. It was with the greatest difficulty that I prevented the men from firing particularly at Longstreet. We routed the carpetbaggers and their insolent and barbarous Africans...a victory for old Louisiana.

Upon our arrival in New Orleans, and just before our walking tour, I engaged participants in a brief group discussion on the Battle of Liberty Place. I began by asking the group if anyone had ever studied or heard of this historical event, to which not one participant answered in the affirmative. I then prompted them with questions including:

- Where in New Orleans did this event occur?
- What do you know about what happened here?
- What was the result of the event?
- How was the event commemorated?

After a brief conversation on each of these questions, I conducted a walking tour of the Canal Street area. The tour included stops at Lafayette Square (the site of many political activities during the late 1800s and current location of the Henry Clay statue), the New Orleans Courthouse, a metropolitan police station, the sites of the original St. Charles Hotel and Boston Club (the meeting places of Southern politicians, including many White Leaguers), the intersection of Canal and St. Charles Streets (the site of the insurrection), and prior locations where the monument had been placed. The tour concluded at the Battle of Liberty Place Monument in its present location, where a discussion ensued about the various inscriptions that have come and gone.

During the tour, it became apparent how influential the summaries had been in contouring each participant's introductory knowledge of the event prior to our walking tour and discussions. Several participants, particularly those who read the White Leaguer account, discussed the struggles they encountered in their attempts to make sense of the events as I described them along the tour. A rich conversation ensued on how challenging it might be to teach about this event, its commemoration, and its subsequent legacy in a middle or high school history classroom. Participants were particularly opinionated regarding the omission of the Battle of Liberty Place from their history textbooks, and students' abilities to recognize various perspectives. The conversation deepened when we discussed how we ourselves were engaging in historical thinking, confronting presentism, dealing with perspective, and evaluating the historiography of

the monument. Participants then volunteered suggestions on how many of these challenges could be avoided, managed, or incorporated into a lesson or class discussion with secondary students.

Upon our return from New Orleans, preservice teachers were instructed to use the knowledge and skills they had developed from the field trip to conduct similar historiographic analyses as described in the assignment prompt. Preservice teachers were instructed to follow author James Loewen's approach for critiquing the historical presentation and commemoration as outlined in *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited about Doing History*. Findings were to be shared in the form of a 2,500-word report (paper) and a related presentation at the end of the term.

### **The Historiography Festival**

During the culminating "Historiography Festival," necessary attention was given to historical background on the eras, events, individuals, or groups being commemorated; however, participants' primary foci were on the manners in which the history has been (or has not been) commemorated and presented to the public. Each presentation included a brief discussion and demonstration of the historiography evaluated or uncovered, and the presenter's opinion of the "take-home" message for people (particularly middle or high school students) who might experience the commemoration with little or no relevant background knowledge.

During the 2011 and 2012 Historiography Festivals, preservice teachers shared pertinent local and regional examples of their own historical thinking and historiographic analysis. Compelling presentations included:

- Helen Keller's biography as presented at Ivy Green (her childhood home) in Tusculumbia, Alabama, which omits her socialist politics and workers' rights advocacy;
- the absence of any local historical commemoration of the "Scottsboro Case" of the 1930s, in Scottsboro, Alabama;
- a biographical sketch of Alabama Governor David Bibb Graves (1927-1931, 1935-1939), who simultaneously served as Exalted Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan, and whose name adorns the University of Alabama College of Education building;
- an analysis of the 2010 commemoration of Governor George Wallace's 1963 "stand in the schoolhouse door" at the University of Alabama; and
- the recent unveiling of sixteen giant murals in Alabama's new Tuscaloosa Federal Courthouse, which are presented as a comprehensive history of the region, yet include only a few images of African Americans.

Each presenter made her/his materials available to all other preservice teachers, and presenters were encouraged to share them with other professionals on the website for the Alabama Learning Exchange, an open-access resource hosted by the Alabama Department of Education devoted to the sharing of lesson plans and other teaching materials, available at <<http://alex.state.al.us>>.

### Conclusion

During post-project interviews, I asked preservice teachers to share their thoughts on these activities and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project. Participants were unanimous in their approval and enjoyment of the project, the field trip, their individual investigations, and the presentation format (the festival). Several of them shared how the investigative design of the project motivated them to find answers that might have been incomplete, inaccurately presented, or outright suppressed by some members of the community. Participants also shared how they enjoyed taking on the roles of history detectives. Some even interviewed museum curators, local historians, and other agents to corroborate the accuracy of exhibits, landmarks, inscriptions, and signs.

Several participants discussed the attention to perspective, particularly as found in the primary documents related to the field trip, as one of the strengths of the project. There were multiple positive comments about the manner in which the summaries were crafted and presented prior to our visit to the historical sites. Another strength of the project was the field trip. The ability to walk the streets of New Orleans, to follow the chain of events as they took place, and to immerse oneself in this historical study was of great popularity to participants in both groups. Finally, most participating preservice teachers reported that they enjoyed taking what they had learned from *Teaching What Really Happened* and had experienced during the New Orleans field trip and applying it to their own historiographies, and could see how they will be able to utilize these lessons in the classroom.

Perhaps not surprisingly, preservice teachers' perceptions of the weaknesses of this project included the feasibility with which these practical historical thinking activities could be immediately implemented in their student teaching placements, and the frequency with which students could be reasonably engaged in such activities. Several of these preservice teachers expressed apprehensions in deviating from traditional lecture and note-taking activities, citing expectations or demands of their university supervisors or cooperating teachers. Participants also expressed concerns about time constraints and how they would evaluate students' performance on a project of this nature. As a group, we discussed these

potential weaknesses at great length, and referred to solutions proposed by a variety of history educators, including Barton and Levstik (2004), Blaszac (2010), Lesh (2011), Loewen (2009), and VanSledright (2011).<sup>15</sup> We aligned these suggestions with state standards for grades 7-12, and discussed ways to blend interactive strategies such as these with the typical constraints encountered by preservice teachers. General consensus among participating preservice teachers was that the best way to accomplish this would be for university supervisors and/or methods instructors to inform cooperating master teachers of this expectation during the first-of-the-semester student teaching orientation, and request that preservice teachers be given opportunities to practice historical thinking and historiography with students.

This project was designed to provide preservice teachers with deeper backgrounds in historical thinking and historiography, so as to equip them to share their knowledge of history with students in similarly engaging and rich manners. The project was also designed to instill candidates with the confidence necessary to move from traditional teacher-centered delivery methods to these more student-centered methods. I sought to engage preservice teachers in historical thinking with attention to chronology, historical comprehension, analysis and interpretation, historical research, issue analysis, and decision-making. Based on their products and presentations, it was apparent to me that the strategy was successful in teaching them new and interactive ways to get students in middle and high school classrooms excited about “doing history.”

## Notes

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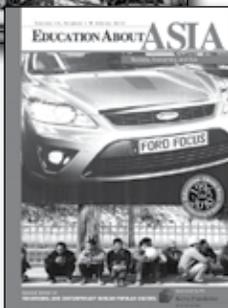
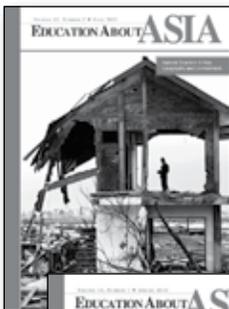
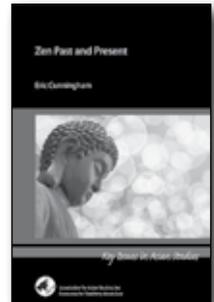
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