

# Why Don't More History Teachers Engage Students in Interpretation?

Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik

**Over the past fifteen years**, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the reform of history teaching. Although advocates of reform come from a variety of backgrounds, most share a belief that students' encounters with history should center on the process of historical interpretation. From this perspective, there is little point in simply transmitting a story of the past to students in hopes they will remember and repeat it. Instead, students should learn how such stories are developed in the first place: They should be involved in historical investigations, they should analyze and interpret primary sources, and they should understand the relationship between historical evidence and the construction of accounts—both their own and those of others. This process necessarily involves consideration of multiple perspectives, not only so that students understand how the same evidence can lead to divergent interpretations, but also so they recognize that people in the past held different outlooks than we do today and may have perceived events differently than we do.<sup>1</sup>

Many history teachers adhere closely to this vision: Their students develop questions about the past, consult a variety of

primary and secondary sources to answer those questions, compare perspectives, and share conclusions through discussion, debate, presentations, artwork, and essays. One need only read works such as James Percocco's *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History* and *Divided We Stand: Teaching about Conflict in U.S. History*, or David Kobrin's *Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources* to see stimulating examples of this approach in secondary classrooms. At the elementary and middle school levels, we have portrayed students and teachers engaged in interpretive, evidence-based inquiry in our own *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*.<sup>2</sup>

But we also know that many experienced teachers remain unfazed by these concerns, and that many new teachers have no intention of giving their students the chance to analyze sources or develop interpretations. Instead, they require students to read textbook chapters, listen to lectures (which they often refer to as "discussion"), locate answers to questions at the end of chapters, and then repeat the information on tests or in essays. At times, these teachers may introduce more engaging or hands-on activities (videos, field trips, games), but they still do not focus on the key characteristics of history as advocated by reformers—investigation, interpretation, and perspective.

A critical issue for those of us concerned with history education is why these

differences exist: Why do some teachers engage students in historical investigations, while others expect them to reproduce a story of the past? It would be misleading to think that some teachers are simply "better" than others, or that they care more about their students. Many teachers in our second category are excellent lecturers, and many develop exciting games or activities to help students learn historical content. They may also care deeply about students and devote a great deal of time to helping them develop into mature and responsible adults. What we need to know is why some good, caring teachers follow one approach, and other good, caring teachers follow another.

## Conveying the Process of Historical Knowledge

The most widely accepted answer is that some teachers know more about teaching history; they have more pedagogical content knowledge, as it is usually called.<sup>3</sup> This does not just mean that they know more about the past (more facts, dates, and sources) or that they are more familiar with effective teaching techniques (using wait time, advance organizers, and so on). Rather, it means that they have a deep and accurate understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed, and they know how to represent that process to students. That is, some teachers know that knowledge of the past depends on interpretation of evidence, that people disagree over such interpretations, and that history can be understood only by

"Research and Practice," established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited leading history educators KEITH BARTON and LINDA LEVSTIK to help us understand why so few history teachers involve students in the actual work of historical investigation—learning history by doing it.

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considering perspectives that differ from our own. Moreover, they know how to introduce students to these concepts: They know how to access primary sources for their classrooms, how to build on or challenge students' prior knowledge, how to help them analyze bias, and so on. Other teachers don't know these things: Either they don't know where historical knowledge comes from or they don't know how to bring the process into the classroom (or perhaps they know neither).

The belief that differences in teaching stem from differences in knowledge is the foundation of most efforts at teacher education. Certification and licensure programs are designed to develop pedagogical content knowledge through courses in both history and education, and professional development programs often rely on the premise that teachers should be exposed to the work of historians and helped to develop corresponding classroom applications. This approach is perfectly logical and compelling. It makes sense to think that if teachers know what history is about, and can share that with students, that they will do so.

Unfortunately, there is increasing evidence that this belief is incorrect. Numerous studies show that even when teachers understand the process of constructing historical knowledge, and even when they are familiar with relevant teaching methods, they do not necessarily incorporate these into instruction. One study, for example, investigated the classroom practices of an experienced secondary teacher who had just completed a doctorate in history. She possessed a deep understanding of the process of historical research, and she was familiar with recent trends in the profession, such as historians' concern with "history from the bottom up"—meaning the daily experiences of people from a variety of backgrounds—rather than only on the actions of powerful elites. But despite this deep and current disciplinary knowledge, her instruction focused primarily on teaching students to reproduce a single, consensus-oriented account of the U.S. past, with little attention to diversity or everyday life. The kind of inquiry and interpretation she had engaged in as a doctoral student was almost completely missing in her classroom. Another study found that university students who had taken a course on historical methods

developed complex ideas about the interpretive nature of history, but they nonetheless thought a good history teacher was one who told "good stories" and wrote lecture notes on the board.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, teachers are just as unaffected by knowledge of educational principles as they are by knowledge of historical interpretation. A number of studies show that even when teachers have graduated from programs that stress active student learning, multiple viewpoints, and construction of knowledge, and even when they clearly understand and accept these principles, their instruction bears little relationship to such knowledge. One study, for example, followed a teacher who had graduated from a program that emphasized historical interpretation, inquiry, and the use of a variety of historical sources and perspectives. This teacher, who held an undergraduate degree in history, had been an outstanding student in the program, and her beliefs accorded well with the principles she had encountered at the university. Yet in the classroom, she did not encourage perspective-taking, interpretation, or open-ended historical thinking or inquiry; instead, her activities were heavily teacher-centered, she lectured frequently (recounting a single narrative of U.S. history), and students took notes from the outline of textbook chapters. In study after study, what teachers know has little impact on what they do. In fact, sometimes teachers are well aware of this mismatch; in one study of preservice teachers who had engaged in a document-based methods course, for example, participants made it clear that they were unlikely to use such approaches in the classroom.<sup>5</sup>

Why is this? If teachers know that history is interpretive and involves multiple perspectives, and if they know how to engage students in the process, why don't they do so? Research suggests that it is because that kind of teaching would conflict with what they see as their two primary tasks: controlling students' behavior and covering content. Many teachers devote a great deal of effort to making sure that classroom routines are orderly and predictable and that students are quiet and still; nothing strikes more fear into their hearts than the possibility that students would talk too much, move around too often, or pursue open-ended projects—precisely the

kind of activities that would result from the process of historical inquiry and interpretation. Moreover, such tasks might conflict with the need to cover the prescribed curriculum, which is one of the most pervasive explanations teachers give for their instructional practices. Everything else—primary sources, multiple perspectives, student interpretation—is extra, and there is rarely time for extras. Learning how to construct historical accounts from evidence might be nice, but it will almost always take a back seat to coverage of textbook or curriculum content, because that is what many people think history teaching is all about, especially in an era of high-stakes testing.<sup>6</sup>

Almost always, but not always. Some teachers do things differently, as we all know, and research suggests that this is because they have different purposes. Some teachers appear to be motivated primarily by the need to fit in (with peers, administrators, and the wider community) and by the desire to implement instruction efficiently. Coverage and control are well-suited to those ends. But other teachers have purposes that cannot be served by those practices, and so they must teach differently. A teacher who wants her students to understand the emotional as well as the intellectual side of history, for example, will use simulations and role plays to get at feelings and reactions. Comparative case studies show that teachers with comparable levels of knowledge may teach in ways that are very different from each other, and these differences are consistent with their ideas about the ultimate goals of the subject. Moreover, teachers who have the most deeply felt and clearly articulated purposes are those most likely to resist conformity and to teach in ways consistent with their beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

This means that in order for teachers to present history as an investigative, interpretive undertaking, they must have a purpose that cannot be served by focusing on coverage and control; their goal must be one that can be met only by having students work with primary sources, consider multiple perspectives, and so on. There are two obvious candidates for this sense of purpose. The first holds that the goal of teaching history is to introduce students to the forms of knowledge and understanding specific to the academic discipline. Because professional historians use primary

sources, students should as well; because professional historians consider multiple perspectives, so too should students. If teachers want to acquaint students with disciplinary knowledge in history, they can't ask students to spend their time reproducing textbook knowledge or lectures, because that has no connection to what historians do.<sup>8</sup>

A great deal of theory and research in history education has been based on this argument, and we've even used it ourselves at times. But we no longer consider it a powerful approach to transforming history education in the nation's schools. We simply do not think many teachers will embrace this purpose with the conviction necessary to overcome the pull of coverage and control. Nor should they. Schools in the U.S. do not exist to reproduce academic disciplines, and there are no convincing arguments for why disciplinary knowledge should be the basis for school subjects. Stephen Thornton has argued that educators should acknowledge that the demands and purposes of history as a school subject are not always the same as those of academic history, and that the discipline cannot provide criteria for what are, after all, educational judgments.<sup>9</sup>

### Education for Citizenship

Another goal for history education has more potential appeal for teachers, as well as being more consistent with the overarching purpose of schooling in the U.S.: preparing students for participation in a pluralist democracy.<sup>10</sup> Education for citizenship is the foundation not only of social studies but of schools more generally in this country, and some approaches to history are particularly well-suited to this role. A basic requirement of democratic citizenship, for example, is experience in analyzing and interpreting information—and this is precisely what historical investigations provide. Citizens must also work together to reach conclusions based on incomplete and conflicting information, and this too is an inescapable element of historical inquiry. And in a pluralist democracy like ours, citizens must try to make sense of other people's perspectives even when they differ radically from their own; history, along with anthropology and cultural geography, can provide experience in exactly this undertaking, as students try

to understand the logic behind patterns of culture and social organization found in other times and places.<sup>11</sup>

As we have argued elsewhere, these investigative and collaborative abilities are essential for democratic participation. Neither unquestioning acceptance of other people's conclusions about the past, nor rejection of every claim as "just an opinion," serves democracy well. If students are to use history to understand the present, they must understand how historical accounts are created, so that they can evaluate how well supported those accounts are by the available evidence. Historical claims cannot simply be buttressed by authority, whether that of the teacher, the textbook, or "experts"; they must be grounded in evidence that has been held up to public inspection. If students are simply asked to remember a body of information, which they think is true because someone in a position of authority said it was, then they don't actually have any knowledge at all—they just have a memory of baseless assertions. Moreover, they have no way of distinguishing historical claims that are based on evidence from those that aren't—such as myths, legends, or outright lies. The inability to distinguish between a myth and a grounded assertion destroys the foundation for democracy, because students will be susceptible to any outrageous story they may be told.<sup>12</sup>

Experience with historical investigations and consideration of multiple perspectives is no guarantee that students will develop into effective citizens of a pluralist, participatory democracy, but it does guarantee they will have taken part in some of its key activities. When history teachers see this as the goal of education, then they obviously cannot rely on coverage and control, because these will fail to prepare students for citizenship. If citizenship requires consideration of multiple perspectives, then these will have to feature in the history classroom; if it requires drawing conclusions from evidence, then students will have to work with evidence in order to draw conclusions.

Research does not yet provide much direction for developing this kind of commitment in teachers. The goal of citizenship is widely shared, but teachers' understanding of its meaning is sometimes simple and

unelaborated.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, teachers come to the profession with ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that have been shaped by a variety of experiences both in and out of the classroom, and education programs appear to have limited impact on these prior perspectives.<sup>14</sup> Professional development for history teachers, meanwhile, focuses almost exclusively on pedagogical content knowledge, and such programs produce little insight into how teachers might link their instructional practices with the demands of citizenship. Several recent studies, though, have addressed the problems and potential of enhancing teachers' reflection on the goals of social education, and we hope this trend will continue.<sup>15</sup> Given the importance of a sense of purpose in determining classroom practice, perhaps no line of research is more important for helping history teachers reformulate their instruction. 📖

### Notes

1. O. L. Davis, Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, ed., *History Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995); James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995); Peter Seixas, "The Community of Inquiry as a Basis for Knowledge and Learning: The Case of History," *American Educational Research Journal* 30 (Summer 1993): 305-324; Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Peter N. Stearns, *Meaning over Memory: Recasting the Teaching of Culture and History* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2001);
2. James Percocco, *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998), and *Divided We Stand: Teaching about Conflict in U.S. History* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2001); David Kobrin, *Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996); Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001).
3. Lee J. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (February 1987): 1-22.
4. Bruce VanSledright, "Closing the Gap between School and Disciplinary History? Historian as High School History Teacher," in *Advances in Research on Teaching*, vol. 6, *Teaching and Learning History*, ed. Jere Brophy (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1996); 257-289; G. Williamson McDiarmid, "Understanding History for Teaching: A Study of the Historical Understanding of Prospective Teachers," in *Cognitive and Instructional Processes in History and the Social Sciences*, ed. James F. Voss and Mario Carretero (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence

- Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 159-186. See also Cynthia Hartzler-Miller, "Making Sense of 'Best Practice' in Teaching History," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 29 (Fall 2001), 672-95.
5. Stephanie D. van Hover and Elizabeth A. Yeager, "Making Students Better People? A Case Study of a Beginning History Teacher," *International Social Studies Forum*, forthcoming; Bruce Fehn and Kim E. Koepfen, "Intensive Document-Based Instruction in a Social Studies Methods Course," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 4 (Fall 1998): 461-484. Other studies demonstrating the mismatch between pedagogical knowledge and classroom knowledge are reviewed in Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).
  6. Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 157-190; Joseph J. Onosko, "Barriers to the Promotion of Higher-order Thinking in Social Studies," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 19 (Fall 1991): 341-366; Stephen J. Thornton, "Curriculum Consonance in United States History Classrooms," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 3 (Summer 1998): 308-20.
  7. S. G. Grant, *History Lessons: Teaching, Learning, and Testing in U.S. High School Classrooms* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), 3-28; Bruce A. VanSledright and Jere Brophy, "'Storytellers,' 'Scientists,' and 'Reformers' in the Teaching of U.S. History to Fifth Graders: Three Teachers, Three Approaches," in *Advances in Research on Teaching*, vol. 5, *Learning and Teaching Elementary Subjects*, ed. Jere Brophy (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1995), 195-243; Suzanne M. Wilson and Sam Wineburg, "Wrinkles in Time and Place: Using Performance Assessments to Understand the Knowledge of History Teachers," *American Educational Research Journal* 30 (Winter 1993): 729-69; Letitia H. Fickel, "Democracy is Messy: Exploring the Personal Theories of a High School Social Studies Teacher," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 28 (Summer 2000): 359-390; Ronald W. Evans, "Teacher Conceptions of History Revisited: Ideology, Curriculum, and Student Belief," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 28 (Spring 1990): 101-138; Jesse Goodman and Susan Adler, "Becoming an Elementary Social Studies Teacher: A Study of Perspectives," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 13 (Summer 1985): 1-20.
  8. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 81; Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 157.
  9. Stephen J. Thornton, "Subject Specific Teaching Methods: History," in *Subject-Specific Instructional Methods and Activities*, vol. 8, *Advances in Research on Teaching*, ed. Jere Brophy (New York: Elsevier Science, 2001), 309; "Educating the Educators: Rethinking Subject Matter and Methods," *Theory into Practice* 40 (Winter 2001), 75.
  10. We have in mind the kind of education for democratic citizenship described in Walter C. Parker, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).
  11. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, "Committing Acts of History: Mediated Action, Humanistic Education, and Participatory Democracy," in *Critical Issues in Social Studies Research for the 21st Century*, ed. William Stanley (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2001), 119-148.
  12. Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*.
  13. Christopher Anderson, Patricia G. Avery, Patricia V. Pederson, Elizabeth S. Smith, and John L. Sullivan, "Divergent Perspectives on Citizenship Education: A Q-Method Study and Survey of Social Studies Teachers," *American Educational Research Journal* 34 (Summer 1997): 333-365; Dorene Doerre Ross and Elizabeth Yeager, "What Does Democracy Mean to Prospective Elementary Teachers?" *Journal of Teacher Education* 50 (September/October 1999): 255-266.
  14. S. G. Grant, "Locating Authority over Content and Pedagogy: Cross-current Influences on Teachers' Thinking and Practice," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 24 (Summer 1996): 237-72; Marilyn Johnston, "Teachers' Backgrounds and Beliefs: Influences on Learning to Teach in the Social Studies," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 28 (Summer 1990): 207-232; Justine Z. X. Su, "Sources of Influence in Preservice Teacher Socialization," *Journal of Education for Teaching* 18, no. 3 (1992): 239-258; Kenneth M. Zeichner and Jennifer M. Gore, "Teacher Socialization," *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3d ed., ed. Merlin C. Wittrock (New York: MacMillan, 1986), 329-348.
  15. For example, Todd Dinkelman, "Critical Reflection in a Social Studies Methods Seminar," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 27 (Summer 1999): 329-57; Elizabeth Heilman, "Teachers' Perspectives on Real World Challenges," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 29 (Fall 2001), 696-733; Avner Segall, *Disturbing Practice: Reading Teacher Education as Text* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

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Why Don't More History Teachers Engage Students in Interpretation? The main determining factor of instructional methods is what the teacher deems to be their purpose and goals o Education for Citizenship Preparing students for participation in a pluralist democracy is a goal more widely acceptable to a variety of teachers Historical interpretation provides necessary skills to achieve that goal by enhancing investigative and collaborative abilities While historical interpretation does not guarantee students.Â Increased student engagement in learning. Strengthens professional community by providing common grounds for the intellectual mission of a school. (King, Newmann, and Carmichael 2009, p. 61-62). Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik The authors argue that encouraging history students to analyze and interpret information helps prepare young people for participation in a pluralist democracy.Â Social Education October 2003. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik The authors argue that encouraging history students to analyze and interpret information helps prepare young people for participation in a pluralist democracy.