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From the Selected Works of Eric Freedman

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Professor Offers a Present-Day Approach for Teaching the Past

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Professor Offers a Present-Day Approach for Teaching the Past

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Freedman proposes more analysis, less memorization



by Timothy Deenihan

Perhaps it's time to change the way students learn history.

Eric Freedman, a professor in Sacred Heart University's Department of Teacher Education, thinks so.

It's no great stretch to say that there are as many versions of history as there are people to tell them—more, actually, if one puts stock in the adage that there are two sides to every story, with the truth living somewhere in between.

The existence of any number of truths presents the greatest challenge facing history teachers: the volume of potential material is simply overwhelming. As such, editing is essential, for the sake of sanity as much as for the constraints of time and practicality. This means that any history lesson is, by necessity, incomplete.

“History lessons can’t be just an empirical question of ‘What happened?’” says Freedman. That, he argues, entirely misses the question of “What matters?”—a question much closer to the hearts of historians and the discipline of history itself.

Seem like splitting hairs? Think back to your own high-school history class and any announcement that there would be a test. Remember the kid who was always the one to ask, “Essay or multiple choice?” And remember the relief or dismay you felt at the answer? Essay questions require something more: not just rote memorization, but analytical skill as well.

Look at it another way. Imagine, if you will, teaching science without a lab, or mathematics without word problems. Knowledge in a vacuum is worth a fraction of the knowledge gained in practical application. Going one step further, lab work is rendered useless unless scientific process is understood at least as well as, if not better than, scientific fact. Why should history be any different?

Freedman recently published a paper in the journal, *Cognition and Instruction*, specifically considering this challenge—essentially, what might history classes look like if we were to teach them through the skill of historical analysis? The paper won him the 2016 award for Exemplary Research in Social Studies from the National Council for the Social Studies. The article, “What Happened Needs to Be Told: Fostering Critical Historical Reasoning in the Classroom,” details Freedman’s study of a high school history class that had the opportunity to learn from different and differing primary sources recording the Vietnam War.

The students discussed all aspects of the accounts—where they concurred, where they conflicted, who valued what over what else and why, etc.—and finally were challenged to write their own history of the time period. In reviewing the papers the students wrote, Freedman examined the analyses, looking at narratives, counting words per topic and discussing the students’ choices. His goal, in his own words, was to determine, “What did they say they were doing, and how did that compare with what they actually did?”

None of the students were interested in presenting an unquestioned American narrative of triumph and progress. In fact, by the end of the unit, they were deeply critical of their textbook. They observed, Freedman writes in his paper, “that the book for the most part stayed true to the facts, but still presented a partial account through selective emphasis and omission.”

Freedman observes that the students failed to note similar problems in their own writing. Giving equal credence to all perspectives of any event or era is all but impossible, Freedman argues, yet that’s exactly what the students tried to do. “Instead of explaining why they considered it important to discuss the Domino Theory, women’s role in the war, or the plight of Vietnamese civilians, they hoped to jettison their personal beliefs entirely,” he writes.

Getting American classrooms to let go of the read-repeat paradigm won’t be easy, as the professor knows firsthand. Prior to his time at Sacred Heart, he had two stints teaching high school social studies, and he is fully aware of the differences between describing a good learning environment and actually creating one. Of all the issues, he says, grading presented the biggest challenge for him. “Time prohibits best practices,” he knows; thus, multiple choice can start to look like an expedient alternative, except that “it fails to assess the reasoning skills we wish to foster.”

There are models to consider for rolling out this brand of lesson planning on a larger scale. Though here in the United States, the emphasis in history always has been on mastering the narrative, in the United Kingdom (and, in particular, Northern Ireland), the goal is much more on teaching students the skills necessary to analyze competing narratives, Freedman notes.

That may be the best thing teachers could do, he concludes. In a modern world where anything anyone could want to know is literally at one’s fingertips, perhaps focusing on giving students information is rather like

handing them water in a teacup as they stand next to a streaming fountain. Perhaps teaching them the *subject* of history is missing the point. Perhaps what the next generation of students requires most, this next generation of citizens and stewards, is to learn the skill of analyzing history—before the skill of analysis becomes history itself.