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### History Teachers' Covert Agenda: Developing Student Literacy

McTygue, Nancy

#### TAKING UP THE CHARGE

While we all know history teachers who puzzle aloud, "How can I teach all of my content standards AND be expected to teach kids to read and write?" increasing numbers in the profession are wondering, "How can I teach history without seizing the many opportunities the content provides for building student literacy?" More than any other subject, history holds the potential for developing the thinking, reading, and writing skills of our diverse student population. While a daunting list of content standards spanning centuries, civilizations, and continents challenges even the most seasoned teacher, history is such a natural for developing critical thinking and literacy skills that many of us are taking up the charge with renewed vigor and applying innovative strategies with promising results.

#### DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF CALIFORNIA'S SCHOOLS

The History Project at UC Davis offers training in practical applications of groundbreaking research in the field of linguistics and discipline-specific methodology. These strategies merge historical content with the literacy needs of our diverse student population. Sacramento County's burgeoning immigrant population, speaking no fewer than fifty-four languages, has seen a 58% increase over the past decade, and, as elsewhere, increasing numbers of American-born and English-speaking students with limited English literacy fill our classrooms. Since 63% of the county's English-learner population attends traditional, mainstream history classes alongside their English-speaking peers with varying abilities, history teachers must do more than provide graphic organizers and images that help students avoid significant reading, writing, and thinking. Teachers in every discipline, therefore, must find ways to increase academic English.

Of paramount concern to many educational reformers is the relatively low performance of secondlanguage speakers on standardized tests. In Sacramento County, for example, 35% of native English-speaking students reached at or above the proficient mark in U.S. history on the California Standards Test (CST) in 2004, yet only 8% of English learners achieved proficiency.<sup>1</sup> The achievement gap between English learners and native speakers is clearly reflected in this data. While native English speakers' achievement plainly needs improvement, our second-language speakers appear to be falling even further behind.

Developing student literacy while teaching history makes sense. It makes sense for students who make significant gains in both content understanding and literacy skills. It makes sense for teachers because it produces deeper, more complex content understanding and more satisfying responses in written work. And it makes sense for administrators whose support for professional development pays off with improved test scores in history, reading comprehension, and writing. In rethinking history curriculum to bolster literacy instruction, history teachers serve their students and themselves, their discipline, and their school's Academic Performance Index.

#### MERGING CONTENT, DISCIPLINE, AND LITERACY

Literacy is the currency of history; of course we care about student literacy. To learn about past events, historical actors, and the great social forces that have shaped humanity, students need not only to be able to listen to a lecture or appreciate historical fiction, they need to be able to comprehend and analyze sources, primary and secondary; they need to discern

differing perspectives; they need to weigh evidence and formulate arguments. Because clear writing both distills and expresses clear thinking, they need to be able to express themselves in expository writing. Indeed, historical content instruction depends on building students' literacy and analysis skills; void of discipline-specific thinking, students are left with a disparate list of dates and details and the subject of history continues to be seen as "one damn thing after another." With careful attention to students' literacy and to disciplinary thinking, students are challenged to reason historically, deconstruct source materials, and defend their own explanations for change over time.

Likewise, literacy skill development without historic content does not serve our students best. After all, vocabulary drills and sentence diagrams without content frequently fail to engage students' intellect in age-appropriate ways. Limited English is not an indicator of low intelligence; our immigrant students should be coached to meet the literacy challenges of content materials instead of recounting the experience in coming to this country year after year. Literacy instruction should be designed to advance student understanding of history. Strategies that help students comprehend their textbook or write a paper must also develop a better appreciation of a specific historical concept, event, or actor. In this way, history teachers can continue to focus on the historical content mandated by the California Academic Content Standards and their students can benefit from relevant skill development that leads to a deeper understanding of the content at hand and the ability to communicate in written form. Communication is a key skill needed by all students.

Students deemed competent enough in English for the average history classroom frequently lack sufficient literacy skills to succeed there. Worse, they frequently plateau in their acquisition of English and achievement across the board once they reach an intermediate level of fluency. Without explicit instruction designed to build student literacy and academic English, English learners and others struggle with reading and writing, many for the rest of their lives.

For better or worse, most secondary history teachers in California hold a Cross-cultural, Language and Academic Development (CLAD) certificate. CLAD training, with its focus on strategies that avoid the textbook, offers history teachers few suggestions for developing students' academic literacy. In contrast, the History Project at UC Davis provides professional development by and for practicing history teachers with the specific goal of increasing student achievement in history.

We are uniquely positioned to bring the many resources of the University of California to bear on the teaching of history in local schools. Through our Project, university historians and linguists have joined forces with experienced secondary teachers to develop a groundbreaking approach which is proving successful in raising student achievement in history by providing teachers with both increased historical content knowledge and disciplinary-skill development. Over the past decade, working groups have honed professional development programs and classroom-tested materials which make disciplinary thinking, reading, and writing primary and focus on improved history instruction which merges content and discipline.

Our approach provides a constant undercurrent for our content-focused workshops featuring talks by academic historians and model lessons designed by teacher leaders. We provide teachers training in the theoretical framework and specific strategies in a one-week institute entitled "Building Literacy through History." This unique course of study develops teachers' understanding of the discipline and suggests ways to organize content for effective instruction that apprentices students as historians. "Building Literacy Through History" also trains participants in specific reading and writing instructional strategies designed to advance student understanding of the standards-based history curriculum. By focusing on apprenticing discipline-specific thinking, reading, and writing, History Project trained-teachers design curriculum that moves students beyond the plateau and enables student success not only in the history classroom and on standardized tests, but also as literate citizens. Literacy achievement is a key goal of the California History-Social Science Framework, and reflects the desire of the state to have literate citizens who can actively and knowledgably engage the timely issues at local, state and national levels.

Starting with the History-Social Science Standards

### Teaching Thesis:

Because African Americans were allowed to associate freely in the Antebellum North, they established churches, schools, and literary societies, and organized politically to fight for abolition. A key aspect of our literacy program is the development of lessons grounded in the History-Social Science Standards. Acknowledging both the importance and scale of the Standards, any strategy we employ must target both standards-based content and student literacy. Teachers use a standard to develop a guiding question and preliminary teaching thesis that answers their question.

From there, participants design historical investigations around their questions, aimed squarely at their teaching theses. They begin by identifying passages from their textbooks that help to answer their questions, and then locate primary sources that further flesh out their topics. Each teacher organizes instruction to provide students opportunities to examine an historic context, realize competing perspectives, forge an interpretation answering the unit's guiding question, and marshal evidence in support of thesis statements. The institute provides a supportive and academic environment in which to plan instruction that guide students in an investigation of selected sources. With support from expert teacher leaders, participants design appropriate activities for meeting the literacy challenges of a variety of texts. In so doing, teachers apprentice their students into the discipline of history in age appropriate ways while directly attending to students' literacy skills. Investigations motivate students as they seek the evidence they need to answer the initial standards-based question. Using questions to guide instruction and assessment allows teachers to focus on the heart of a standard, use their textbook to develop expository reading skills, and develop content and literacy skills, all while being true to the discipline of history.

### Support for Instructional Texts

While primary sources do play a key role in our approach, we are not advocates of dismissing the textbook, as was once in vogue. We recognize that the history textbook is the most available source for both students and teachers, and that in providing the "big picture," it serves to contextualize outside sources. Further, its expository style provides a multitude of opportunities for teaching how language functions. One analysis of junior high school history textbooks suggests that textbook history "is neither a story nor is it about people. In the process of arranging, interpreting and generalizing from recoverable facts, people are effaced, actions become things, and sequence in time is replaced by frozen setting in time."<sup>2</sup> Effective teachers must be able to help students reanimate the past, by restoring a sense of the people both famous and ordinary—who have shaped history. Students must command more than a simple understanding of vocabulary terms. They need to understand the sentence and paragraph structure commonly employed by historical texts. They need to understand that textbooks do not always organize events chronologically, but may arrange them thematically. Finally, they need to appreciate the fact that although a textbook may appear to be an historical narrative or description, it often times is really an argument, designed to convey a particular interpretation.

For example, consider this excerpt from a U.S. history text: "The problems with the Embargo Act led Congress to repeal the unpopular law and replace it with the Non-Intercourse Act of 1809."<sup>3</sup> This sentence highlights a common challenge for students. Without a careful reading, students may miss the author's creation of a causal link - the problems and unpopularity of the Embargo Act led to its being repealed and replaced. Moreover, this sentence highlights a common practice that poses difficulties for many students: an abstract idea, "the problems with the Embargo Act," has been turned into an historical actor causing change. Many students have difficulty understanding how ideas, documents, or movements can "do" things. Superficial comprehension may distort history by divorcing human agency and the individual actions behind movements or ideas.

These and other challenges posed by history textbooks and primary sources point to a myriad of opportunities for developing student literacy. While our approach to unit planning supports disciplinary thinking and skills, building student literacy requires an additional focus. The "Functional Linguistic" framework<sup>4</sup> points to interesting implications for secondary history

classrooms; applying this research has been central in developing our reading program. Functional linguistics offers our teachers tools for helping students break apart selected passages in order to understand causality, agency, perspective, persuasion, and abstraction. By employing such tools in teaching history, we enable students to understand the meanings constructed in historical texts, both primary and secondary, and develop their ability to tackle expository text independently.

#### EXPOSITORY WRITING INSTRUCTION

While most history teachers would agree that constructing and supporting arguments in writing is essential for content and disciplinary understanding and for literacy skill development, few have the training to design and implement an adequate writing program while teaching 150 or more students each day. Our step-by-step writing program trains teachers to scaffold the writing process for students, ensuring mastering of discrete skills from thesis development to analysis. By building competence, offering plenty of opportunities-big and small-for practice, and developing students' expository writing skills over the course of a school year, teachers are less likely to collapse under the burden of grading hundreds of poorlywritten essays; by the time a teacher assigns a full essay, he or she should feel confident that each will have an argumentative thesis, evidence in support of that thesis, and analysis connecting the two. By applying the History Project's writing strategies for developing student writers of history, history teachers become outstanding teachers of expository writing without sacrificing content instruction.

#### PRELIMINARY EVALUATION RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

"History offers a literacy environment as rich as anyone is likely to encounter prior to college,"<sup>5</sup> notes M. Anne Britt and her colleagues. The preparation of history educators is therefore paramount. Preliminary findings in our first year of an ongoing evaluation, conducted by Gargani & Company, document greater gains in content and literacy development for the students of teachers who attended History Project professional development programs. In fact, it seems the more time teachers dedicated to this kind of training, the greater the gains. Controlling for school site, propensity to attend training, and a subjectively scored teacher quality rating, Gargani found that 60 hours of History Project training resulted students-gains averaging 22% higher than their peers with teachers who attended no professional development activities.<sup>6</sup> The History Project's approach increases achievement in history because teachers review the content of the history standards with assistance from professional historians who enthusiastically share their time and expertise. Teachers also develop lessons rich in historic content and literacybuilding activities, frequently in collaboration with other history teachers K-16, apprentice students in the discipline of history in age-appropriate ways, and learn specific strategies for deconstructing text to develop reading independence. In so doing, they ensure that all students have access to rich and engaging curriculum which stretches their understanding of history while providing literacy skills that support all the disciplines.

#### Notes

1 California Department of Education, 2003-04.

2 Eggins, Suzanne, Peter Wignell, and J.R. Martin. "The Discourse of History: Distancing the Recoverable Past." *Theory and Practice*, London: Pinter Publishers, 1993. 75.

3 Stuckey, Sterling and Linda Kerrigan Salvucci. *Call to Freedom*. Holt: Rhinehart and Winston (2000). 348.

4 Schleppegrell, Mary and Mariana Achugar. "Learning Language and Learning History: A Functional Linguistics Approach." *TESOL Journal*. Vol. 12, No. 2.

5 Britt, M, et al "The Sorcerer's Apprentice: A Tool for Document-Supported History Instruction." *Knowing, Teaching, and*

Learning History: National and International Perspectives. (New York: New York University Press, 2000). 437.

6 The adjusted difference in post-test score is 2.22 points on a 0 to 24 scale. The size of the effect is 0.54 standard deviations and is considered a medium to large effect size.

## Reading List

### I. General Teaching History Sources

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. (2003). Where we stand: Teacher equality. Washington: AFT, June. Advocates extended discipline-specific training and mentorship for novice teachers to reduce teacher attrition and improve quality of teaching.

Bain, R. (1998). Into the breach: Using research and theory to shape history instruction. Paper presented at Spencer Foundation, Nov. 6-8. Advocates apprenticing students as historians by merging subject-matter content with historical interpretation and practice in secondary history courses.

Ball, D. & McDiarmid, G (1989). The subject-matter preparation of teachers. *Curriculum of Teacher Education*, 437-449. Explores the idea that teachers must have a great understanding of the subject matter they are teaching in order for students to learn effectively. Stresses the importance of subject matter preparation and learning for teachers.

Britt, M., Perfetti, C., Van Dyke, J., & Gabrys, G (2000). The sorcerer's apprentice: A tool for document-supported history instruction. *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*. Ed. Stearns, P., Seixas, P., & Wineburg, S. New York: New York University Press, 437-470. History as a text-rich site for literacy development is the focus of this article. To increase the effectiveness of using multiple texts, the authors evaluate whether sourcing skills improve with use of the computer application, Sorcerer's Apprentice.

California Department of Education, Database. 1 October 2004. <http://www.cde.ca.gov>. Statewide database of public school information listing standardized test scores, enrollment, ethnic and language populations, etc.

California Department of Education. (2001). History-Social Science framework for California public schools. Sacramento: CDE. Provides the academic content standards for History-Social Science in California K-12 classrooms, which serve as a basis for statewide assessment.

Medina, K., Pollard, J., Schneider, D., & Leonhardt, C. (2002). How do students understand the discipline of history as an outcome of teachers' professional development? Results of a 3-Year Study: *Every Teacher An Historian: A Professional Development Research and Documentation Program*. Spencer / MacArthur Foundation Grant. Analyzes the impact of professional development programs offered by the Area 3 History and Cultures Project at UC Davis upon teacher practice and student achievement.

McDiarmid, G (1992). Issue Paper 92-3: The Arts and Sciences as Preparation for Teaching. Michigan: The National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. Most educational researchers recommend that teachers pay more attention to students' ideas and thinking, lecture less, show relationships between details and "the big picture," discuss their own personal experience, find new ways to represent concepts and ideas, encourage cooperative learning, and involve students in active inquiry. McDiarmid suggests, though, that the real problem in education is one of values, not technique. He stresses the importance of arts and sciences faculty interacting with education faculty so that teachers are learning in their content areas.

Presidents' Network for the Education of Teachers. Executive Summary of the Teacher Education Task Force Report. March 20, 2002. February 3, 2004. <http://www.acenet.edu/resource/presnet/exec-summary.cfm>. Lists suggestions for college and university presidents to follow in order to better train k-12 teachers. Among those suggestions is the idea that universities should "require that education faculty and courses are coordinated with arts and sciences faculty and courses" and also that universities should "ensure that graduates of their teacher education programs are supported, monitored, and mentored by providing continuing professional development."

Shulman, L. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*. 57, 1-22. This article suggests that to reform the teaching profession, education policy must address the sources of teacher knowledge and student learning.

Stuckey, S. & Salvucci, L. (2000). *Call to freedom*. Holt: Rhinehart and Winston (2000). Survey U.S. History textbook

## II. English Learners in History Bibliography

Beck, I., McKeown, M., & Gromoll, E. (1989). Learning from social studies texts. *Cognition and Instruction*, 6.2, 99-158. Draws on research on the nature of the reading process and characteristics of historical texts that promote or impede comprehension.

Coffin, C. (1997). Constructing and giving value to the past: An investigation into secondary school history. *Genre and Institutions: Social Processes in the Workplace and School*, Ed. Frances C. & Martin, J. London: Cassell, 196-230. Examines secondary school history texts to show how students move from constructing the past as story, with a focus on particular, concrete events moving through time, to constructing it as argument, with a focus on abstract theses organized in texttime.

The condition of education. National Center for Education Statistics. February 2, 2004. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/index.asp>. Website of various indicators and analyses in education, as published in *The Condition of Education 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003*.

Eggs, S., Wignell, P., & Martin, J. (1993). The discourse of history: Distancing the recoverable past. *Theory and Practice*, London: Pinter Publishing, 75-109. Discusses how the teaching of history requires inculcating students with an "historical perspective," which is described as involving a "sense of time, a sense of cause/effect relationship, an understanding of the interaction of past and present, and an understanding that history is a dynamic relationship of people, place and time."

Jacobs, E., Rottenberg L., Patrick, S. & Wheeler, E. (1996). Cooperative learning: Context and opportunities for acquiring academic English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30, 253-80. Analyzes cooperative learning during social studies. Students aided by comprehensible input, but opportunities for learning were missed and students received negative input from peers. Students focused more on getting done than on learning something new.

Martin, J., (1991). Nominalization in science and humanities: Distilling knowledge and scaffolding text. *Functional and Systemic Linguistics*. Ed. Ventola, E. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 307-337. Analysis of middle school science and history textbooks and their linguistic requirements.

McNamara, J. (1989). The writing in science and history project: The research questions and implications for teachers. *Writing in Schools*. Ed. Christie, F. Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press, 24-35. Analyzes writing tasks demanded in history and science in grades 7-12. Describes specific strategies used to increase student achievement by including a discussion of genres, pre-writing assignments and detailed assessment of student work.

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Education Programs (NCELA). 2003.

January 15, 2004. <http://www.ncele.gwu.edu/index.htm>. NCELA provides online information and publications relating to the effective education of linguistically and culturally diverse learners of the U.S.

Participation in education: Elementary/secondary education. National Center for Education Statistics. January 18, 2004. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2003/section1/indicator04.asp>. Reports increases in language minority students in U.S. schools over past 20 years.

Schlepppegrell, M. & Achugar, M. Learning language and learning history: A functional linguistics approach. *TESOL Journal*. Vol. 12, No. 2. Details the development of the California History Social Science Project's literacy curriculum and the methods employed to deconstruct historical text to increase student literacy and achievement in history.

Veel, R. & Coffin, C. (1996). Learning to think like an historian: The language of secondary school history. *Literacy in Society*. Ed. Hasan, R. & Williams, G London: Longman, 191-231. Explores the "language of school history" and suggests that students must develop genre-specific ways of meaning which in turn requires them to learn a greater range of genres. To do this, teachers must build on students' historical understanding by developing more abstract ways of understanding knowledge that was gained at the start of their historical education.

Nancy McTygue is the Director of the History Project at UC Davis and serves as Project Director for three TAH grants: Grant Joint Unified High School District (2002), Sacramento City Unified School District (2003), and the Yolo County Office of Education (2004). Prior to her appointment as History Project Director, she taught high school in the Vacaville School District. McTygue holds a BA in Political Science, an MA in Education, both from UC Davis, and a Clear Ryan Single Subject Teaching Credential in Social Science and Government.

Pamela Tindall has been the Co-Director for the History Project at UC Davis since 2001. In this position, Tindall coordinates the majority of U.S. history programming offered by the Project, in addition to programs that support teachers of geography and those seeking National Board Certification. Before joining the History Project as Co-Director, she taught middle and high school in the Elk Grove Unified School District. Tindall holds a BA in Social Science from California State University, Sacramento and a Single Subject Teaching Credential in Social Science.

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