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The right way to teach history

By Marion Brady

Mr. Martinez, middle school American history teacher, slips his roll book into a desk drawer and looks up at his class.

The students eye him quietly, for they’ve learned that he frequently does or says something surprising. If they aren’t attentive, they might miss it.

The attentiveness isn’t lost on Martinez. After a well-timed pause, he touches a key on his computer, and projected on the screen in the front of the room is a huge image of a yellowed, authentic poster announcing job openings for Pony Express riders.

“WANTED,” the poster says, “YOUNG, SKINNY, WIRY FELLOWS not over eighteen. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred. Wages \$25 per week.”

Martinez watches his students’ eyes sweep down the poster. Then, pausing just a moment, he asks, “Any takers?”

There are good reasons for studying American history. Martinez’ style suggests he favors the benefits to be had from what the publishers of history textbooks sometimes advertise as “making the past come alive” — history as literature, history that engages the emotions, history in the form of an exciting, perhaps inspiring story.

That use of history fills an important need. In order for a society to function, its members must feel connected — have a sense of “us-ness.” Without it, individual interests overwhelm collective interests. Taxes are resisted. Roads, bridges, parks, schools, libraries, and so on, don’t get built, or, if built, aren’t maintained. Without that sense of relatedness, social institutions that provide protection, insure justice, maintain the environment, and so on, aren’t created, or, if created, aren’t sufficiently supported.

It seems fair to say that — except when America is under attack — our feelings of “us-ness,” of “one nation, indivisible,” aren’t particularly strong. Congressional actions, for example, frequently illustrate a level of national divisiveness sufficient to paralyze governing, or even cooperate sufficiently to explore the benefits of various health insurance programs.

Stories of a shared past create and reinforce an essential sense of community and strengthen supportive values and beliefs. Remembered heroes tell the young what traits of character are admired. Remembered difficulties, hardships, and crises tell citizens about potential problems and dangers that can’t be adequately dealt with except by collective action.

Sadly, even before the current education “reforms” shoved the study of history aside, the subject seemed to maintain its place in the curriculum more from inertia than a sense of its importance. Student surveys almost always put it at the top of the list of boring, irrelevant subjects, and most students would have a hard time putting together a convincing argument in its defense. History texts — in order to get past textbook selection committees — have to be written

in a bloodless, impersonal style or are considered too subjective to be acceptable. Few parents know much history, display an interest in it, or communicate to their kids a sense of its importance. Ideologues gut textbooks by demanding that they be free of criticism of American policies and actions.

If contributing to societal survival is a legitimate aim of education, what present education policy is doing to the study of history is unacceptable. The main generator of really hard-to-solve social problems is social change. The past offers no ready-made formulas or strategies for solving the problems that change creates, but it's the only school subject that deals with societies holistically, the only school subject that subsumes all other school subjects, the only school subject that offers a perspective broad enough to make adequate sense of who we are as a nation, and the roles we play on the world stage.

If study of America's past is to get the attention it deserves, treating it as a story to be told is probably best left to documentaries and other products of filmmakers and television producers. What history teachers can do that media specialists can't do — or can't do well — is challenge kids to a sustained effort to use their brains for something other than trying to remember what they think is likely to be on a test. Learners need to identify and explore patterns and regularities in our collective behavior, need to question unexamined assumptions about who we are, need to trace the trends of the era, and so on. Stories can move us, but when we're trying to make more sense of what's happening, why, and what might happen next, a more analytical, scientific approach to study of the past is necessary.

Consider: A look at almost any newspaper's front page is likely to provide evidence of the need for a better understanding of the process of polarization. Why do small differences that should lead to productive dialogue between friends, between husbands and wives, between neighbors, between management and labor, between political parties, between nations and among groups of nations — why do small differences so frequently spiral so far out of control that productive dialogue is impossible?

America's past offers ample resources for studying the process of polarization.

Consider: Mainstream media often tell everyone in the country about the kidnapping or murder of a photogenic female, provide day-by-day coverage of a celebrity's trial for some alleged minor offense, and trace in detail the sex life of a politician belonging to the political party not favored by the news outlet. Meanwhile, invisible under our feet and largely ignored, the water table essential to our way of life drops inch by precious inch to fatten the bottom line of a bottled-water producer or a golf course owner.

Only by getting our priorities in order and studying change over time — as history does — do matters such as these get the attention they deserve.

Consider: American history has important things to say about the consequences of various patterns of wealth distribution, about unintended negative consequences of well-meant legislation, about the systemic effects of changes in the percentage of the population in various age groups, about problems triggered by technological change, about the relationship between economic diversity and economic stability, about reactions to thwarted individual autonomy, about decision-making concentrated in too-few hands, about the limitations of market forces, about the push and pull of un-examined cultural assumptions.

The past contains no easy answers, no ready-made conclusions, no precise parallels to today's situations, but it's ridiculous to suppose that America can function as it ought if its citizens are ignorant of the dynamics of change and unaware of probable future problems created by forgotten missteps.

To be valued as it ought to be valued, American history instruction needs to move away from "the story" toward the study of important changes that have affected — and will continue to affect — the way of life we seek. That's a significant shift. However, this won't solve the other problem with history as it's usually taught: its failure to engage learners in any effective way.

The core of the problem is the textbook — a huge, backpack-stressing compendium of pre-digested, secondhand information that students are expected to remember, at least long enough to pass a test. History textbooks are loaded with conclusions, leaving learners little to do but try to store them in memory, a task at odds with kids' basic natures. Too many history classes resemble the famous scene in the movie "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," with Ben Stein lecturing on economic history to zoned-out teens.

Instead of making the past come alive, kids need to come alive. Moving to active learning using un-interpreted primary sources, and requiring real investigation and deep analytical thought is a key to developing that engagement. Focusing on historical principles that kids can use "right here, right now," is another.

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Note: For examples of the kind of instructional materials for history that I think would do the job that needs doing, I invite readers to take a look at:

<http://www.marionbrady.com/AmericanHistoryHandbookForTeachersandMentors.asp>

In the spirit of open source, the materials are free, a feature your local school system administrators might find both unusual and attractive.

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