

Teaching Hard History: Whose Monument is This, Anyway?

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Abstract:

As a social sciences methods professor, I face a growing concern over preparing Teacher Candidates (TC) for an ever-divided political system. The purpose of this study was to create and use primary source reading techniques regarding modern controversial issues. As educators, it is clear that the divide from political allegiance is hard to separate from our personal identities or political affiliations. We know from this study that this is a difficult but necessary process for future teachers to explore.

Key words: dominant narrative, teacher education, democratic citizenship

Introduction and Statement of Problem

According to Hillburn, Journell, and Buchanan (2016), content decisions in social sciences have escalated over the years, often due to our divisive political views. With this context in mind, the purpose of this article is to advocate for teaching a hard history approach to social sciences and other disciplines in all grades through research and personal experiences. VanSledright (2008) contends that the process of history is one that “investigates, wrestles with, and interprets [the] past in an uncomfortable, ongoing struggle to wrest some meaning from it all, all on its own terms as much as possible” (p. 120). Social sciences as a discipline, then, theoretically affords students the opportunity to objectively approach a given topic or event, critically examine it from differing viewpoints, synthesize this learned information, and from it produce an informed and well-rounded conclusion. What we find more often in the social sciences curriculum is an encoded knowledge that is both “selected through mainstream values, perspectives, and ontological and epistemological traditions” (Salinas & Blevins, 2014, p. 35), as well as “simplistic and void of complex, nuanced, and other perspectives” (p. 36). Surveys of high school history teachers reveal that they broadly engage in the “common, long-standing practice of using and covering the vast textbook, occasionally supporting it with additional print materials and visual imagery..., and

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reinforcing the ideas the textbook conveys with classroom lectures” (VanSledright, 2008, p. 118). Instead of providing a more holistic and analytical approach to history through the active development of students’ critical thinking skills, the social sciences curriculum advocates for students to simply learn a predetermined, streamlined, and homogenous ideological narrative propagated by a dominating group (Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012, p. 18).

Division over Curriculum

According to Ogbu (1992), the social sciences curriculum is seen as divisive. There are groups in the United States that do not see themselves as being represented in textbooks, standards, and current events while other groups think they are not represented fairly. A student might yearn for history lessons presented through a hero’s narrative while another student might want to learn history from an evidence-based perspective. As we witness in the classroom, these perspectives shape how teachers approach social sciences. In the following sections, the researcher will argue that the neglect and underdevelopment of student critical thinking within the social sciences curriculum (particularly the U.S. History curriculum) is abetted by two distinct yet interrelated phenomena: the impetus in standards and textbooks and the influence of the dominant narrative.

Dominant Narrative

In analyses of U.S. History textbooks and standards across the United States, a common narrative trend presents itself: Textbooks are “frequently privileging Eurocentric narratives” (Rogers Stanton, 2015, p. 183), and standards are telling a “traditional, Euro-American narrative” (Shear, Knowles, Soden, & Castro, 2015, p. 69). Salinas et al. (2012) posit that this favoring of a collective narrative is the result of dominant groups in American society having the “ability to shape and produce the official narratives that are communicated in our society because they have access to particular means of cultural production” (p. 18). Those who have the power to produce the U.S. History narrative are molding it into a framework that they identify with and seek to promote.

The dominant narrative found in the social sciences curriculum is not only shaped by a certain group of people who favor their own group’s narrative, but it also aims to tell a certain type of story. This story has three different themes that help it to achieve its goal. VanSledright (2008) argues that in schools and textbooks, (1) there is constant repetition of the “American nation-building story” (p. 110), which (2) seeks to “celebrate and proscribe the terms in which the celebration is cast” (p. 115). This celebration manifests itself in (3) the onward-marching story of American progress (Shear et al., 2015, pp. 86-87). K-12 students, consequently, are continuously

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taught year after year, the same progressive, celebratory, nation-building narrative crafted and endorsed by the dominant group. The challenge in social sciences is that the textbooks tend to present a Eurocentric viewpoint of history. Depending on one's political affiliation, one might be content with a version of history that ignores the negative treatment of minorities so that a positive view can be placed on what is viewed as an individual's interpretation of events (Journell, 2008). Which two groups are most likely to argue for and against historical content? During the traditional tenets, social sciences finds itself at a crossroads in regards to how content is explored (Anderson, 2013).

Narrative Selectors

The impact of state standards is visible in numerous textbooks that support the argument of states' rights during the Civil War. Despite all the historical evidence that states' rights was not the reason for the Civil War, based on how standards are worded, this narrative is interjected into numerous state standards. This, in turns, causes teachers to divert their attention away from other perspectives in history. The constant theme throughout history is that the victor writes the history, but this is certainly not true in regards to the Confederate narrative. We do not see this narrative view for other historical events; for instance, we rarely hear the accounts of those who suffered greatly at the expense of Westward expansion. In regards to hard history, we face a greater challenge in the divisive nature of how historical events are construed.

Historical Relevancy

Relevancy is an essential part of the social sciences curriculum, yet it is woefully underused. Relevancy helps students comprehend that history is not a static discipline but a dynamic one that provides context to understanding the politics, conflicts, struggles, cultures, etc., of the world today. Salinas et al. (2012) describe dynamic history as history that is "continuously interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals, communities, and nation states in undeniably different ways" (p. 19). Instead of students being passive consumers of history, critical analysis of the relevancy of any given historical topic allows students to become active inquirers engaged in current civic and social issues.

If relevancy is important, provides a sense of immediacy to students, and actively develops critical thinking, then why is it not a prominent part of the social sciences curriculum? One reason for this occurrence is that the social sciences curriculum presents historical events as narratives with a beginning, middle, and end/resolution (Salinas & Blevins, 2014, p. 36). It is this sense of a conclusion that prevents continued conversation and investigation. Journell (2008) provides the

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state standard scenario of racial inequality being interpreted as ending with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 because of “the lack of emphasis on modern African American issues” (p. 46); indeed, only one state of the nine that he studied included anything about African Americans after the Civil Rights Movement.

Historical Thinking

Within the social sciences field, we are introduced to various approaches to teach historical content. One of the most used approaches is historical thinking. The theoretical view behind this approach is for students to think like historians (Ashby & Lee, 1987). Based on this approach, other research was conducted to examine young learners’ thinking (Barton, 1997). Wertsch’s (2002) approach changed the focus from individual abilities to employ historical reasoning and methods to produce an objective or rational interpretation of the past to social-group uses and interpretations of history to create and sustain social identities.

Research Methods

Breakstone (2014) designed an original case study by defining history-assessment tasks as the unit of analysis. He designed, piloted, and revised three classroom-based assessment tasks—each one analyzed as a separate case—using student responses and think-aloud protocols as data sources to evaluate the tasks’ validity and construct alignment, as well as to assess the cognitive processes in which students engaged to answer the tasks.

A related methodology involves visual or image-based educational research (Prosser & Burke, 2008). Which is often used to enable children, adolescents, and other “non-researchers” to represent their understandings of the world. Using the methodology, researchers working in the fields of childhood and youth sciences ask children and young people to produce drawings, photographs, and/or videos as ways to represent their understandings. The premise is that children and youth are active participants and interpreters of their social worlds and construct their own unique perspectives. Keeping this in mind, the same should hold true for adult learners as well.

Site Description

In order to evaluate the attitudes of future social sciences teachers (N=24) regarding the inclusion of hard history in the curriculum, the researcher devised a case study that involved visiting a removal of Confederate statues. This study specifically focused on Robert E. Lee’s statue at the Antietam National Battlefield (Appendix A). This was accomplished through preparation,

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observation, reflections, break-out sessions, and post surveys. The study took place during the spring semester of 2020 and consisted of 24 (N=24) pre-service social sciences middle and high school teachers.

Classroom Preparation

During the inquiry process for a secondary methods course in the southeastern region, teacher candidates (N=24) were asked to use the professor's approved list of sources for the assignment (Appendix A). During this process, many of the Teacher Candidates used resources not approved by the professor. We engaged in discussions with the Teacher Candidates about controversial monuments. The main question was: Do these monuments represent southern heritage or do they serve as symbols of oppression? Basic questions (e.g., Who paid for the monuments? Where were the monuments built? For what purpose?) were explored and discussed in class sessions.

Data Collection

The Teacher Candidates' (N=24) post-survey responses to the prompts were coded by the researcher after the end of the course. Grades were based on responses and evidence collected based on Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) backwards design framework. After the course, a graduate student coded the names and created a chart of key terms and statements that were recorded during the assignment.

Member Checking

Member checking was performed to embody the authenticity as constructed by the participants (social science Teacher Candidates [TCs]). Once we had completed the analysis of the data, the TCs were invited to the computer lab after all assignments had been graded to review statements and to check the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the researcher's findings. This included the researcher's notes, significant themes, and a viewing of the sources used for the assignment. All responses were anonymous. The students also received a copy of the peer researcher's notes and themes, as well as a copy of the session. They were allowed to read and post notes or questions on all documents. The TCs were allowed to address any concerns raised by checking the data collection process. They were allowed to remove items or clarify statements with the research assistant after the course was completed.

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Results

This study examines the experiences of 24 Teacher Candidates (TCs) as they learned about hard history and acted as historical thinkers. While the TCs were all in the same social sciences methods course, their historical accounts varied due to the wide range of social and political backgrounds and on the subject of removing the Robert E. Lee monument, as well as their own personal experiences. We examined how these TCs applied their findings into two themes: an emphasis on primary source usage and a non-emphasis on primary sources.

During this project, the TCs' experiences with primary sources varied greatly. TC 7 said, "It is important to recognize implicit bias during this process." Experience with using questions enabled teachers to enter into the inquiry design process, providing a pedagogical framework for the study (see Table 1).

Emphasis on the Sources

Teacher Candidates found the process of using pre-selected resources helpful. However, several found this problematic and limiting. TC 4 asserted, "Ha! He told us we could only use the sources in the assignment. Ok! He is forcing us to agree with him. It is rather blatant on his part." Positive responses were also presented. According to TC 9, "I really enjoyed this process. I can see myself using this with my students. I taught at a high-poverty school this semester. I know my students would love to explore a topic like this during a Civil War unit."

All TCs demonstrated a willingness to participate despite some negative feedback from, for example, TC 13:

I think this is a great approach to learning. However, I did hate how provocative it was. I know a number of people felt uncomfortable about the assignment. Now that is over, it was not that bad of a learning experience. For myself, I will select a non-aggressive personal hard history assignment for my students.

Regarding the removal of Robert E. Lee's monument:

I am so glad that we were able to complete this project. I was not aware of the time period that these statues were built and what their intent was. I can only guess what that might be. I assume it was to preserve their way of life, but also to scare those that were free in the Southern States during the Jim Crow Era. Based on my review of the current events, I think it was for both reasons. I also think racism is viewed differently now. (TC 3)

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In defense of statues:

It is heartbreaking to know that cancel culture wants to destroy my heritage. I think that I am in a class that seems to take joy in the death of my culture to help others. It is a real sad experience for me. (TC 1)

I am not sure why I am asked to condemn my ancestors. No other group of people are asked to renounce their race in this class. It is just the lone white male who is blamed for everyone's short comings. The sooner this class is over, the sooner I can go back to teaching the way that I know works best. (TC 4)

Let me get this straight, I have to say these monuments should be removed to get a good grade? I am just going to switch it up here. What if I asked the black students to take down a statue of Martin Luther King Jr? I assume I would be fired for that. Not for this? Ridiculous! (TC 16)

Discussion

As demonstrated above, the utilization and development of students' critical thinking, as it prohibits skills in the social sciences classroom have been severely stunted by the curriculum's dominant narratives, exclusions of other perspectives, and the absence of historical relevancy. The previous section examined these three phenomena as singularities, but here we seek to thread them together to highlight how they work together to restrict what can be called authentic critical thinking. Previous research has shown that Eurocentric narratives are the dominant narrative in U.S. History textbooks and standards, and that this narrative is positively and progressively constructed and propagated by those with power, access, and means. If textbooks and standards are consistently privileging and preserving a traditional narrative that fits within an exclusive framework constructed by a partisan group in society, then students do not have an authentic opportunity to critically engage with the social sciences curriculum. Authenticity in critical thinking as it relates to social sciences should be cast in the same relief as the VanSledright (2008) quote from the beginning of this paper and the Salinas et al. (2012) definition of dynamic history as a disputative discipline that requires students to investigate and interpret historical sources and materials. Students cannot genuinely engage in these processes of critical thinking if the evidence they are given is the type that, for example, excludes other perspectives that provide challenging, contentious, and diverse counterpoints to the dominant narrative. Lack of historical relevancy further enshrines the set parameters of student critical thinking as it prohibits students from evolving from passive consumers of the historical narrative

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to active inquirers engaged with the social and civic historical present. As a result, students are provided with a purposeful imbalance of perspectives and a clear conversation demarcation that favors the dominant group so that it can keep control of the narrative it seeks to promote.

The effect of this is that even if textbooks or standards ask students to utilize their critical thinking skills, the information and resources given are hand-picked, subjective, and biased. Consequently, any conclusion students derive from analysis is one that has already been essentially predetermined by the dominant group. Students, therefore, cannot participate in authentic critical thinking because the scope of the narrative has been narrowed and simplified to exclude any meaningful analysis that would allow students to investigate, research, interpret, and wrestle with historical material as it presents itself, and not how the dominant group presents it.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

Parker (2010) advocates for students to value differences and work towards solving common problems. Social studies is a key field to practice deliberation. Inquiry is a valuable tool in any discipline. In regards to hard history in social studies, Teacher Candidates have the opportunity to explore events and discuss them and the surrounding issues in a positive manner. Perspectives and background are essential (Clay, 2003). Teachers and students are in a constant state of engagement. This study sought to examine how issues in the social studies Teacher Candidates (TCs) regarding dominant narratives, exclusion of other perspectives, and the absence of historical relevancy have a direct influence on the development and utilization of authentic student critical thinking skills. This study has shown us as social studies professors that not only do we need to be more aware and to question the agendas behind US History textbooks and standards, but also that there are significantly deficient areas of diversity, other voices, connections to current issues, and student developmental skills in the social studies curriculum. Whether in lectures or student activities, as a social studies methods professor, we want teacher candidates to scaffold from what they have learned, critically evaluate new information, and shape their own evidentially- and logically-informed understandings so they may similarly guide students through this process as well. This research project has also made me more considerate of how various minority groups might struggle to identify and to engage with the social studies curriculum due to this we must be aware of bias in teaching. We also must recognize self-imposed limitations like Black History Month should be expanded into a robust curriculum that celebrates the many accomplishments of those not recognized by the dominant narrative.

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Table 1

Teacher Candidate Demographics

	Ethnicity	Age	Gender
TC 1	Caucasian	18-21	Male
TC 2	Caucasian	22-25	Male
TC 3	Caucasian	26-30	Male
TC 4	Caucasian	31-35	Male
TC 5	Caucasian	31-35	Male
TC 6	Multi-racial	31-35	Male
TC 7	Latina	31-35	Female
TC 8	African-American	18-21	Female
TC 9	African-American	22-25	Female
TC 10	African-American	22-25	Female
TC 11	African-American	22-25	Female
TC 12	African-American	22-25	Female
TC 13	Caucasian	22-25	Female
TC 14	Caucasian	22-25	Female
TC 15	Caucasian	22-25	Female
TC 16	Caucasian	26-30	Female
TC 17	Caucasian	26-30	Female
TC 18	Caucasian	26-30	Female
TC 19	Caucasian	26-30	Female
TC 20	Caucasian	31-35	Female
TC 21	Caucasian	31-35	Female
TC 22	Caucasian	31-35	Female
TC 23	Caucasian	36-40	Female
TC 24	Caucasian	36-40	Female

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Table 2

Teacher Candidate	Comments	Grade
TC 1	Comparing Robert E. Lee to Martin Luther King.	1
TC 2	Stated historical reason for the monument to stay. Cited 3 current events.	10
TC 3	Stated historical reason for the monument to stay. Cited 3 current events.	10
TC 4	Stated historical reason for the monument to stay. Cited 3 current events.	10
TC 5	Stated cancel culture as the reason for removal. they only cited one current event for their stance.	5
TC 6	Wanted the monument removed. Did not cite sources.	1
TC 7	Wanted the monument removed. Cited all articles in their decision.	10

Table 3

Post Monument Study Survey

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Were the media literacy sources valid?	TCs 1-4	TC 7	TCs 5,6	TCs 8-14	TCs 15-24
Did you have an opinion on this topic before the class assignment?	TCs 3-5	TCs 16-24	-	TCs 6-15	TCs 1,2
Did the sources change your opinion?	TCs 6-15	TCs 16-24	-	TCs 3-5	TCs 1,2
Would you use a similar method to teach media literacy in your classroom?	TCs 3-5	TCs 16-24	-	TCs 1,2	TCs 4-7

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Appendix A

Primary Sources Resources

You have been tasked as a Civil War historian to explore the rationale to keep Confederate Monuments. See link for background on the subject from PolitiFact: <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/jun/12/facebook-posts/fact-checking-claims-about-robert-e-lees-position/>

Historical Figure	Background Information on the Confederate	Geographic Location	Evidence from various primary sources	Decision to remove monument: Yes/No Must provide evidence and rationale for stance
<p>Robert E. Lee</p> 	<p>Born 1807 Confederate General (1861-1865) Died 1870 Hall of Fame for Great Americans 1900</p>	<p>Monument to Robert E. Lee at the Antietam National Battlefield</p>	<p>Congress.Gov to remove monument: https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3779</p> <p>Congress.Gov Restores citizenship posthumously to General Robert E. Lee https://www.congress.gov/bill/94th-congress/house-joint-resolution/411</p> <p>The Smithsonian: https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchCode=LCCN&searchArg=12004370&searchType=1&permalink=y</p> <p>Robert E. Lee's statue vandalized: https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/news/local/lee-statue-at-antietam-battlefield-vandalized-again/article_6f31bb34-3516-5da2-b994-6a9ca230c7a0.html</p>	<p>Narrative Response 2-3 paragraphs.</p> <p>Establish a proposal to remove or protect the monument based on the sources.</p>

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Appendix B

Monument Rubric

Monument Position	Proficient	Capable	Adequate	Limited	Poor
Narrative Response 2-3 paragraphs. Establish a proposal to remove or protect the monument based on the sources.	An insightful understanding of the reading selection(s) is effectively established. The student's opinion, whether directly stated or implied, is perceptive and appropriately supported by specific details. Support is precise and thoughtfully selected.	A well-considered understanding: Opinion is thoughtful. Support is well defined and appropriate.	A plausible understanding is established and sustained. The student's opinion is conventional and plausibly supported. Support is general but functional.	Some understanding is evidenced, but the understanding is not always defensible or sustained. Opinion may be superficial and support scant and/or vague.	An implausible conjecture. The student's opinion, if present, is inappropriate or incomprehensible.
Score:	10	7	5	3	1
Comments:					

The evaluation of the answer should be in terms of the **amount of evidence** that the student has actually read something and thought about it, **not** a question of whether the student has thought about the topic in line with the professor or any other students.

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