

Bridging the Divide between Content and Pedagogy: Reflective History Teaching

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A common feature of universities is the dual role of addressing disciplinary content and, either directly or indirectly, preparing future generations of students to teach the discipline. A product of a research project entitled, “Historians and History Teachers: Collaborative Conversations,” this post summarizes our presentation at the Teaching and Learning Symposium in January and explores our effort to address the persistent divide between content and pedagogy among undergraduate history education students. History educators often debate the number of required history courses in relation to education courses for undergraduates seeking to be teachers; we created a course, “United States in the Twentieth Century,” that purposefully *blended* historical content, the burgeoning scholarship in history education, and reflective practice. We drew upon SoTL work in history and scholarship in history education as the basis for a course designed to build teaching candidates’ pedagogical content knowledge and prepare them for content methods courses. Our work explored the following question: “How do students’ disciplinary understandings affect their emerging conceptualization of discipline-specific teaching?”

The research project included a number of assignments aimed to assess teaching candidates’ understanding of disciplinary concepts and how these understandings contribute to the development of pedagogical content knowledge in history. Some of the specific areas included how future teachers understand historical knowledge and the work of historians and how they craft historical narratives for their students. The 17 students who participated in the study were all junior and senior history education majors with, on average, 8 or 9 previous college courses in history including our department’s required course in historical methods and a grade point average of 3.0 or higher. In other words, these history majors were relatively accomplished, experienced, and motivated. They will also make innumerable decisions in history classrooms in the future.

Two of the assessments in the course involved questions about the role of individuals involved in history education and “think aloud” interviews in which participants were also researchers in history education. The first assessment involved asking ISU history education students three simple questions: “What do historians do?” “What do history teachers do?” and “What do history students do?” The following word clouds represent the answers to each question:

The differences in the students' answers for each question were substantial. For the first question, students' answers were full of action verbs that conveyed how historians engage the past and create knowledge as part of a process. Their answers suggested that students were very clear that history does not simply equal the past but rather represents how historians construct the past with evidence. In contrast, students' answers about teaching were surprisingly vague about what teachers do other than "teach." Their written answers suggested a limited role in which teachers are simply passive vehicles for distributing facts as if history was an object that teachers transferred to their students. A few examples were more revealing than the word cloud:

- A. "History teachers are responsible for passing along the information found by historians and guiding them to think historically."
- B. "History teachers use the information gathered by historians (or themselves) and use it to describe events and characters to students."

The students' answers to the final question about what history students do were even less specific and often limited to the verb "learn." When students were more specific, they most often mentioned assignments or skills such as researching, writing, or taking notes. No students made any explicit reference to historical thinking, and many of the answers about the role of history students were so general that they could easily be applied to students in any academic subject. Scholarship in history education has exploded in recent decades with claims about the discipline-specific nature of historical cognition and the importance of teaching historical thinking in secondary and higher education. However, the teaching candidate's assumptions about the role of historians, teachers, and students provide some significant obstacles to this goal. How likely is it that teachers promote and teach historical thinking among their students if they do not even conceptualize the role of a teacher as involving active and critical engagement with the past?

Another assessment involved asking ISU students to create and conduct a research study as part of our unit on the United States during the Great Depression. After reading and discussing a number of historical issues related to the topic, students selected, analyzed through a "think-aloud," and recorded their analysis of two important primary sources (one text, one image) from the period. They were then paired up with a freshman from University High School and recorded the high school students as they analyzed (out loud) the sources. Each participant also conducted the short experiment with an ISU student who was not a history major, including a recorded analysis of the same documents. Students then wrote a paper comparing and contrasting the three analyses in light of the research they had read in both U.S. history and history education such as a chapter in Sam Wineburg's *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (2001). Here are a few representative examples from the participants' reflections on the project:

"This experience has truly deepened my understanding of historical thinking, not only by reminding me what it means to think historically myself, but also to consider how others

may think when reading sources and documents, which is extremely pertinent to all who value the importance of understanding the past and future.”

“It is important to note that many of the students that are being interviewed for the project have never been formally introduced to the characteristics of historical thinking, but I believe that this is what makes the project so relevant. By analyzing the students’ thought process[es] you can see the difference between what methods students innately possess as opposed to the methods that we are taught as history majors.”

“This gave me a much better view of how students learn and how students evolve. While it can be hard to remember what it was like to be thirteen or fourteen, doing activities like this can give an important insight into how that age group thinks so we can better teach them.”

“The research experience will inform my future teaching methods and implementation of primary sources in the classroom. I hope to make the distinction between history as an account and history as an event with my students in conjunction with thinking historically. Both methods will be improved through the research as it helped me observe the thinking processes of two different students at two different levels of education.”

The students’ reflections on the project suggested that the experience was powerful and effective in making “visible” (or at least audible) the important cognitive processes that remain hidden but necessary in most college and secondary history classrooms. While all the students reflected on the performance of the secondary and college students, the participants’ essays suggested that many remained largely unaware of their own thinking when engaging the primary sources associated with the 1930s or their crucial role, as emerging teachers, in selecting sources that were or were not conducive to illustrating historical thinking.

Our findings suggest the value of revising curricula across campus to provide future teachers, regardless of subject, with a better understanding of what occurs when individuals engage their discipline. Colleges and universities approach teacher education very differently across the nation. At Illinois State University, we have long taken pride that history teachers are trained by historians within the department of history. The same pattern holds true for secondary teachers in areas such as biology, English, and math. In our department, we are also proud that history education majors take the same required courses in history and complete the same senior capstone assignments as students whose future plans involve a Ph.D. in history, law school, or employment in a history museum.

However, these two experiences with History 309, while only a portion of the research integrated into the class, illustrate that, despite the fact that the university does a great deal right in terms of academic structure, future history teachers perceive teaching history as strangely separate from their experiences as students within the discipline. Despite the fact that history education students at Illinois State already experience two of the recommendations that proponents of

history education promote—an academic major in history and a substantial number of history courses—many of them struggle to become the type of teacher consistent with the research in history education. If this is accurate, future history teachers need different kind of history courses rather than simply more traditional content courses or additional coursework in teaching methods. This study, albeit limited in size and scope, suggests the need for courses that explicitly integrate the methodology of historians and the research in history education into content courses to “make the invisible visible.” For those of us who work directly or indirectly in teacher education, it may be beneficial to engage in a continued examination of our discipline’s unique disciplinary concepts and methodology. We must explore ways in which our teacher education program can bridge the gap between traditional content courses and traditional content methods courses, thereby promoting the development of pedagogical content knowledge.