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The Relevancy of History Education

Every teacher hears it countless times in the classroom or in his or her personal life. “I don’t like history. It’s boring and irrelevant to my life.” And even the way that non-students often cast history educators as providing an irrelevant education is reminiscent of Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, in which a community relegates the preservation of memory to the lonely Receiver of Memory. The question for educators is often how to make history relevant. One typical answer is to use the study of history to produce a knowledgeable democratic citizenry and to guide mankind so that it does not repeat the mistakes of the past. Yet while such utilitarian arguments may convince some people of history’s importance, the idea that we must justify history by its social utility is one that I find offensive and of little use to me in the classroom. And it is not through appeals to social utility that I believe I will make my students feel that history is worthwhile. If I am to make history education seem meaningful, my efforts should focus on good pedagogy to ignite students’ interest in the past and to allow them to intellectually pursue the making of their own perspective and identity.

In order to make history seem more relevant or interesting, many educators argue that we need to continually find ways to relate the subject to students’ own experiences. When teaching Ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, I related these civilizations to modern America by discussing their influence on our own republican Constitution. Yet while the study of these civilizations can translate to students’ lives today rather easily, for many historical subjects the connections are ambiguous. Furthermore, even for the subjects that seem clearly relevant, ‘relevancy’ is an entirely subjective term. As D.A. Withy (1975) wrote in “Education and the Cult of Relevance,” “...if the child cannot see [a historical subject] as relevant learning, despite

the best endeavours of his teachers, then for him it is not relevant...” (p. 176). He furthermore claims that to center instruction around more familiar connections “because only in this way can it be relevant to the child is unlikely to foster any worthwhile historical perspective...” (p. 178). For Withy, a history program is relevant if it fulfills students’ educational needs, which includes broadening their world outlook and delving deeper into the process of historical study.

When students do not see the relevance or utility of history, a significant part of the challenge to improve motivation may simply be to make it more fun. As Frank Stricker (1992) wrote, “To the degree that presentation improves, most of the utility arguments...become less pressing; the style of our work may win larger audiences whether or not we can convince them of the utilities of history with logic” (p. 295). He also rightly argues that good presentation alone will not always induce students to become willing participants. Still, I have seen first hand through Mr. Lesnett’s instruction that animated and engaging teaching can go a long way in making students believe that history is relevant. Whether students will admit it or not, I believe there is a fascination with different cultures and time periods in everyone. Books and films set in the past, global tourism, and other activities relating to historical events and contexts all continue to be popular. Not all cultures and times are interesting to all students; but humans will always have at least some curiosity about their past. With this in mind, I must make my teaching feel interesting and worthwhile.

In addition to providing interesting activities, teachers can foster feelings of relevance if they use history to help students find a sense of themselves and form opinions. History is uniquely suited for identify formation no matter what the audience, but as Hilary Conklin (2007) argues, it is even more important at the secondary level – and middle school in particular – where students “tend to be keenly interested in issues of justice, equity, and moral dilemmas.” As she

stated, “Tapping into their questions and concerns makes the content relevant to them” (p. 9).

Though my students may not feel that a unit on Ancient China fills their personal needs because the subject seems so far removed from their personal identities, the unit “could be called relevant in the sense that it was relevant to cognitive aims of teaching and learning” (Withy, 178). Are the issues of Ancient China directly related to modern issues? In many cases no. But by drawing out students’ questions and encouraging them to voice opinions even on culturally distant subjects, we may awaken students’ interest in history and their desire to explore their questions.

Works Cited

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