ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to investigate and characterize current practice in secondary history education and its relationship to best practices. In this phenomenological study, the author examines the pedagogy of three high school history teachers and the extent to which their current methods exhibited recent thinking on best practices in student learning. Data were obtained through questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Research posits that constructivism is the most effective approach to educating history students. However, most history teachers still use traditional, objective methods in their classrooms. Nevertheless, the three teachers in this study show that some history teachers are pursuing changes in their pedagogy and aligning them with best practices to become more effective in the classroom.

Keywords: history, pedagogy, secondary education

Over the past one hundred years, only a handful of large-scale studies have been conducted on the teaching methods used in high school history classrooms. Larry Cuban’s comprehensive classroom research for the 110 years between 1880 and 1990 is the most informative source on pedagogy in all subject areas. His research suggests that teacher-centered instruction—the traditional model—dominated classroom instruction during the time he conducted his study (Cuban 1993). Thus, the majority of history teachers have taught by lecture and rote memorization, the traditional model, for more than one hundred years, and few teachers have revised their pedagogy to stimulate more learning in their classrooms. Current research proposes methods to replace traditional pedagogy. Such methods include authentic uses of primary sources as well as small-group and student-led discussions.

This article examines the pedagogy of three high school history teachers and the extent to which their current methods exhibit recent thinking on best practices of student learning. I observed and interviewed the three teachers to discover their most common teaching methods and determine reasons why they chose the methods used. They show that some history teachers are pursuing changes in pedagogy because they believe it will effect improvements in the quality of student learning.

Literature Review

A number of educators have identified critical concerns about the state of history education. In a presentation to the American Educational Research Association, Ronald Byrnes, an assistant professor of educational studies at Guilford College, stated that history teachers’ main concern is the lack of student interest and willingness to complete assignments. However, he noted that despite this observation, teachers remain unwilling to alter their pedagogy from teacher-dominated instruction (Byrnes 1997)—an alarming point.

Even if teachers understand the importance of curiosity, interest, and experience, many do not know how to use them in teaching situations. Paulo Freire (2000) posited that teachers must be partners with the students in their quest for knowledge: “In problem-posing education, the teacher becomes a student and students become teachers. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in [objective] education are ‘owned’ by the teacher”
Currently in use. (2) I administered Likert scale questionnaires to participating teachers to obtain information related to their beliefs about history, student learning, the importance of the subject, and their understanding of the state's curriculum framework with respect to history teaching. The questionnaire instrument was designed as a five-point Likert scale (from 1 [strongly agree] to 5 [strongly disagree]), which was adapted from those used successfully for more than a decade in mathematics education research (see Kennedy, Ball, and McDiarmid 1993). I tailored items to focus on history teaching and learning. (3) Following the completion of the questionnaire, I videotaped one class period for each of the three teachers. (4) After each observation, I conducted a postinterview, although in the case of Mr. Allen, a postobservation questionnaire was given instead of a postinterview because of time conflicts. I selected the participants because of their reputations and the types of schools in which they taught. For the purposes of this study, I treated each participating teacher as a case and changed all names to pseudonyms.

**David Brown, Advanced Placement U.S. History**

In 2005, Mr. Brown was in his eighteenth year of teaching history in a small, rural school with a student population that came mainly from working-class families. In the preinterview, Mr. Brown explained that the advanced placement (AP) class, consisting of juniors and seniors, was learning about New Freedom and New Nationalism during the Progressive Era. He planned to begin the class with a short lecture as an introduction to the topic and use an overhead to outline the main themes and important ideas. After the lecture, the students would work with some primary documents from that time period. While talking about the upcoming class, he noted that these AP students needed to read documents and materials from that time period. He thought it was important for them to read what people were actually thinking and saying.

Mr. Brown’s goal was for the students to draw their own conclusions about the differences and similarities between Progressives and Democrats. In class he asked them to work in groups to compare and contrast the two different parties based on their speeches and party platforms. Ultimately, he wanted them to realize that the two parties’ platforms were quite similar, much like the modern Republican and Democratic parties. At the end of the interview, Mr. Brown mentioned the students also needed to be comfortable working with primary documents to prepare for the AP exam.

During the ninety-minute class, Mr. Brown’s practice matched his goals for the class and his questionnaire answers. Although he labeled the introduction a lecture, it was more of a conversation between teacher and students, with the students filling in much of the important background information. It became clear that Mr. Brown was skilled in the art of questioning, as he continually drew information out of the students. By asking the why questions and questions about people’s personalities, it was apparent that he did not believe history was based merely on prescribed facts. Through his questions, Mr. Brown tapped students’ prior knowledge, enriching their present study and allowing them to delve deeper into the subject to gain a better understanding of the era, how it connected to the past and the future, and why things happened as they did. Thus, he demonstrated his own knowledge and conceptual understanding of the subject and the importance he placed on students achieving this same depth.

As the students turned to their group project, Mr. Brown emphasized the need to cite the primary sources they used as they pieced together information to form logical conclusions about the two parties. Therefore, Mr. Brown ensured that these students not only learned history but also practiced history as historians do. While the groups sifted through the details, Mr. Brown moved from one to the other, asked questions, and redirected them to more fruitful paths of thought. Not only did students have the opportunity to do history but their teacher also guided them in thinking as historians and taught them the processes that researchers use.

**Methodology**

To characterize current practice in secondary history teaching and compare it with current research in history education, I conducted a phenomenological study consisting of four phases: (1) I reviewed recent literature on teaching methods of high school history to identify dominant pedagogical practices currently in use. (2) I administered Likert-scale questionnaires to participating teachers and their understanding of the state’s curriculum framework with respect to history teaching. The questionnaire instrument was designed as a five-point Likert scale (from 1 [strongly agree] to 5 [strongly disagree]), which was adapted from those used successfully for more than a decade in mathematics education research (see Kennedy, Ball, and McDiarmid 1993). I tailored items to focus on history teaching and learning. (3) Following the completion of the questionnaire, I videotaped one class period for each of the three teachers. (4) After each observation, I conducted a postinterview, although in the case of Mr. Allen, a postobservation questionnaire was given instead of a postinterview because of time conflicts. I selected the participants because of their reputations and the types of schools in which they taught. For the purposes of this study, I treated each participating teacher as a case and changed all names to pseudonyms.

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When asked in the postinterview if he met his personal goals for the lesson, he responded that he had and was pleased with how quickly the students picked up on the concepts. For him, when one student asked, “What’s the difference [between the two parties]?” it meant that they “got it.” On facilitating the students’ learning, Mr. Brown commented, “I want them to come to those conclusions. I don’t just want to give it to them. It won’t mean anything. I want to try to make them see the whole big picture, not just 1912.”

Not only did the questions Mr. Brown asked make the classroom interesting and thought provoking but his sources also sparked interest and excitement. Primary sources were used often in his lessons. These included art, literature, speeches, songs, and so on. He explained in the preinterview that he used a variety of sources because if he focused on only one type, it would become like a textbook. When students were given the sources, it was their job to determine the author, the subject of the source, why the people said or conveyed events and other people the way they did, and in what context this was done. If given a photograph, the students were asked to interpret it; sometimes, different groups were given a different “lens” through which to view the source so that the class as a whole could compare different perspectives. This helped the students determine which perspectives were more likely to be accurate considering the context—a useful skill to have in daily life apart from research.

Mr. Brown’s pedagogy, especially his open-ended questions, conforms to the basic tenets of the “teaching history as mystery” method. “The goal of this method is to have students think hard about what happened, why, and why someone said it happened” (Gerwin and Zevin 2003, 13). Teaching history as mystery also helps students understand the tools historians use as they analyze information—something Mr. Brown ensured in his class.

Gary Allen, Tenth-Grade World History

Mr. Allen was in his eighteenth year of teaching history while participating in this study (in 2005) and was employed by a midsize, affluent suburban school. Mr. Allen’s passion for and knowledge of his subject were obvious when observing his classroom. The ninety-minute class opened with a brainstorming session as the students recalled what they had learned in previous lessons and were prompted to remember the time period they were studying. Mr. Allen also used this time to connect the events the students mentioned to the day’s lesson. After this short introduction, Mr. Allen handed the students a small packet of letters from a South African chief written to the British between 1845 and 1867. The purpose of analyzing these letters was to help students understand the South African perspective during African colonization. After the students read through the documents in preassigned groups, he gave each group a specific question to answer, such as, “What was the conflict about? Why did it continue for so long?” As the students began tackling their questions, Mr. Allen reminded them of the historical-thinking process and asked them to compare their findings to prior knowledge of people’s actions and reactions during African colonization. Through questioning, Mr. Allen, like Mr. Brown, was effective in drawing on students’ previous knowledge to add to their depth of understanding. The questions also helped students understand how historical events are related to one another, which Mr. Allen considered very important.

Mr. Allen was constructivist in his pedagogy, and his beliefs (as noted in the questionnaire) matched his practice. For instance, he provided opportunities for the students to conduct their own research, discuss historical evidence, and draw conclusions on their own. In addition, he was qualified to help the students learn to “do” history because he conducted his own historical research. Furthermore, he viewed primary documents and artifacts as important in the study of history, and he used them in class at least once a week.

While moving around the room, he used Socratic questioning, pushing students to think for themselves. In these interactions between Mr. Allen and the students, he met them at their level of understanding and tried to facilitate their discussions, moving them to deeper and more meaningful comprehension. To help each student get to this point, Mr. Allen drew the quiet students into the conversation, which allowed all students to participate and add to the collective knowledge in a less-intimidating, small-group setting.

Finally, each group presented their findings to the question they were assigned. After each group finished, Mr. Allen summarized their information and double-checked to make sure that his synopsis matched the students’ answers, which allowed the students to be the arbiters of their own learning. The degree of autonomy and responsibility that the students have in their learning processes is an important aspect in any course and is consistent with the best practices posited by research.

As noted in his postobservation questionnaire, Mr. Allen placed the students in groups

for this unit to use each other as resources and sounding boards while working through South African history. Groups or pairs are more the norm for Allen’s class. Putting students in situations where they can discuss their writings and observations is helpful. It provides examples for students on how to question sources and think historically within their peer group.
Working in groups gives students a feel for what historians experience during their own research because other people’s opinions, experiences, and findings are often important in such work.

James Breen, Tenth-Grade U.S. History

At the time of this study (in 2005), Mr. Breen had taught for ten years—the first eight in a smaller, rural high school with a diverse socioeconomic student population. From responses on the questionnaire, it was evident Mr. Breen was passionate about history, and he based his pedagogy on the belief that history is not just a series of facts and dates to memorize. In addition, Mr. Breen noted that a teacher’s love of history is prerequisite to student learning. He added that personal thoughts, emotions, and primary sources are important in evaluating past events, and students learn history more effectively if they have the opportunity to discuss and write about it.

During the observation it was clear how much these beliefs influenced Mr. Breen’s teaching. In each lesson, he tried to incorporate current events relating to the students’ daily life, world events, and technology to spark student interest and discussion. During the observed class, the students were excited about some of the articles, such as one dealing with cell phone use and another with the declining car-accident rates of young drivers. As a result, the conversation was animated. Mr. Breen asked thought-provoking questions and involved the foreign exchange students to give the American students a different perspective.

Following the current-events discussion, Mr. Breen had the students turn to a picture of a woman during the Great Depression in their textbook and brainstorm as a group what they knew about the woman by looking at the picture. He then gave students five minutes to write a journal entry about how the woman arrived at that point in her life. As they wrote, Mr. Breen walked around the room, encouraging the students. Not only did the journaling activity help the students to connect to the past by using creative thinking but this activity also improved the students’ writing skills, which is an area of concern in many high schools.

A video clip of the 1920s was shown once the students had finished their journal entries. During the clip, Mr. Breen instructed them to find ten things they recognized from their class discussions, such as speakeasies, bootlegging, and Al Capone. Then he gave students the opportunity to share what they found in the video. Mr. Breen facilitated a discussion of what some of the terms meant and whether they could be found in today’s culture, thus reviewing important vocabulary and connecting students’ lives to the past.

The purpose of using the video clip was to show the students what life was like before the Great Depression and allude to the causes of the stock market crash, which the lecture covered more in-depth. In the video, students could see the lifestyle that many people led in America in the 1920s, which helped them understand why the market crashed. In addition to the video, Mr. Breen led the students through a series of questions drawing on their prior knowledge and made sure to include examples from the students’ lives to explain what happened in 1929. For instance, he asked the students to name companies in the town and if they thought there were one hundred companies in the town. When they said they believed there were, he explained that only two hundred companies controlled 49 percent of the economy in 1929.

The hour-long postinterview provided more insight into Mr. Breen’s pedagogy. He was an organized teacher who thought carefully about each lesson, which was clear from his detailed lesson plan. Furthermore, he was a good classroom leader. During the discussions, which were the link between each of the three “acts” of the class period, he made sure that students did not interrupt each other and tried to talk to each person in the class. When discussing delicate subjects, he kept students on track, reminding them to keep their comments mature and academic.

The lesson’s emphasis was making connections between events before, during, and after 1929. Mr. Breen was also interested in having the students delve into the “story” of history, so he provided them with opportunities to get a feel for the time period through picture analysis and viewing the video clip. Mr. Breen clearly guided students through the process of understanding how events are related and influence each other. He noted in the postinterview that on written assessments, he had students place events, people, and military actions in the correct chronological order. Graphic data were often used in Mr. Breen’s classroom to help students identify influential people in history and gain perspective on the time period.

Discussion

Despite the many educators who continue to teach history using traditional methods, there are those who are developing other methods to inspire more learning and knowledge retention in their classes. As examples, the three teachers in this study were quite nontraditional in their pedagogy. Mr. Brown’s pedagogy was aligned with the radical constructivist learning theory, Mr. Allen’s pedagogy was based on the social constructivist learning theory, and Mr. Breen used media to create a multisensory lesson that correlated with modern times and the students’ life experiences.

Based on the questionnaire, observation, and interviews, Mr. Brown’s class seemed to fit Virginia Richardson’s (1997) definition of constructivism: “Individuals create their own new understandings, based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe” (3). From the observation, it is evident that the students were familiar with primary sources and how to glean specific information from them. Thus, as Mr. Brown noted in his questionnaire and postinterview, he emphasized students working with historical data and drawing conclusions on their own, which is precisely the goal of constructivist pedagogy. Additionally, Mr. Brown’s pedagogy can be described as...
radical constructivism because the students usually constructed their knowledge individually rather than as part of a group. Mr. Brown’s reminders to think analytically and to use historians’ research processes also fit well within this learning theory.

Furthermore, Mr. Brown’s pedagogy was inquiry-based. He gave students the task of determining the answer to interesting problems or questions. For example, Mr. Brown planned to assign a paper at the end of the unit that asked students to judge and evaluate events, requiring higher-order thinking in Bloom’s taxonomy. There were no concrete answers to the questions posed in the assignment, which made the subject more intriguing, allowing the mystery to encourage exploration and growth in knowledge and understanding. The focus was on connecting events and concepts, and there may be many “correct” answers.

Last, Mr. Brown’s democratic pedagogy reflected elements of Freire’s democratic teaching ideal. Students had a voice in the class. They provided many of the details and background information and discerned why a historical event occurred. In this way, they were certainly using “the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge so they [could] participate fully in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing” (Freire, 19). Since Mr. Brown’s lecture was actually more of a dialogue with the students while he acted as a facilitator, they were allowed to actively participate in this “process of learning and knowing” (Freire, 19). Because the students were participating fully, they asked questions with depth—such as “How is Taft more conservative? What makes him more conservative [than Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt]?”. This indicated students’ interest in the subject, something teachers strive for in their classrooms. Finally, twelve out of thirteen of his students passed the 2003–4 history AP test. Of those twelve, four received a score of 5, six received a score of 4, and two received a score of 3, which is a phenomenal accomplishment and is one indicator of the effectiveness of Mr. Brown’s teaching methods.

As demonstrated in the classroom, Mr. Allen’s pedagogy, like Mr. Brown’s, was constructivist. Despite the students’ young age and need for refocusing, they were engaged with the material and proved their understanding went deeper than restating facts. Through Mr. Allen’s use of the learning-cycle inquiry model, the students had also learned how to think historically and analytically. As they studied the letters, they were able to glean who wrote them, to whom, and why. In addition, they dug deeper into the motivations behind the events discussed in the letters and pulled together knowledge from previous classes to make sense of the current material. As previously mentioned, these types of inquiry-learning situations in which students draw on prior knowledge and experiences make learning more meaningful. These learning situations also require students to think critically, as their answers demonstrated.

Not only did Mr. Allen use primary documents in his classroom but he also used other types of primary sources such as art. For instance, he took the students to a local art institute to see an exhibit addressing issues of race, religion, and environmental practices. In his post-observation questionnaire, he wrote that it was a great opportunity “for students to examine history through another medium.” Hence, this class was clearly inquiry-based, as Mr. Allen provided many chances for the students to learn through original data rather than solely through tertiary sources such as textbooks.

Unlike Mr. Brown’s pedagogy, which was based on radical constructivism, Mr. Allen’s pedagogy appeared to be aligned with social constructivism since the students were actively constructing knowledge in groups rather than individually. Group work and class discussion are critical components of this model, and both were demonstrated in the observed class. Mr. Allen used primary sources at least once a week, and when he did, he often used group work so the students could use each other as resources, according to the postobservation questionnaire. This use of primary documents and field trips to view art as primary sources gave students the opportunity to personally connect with history in tangible ways. Employing primary sources and group work aligns with Matthew Hoagland’s (2000) ideal of students learning like adult researchers. From this snapshot of Mr. Allen’s classroom, it was clear that he has been successful in guiding students to greater depths of conceptual understanding and giving them insight into what “doing” history actually means, making learning more interesting and meaningful.

Mr. Breen also exhibited characteristics of current best practices in his efforts to develop his pedagogy beyond objectivism. His fast-paced class made learning exciting and gave students an idea of what it felt like to live during the times and events studied. The observed class closely followed the learning-cycle inquiry model. During the first phase of exploration, the students made a hypothesis about the woman in the picture and wrote a short narrative of what they believed happened to her. Then, Mr. Breen discussed some of the causes for the Great Depression with the students, helping them imagine what that time period was like. Finally, students had to apply what they learned from the observed lesson in future lessons as Mr. Breen drew on students’ prior knowledge. Throughout this process, Mr. Breen gave students the opportunity to make a personal connection to history. This connection allowed learning to become more meaningful for the students, and, as a result, students internalized more concepts, which is consistent with research on best practice.

Additionally, Mr. Breen did an excellent job presenting a multisensory lesson in which students of many different learning styles could feel comfortable, challenged, and intrigued. The use of images and videos helped students who had a difficult time picturing what the people and world looked like in the past. The creative writing and interactive lecture also achieved this goal and helped students who learned best by listening or writing down thoughts. This lesson highlights how some teachers are beginning to move away from traditional pedagogy to other methods in an attempt to reach their students and help.
them develop a conceptual understanding of history.

During the postobservation interview, Mr. Breen’s sentiment mirrored Byrnes’s (1997). He talked about five or six students—about 20 percent of his class—who would not turn in the journal entry even though they had plenty of time to complete it and finished most of it in class. However, he disproved Byrnes’s conclusion by continually seeking new methods to reach students, spark their interest, and motivate them to learn.

Despite the promising nature of this introductory work on best practice in the history classroom, this study has some limitations. First, a larger number of teachers needs to be observed, and participants should include women. Second, the sample should be more representative of the state or nation by including an ethnically diverse urban school. Finally, these results would be complemented by data demonstrating student knowledge and understanding of history in relation to the pedagogy teachers use.

Conclusion

The majority of history teachers have taught (and continue to teach) their classes using traditional methods. However, student-centered pedagogies provide an alternative. Questions that require deeper thinking by the students are an essential part of constructivism and are the tie that binds these three participants’ teaching methods. Each teacher used different approaches that align with constructivist learning theories, but each teacher used questions as a tool to push students to think more deeply and gain a better understanding of history. By asking questions, these teachers were interacting with the students. Rather than acting as the sole source of knowledge in the class or relying only on the textbook as such, each teacher allowed students to use each other and their prior knowledge to contribute to their learning, which empowered and motivated the students. Furthermore, all the teachers used sources other than the textbook as learning tools, including video clips, letters, party platform documents, and speeches. Although the teaching was student centered, it was still structured. Its foundation rested on time limits for tasks and questions that guided the students to answer and promote understanding.

Since the teachers’ pedagogy comprised questioning, student responsibility for learning, and the use of primary sources, each used aspects of one or both models of constructivism in the history classroom: “teaching history as mystery” and “inquiry-based learning.” Constructivist pedagogy in whichever form it may take is considered best practice by researchers and educators. Despite the mountain of evidence suggesting that the majority of history teachers use traditional methods, the three participants in this study show that some history teachers are changing their pedagogy, aligning it with best practice, and facilitating depth of understanding, knowledge, and interest among their students.

REFERENCES


