THE CHALLENGE OF RETHINKING HISTORY EDUCATION
On Practices, Theories, and Policy

Bruce A. VanSledright
Every few years in the United States, history teachers go through what some believe is an embarrassing national ritual. A representative group of students sit down to take a standardized U.S. history test, and the results show varied success. Sizable percentages of students score at or below a “basic” understanding of the country’s history. Pundits seize on these results to argue that not only are students woefully ignorant about history, but history teachers are simply not doing an adequate job teaching historical facts. The overly common practice of teaching history as a series of dates, memorizing the textbook, and taking notes on teachers’ lectures ensues.

In stark contrast, social studies educators such as Bruce A. VanSledright argue instead for a more inquiry-oriented approach to history teaching and learning that fosters a sense of citizenship through the critical skills of historical investigation. Detailed case studies of exemplar teachers are included in this timely book to make visible, in an easily comprehensible way, the thought processes of skilled teachers. Each case is then unpacked further to clearly address the question of what history teachers need to know to teach in an investigative way. The Challenge of Rethinking History Education is a must read for anyone looking for a guide to both the theory and practice of what it means to teach historical thinking, to engage in investigative practice with students, and to increase students’ capacity to critically read and assess the nature of the complex culture in which they live.

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Introduction

About a decade ago, I taught a diverse group of fifth graders over some 16 weeks to learn to think historically in an effort to deepen their historical understandings of the American past. We pursued history as an investigative endeavor in which we began with historical questions that have long animated the work of other investigators. My purpose was to test an idea borne out by my own and others’ research that investigating the past through rich questions and teaching students how to think their way toward answering them would enhance their historical understandings in ways that common, textbook-centered practices typically do not. A closely tethered goal was to use this process of investigating others’ lives to help students come to better understand who they were and are becoming with the hope that this would begin to create in them the capacity to critically read and assess the nature of the complex culture in which they lived.

Following that experience, interested groups—history teachers, teacher educators, state department of education officials, social studies curriculum supervisors, and the like—would invite me to talk to them about that work. Almost invariably, someone, often an interest-piqued history teacher, would get around to asking, so what do you need to know to teach the way you did and where and under what circumstances are teachers to learn how to do it? At first, I found the question disarming because, quite frankly, I had not given it adequate thought. In the years since, I began to appreciate the question’s brilliance, for it goes on my view to the heart of the matter: The knowledge history teachers need to possess in order to significantly deepen their students’ historical understandings, as complex, multi-valenced, and socioculturally diverse as those might be. This book is my attempt to address the two-part question largely by way of analogies, descriptions, and illustrations.
In doing so, I am seeking to enter into a conversation with a number of different groups who occupy a variety of roles in addressing that knowledge question and approach it from contrasting standpoints. The primary groups I am thinking of include teacher educators, historians, history teachers, history education researchers, and various stripes of policymakers from local school system coordinators, to state education department officials, and on to those who shape educational policy at the federal level. This is a disparate list, characterized by divergent—but also, I hope, at least a few convergent—interests in the question. All have some influence over the process of constructing the opportunities children have to learn in history classrooms and what they take from those experiences.

Yet, as we know, these groups speak in different vocabularies and operate from and within different communities of practices. This makes my effort here especially challenging. And I will be the first to admit that readers may find my efforts questionable. As a result, I wish to offer some suggestions to readers up front about how the book is structured, ones that may offer some sense about which portions of it might appeal to some more than others. Of course, like all authors, my desire would be that all groups and individual readers find the entire text accessible and compelling. But that may border on unwarranted wishful thinking.

In the first two chapters, I labor to make the case that the general cluster of common approaches to history education for over a hundred years in the United States is largely broken. There is simply no solid evidence to say that what we typically do and have repeatedly done matters significantly in producing young Americans who hold deep understandings of history. In these opening chapters, I sketch out an argument using counterpoised illustrations that I hope show where we have gone wrong and contrast that analysis with one that portends a more potent approach to history education. There are, of course, historical antecedents for what I am advocating—one in particular, the 1960s and 1970s Amherst history project—and I draw from those antecedents to make my case on the assumption that a book on rethinking history education should pay some homage to the history of its ideas.

In my view, the large middle section of the book, Chapters 3 through 6, go directly to the first part of the question: what do teachers need to know to teach history as an investigative process? This investigative approach is an uncommon one. However, research indicates that it shapes and cultivates deeper historical understandings of the sort epitomized by the experts than do our more common and traditional ways of teaching history in school. To take up the question, with an appreciative nod to Joseph Schwab’s idea of commonplaces, I devote chapter-length treatments to (a) subject matter knowledge, (b) knowledge of learners and theories
of learning that support this investigative approach, and (c) knowledge of corresponding teaching practices. In the latter especially, I illustrate in considerable detail with the pedagogical machinations of my invented, history-teacher protagonist, Thomas Becker. I trace his work as he teaches a typical curriculum-prescribed unit on Cherokee Indian removal and dislocation in the 1830s. I then devote the sixth chapter to outline, again in some detail, the types of assessment practices Becker engages in with his charges, ones that are aligned with and therefore support his investigative approach.

In Chapter 7, I undertake some summative theorizing. That is, I try to fit the different types of knowledge Becker holds into a theoretical composite, a small-t theory of history education as investigation into the past, if you will. I attempt to show how those forms of knowledge overlap, cohere, correspond, and align. I note how unaligned aspects of this knowledge terrain can produce confusing results for students because of the mixed messages they entail. I stress the critical importance of alignment to achieving the enhanced learning results such an approach can produce. Readers will find in this chapter as well as elsewhere that I occasionally repeat ideas and constructs at the risk of belaboring them. This is a consequence of the degree of integration I am trying to stress and the theorizing that underpins it.

The final chapter addresses the second part of the question, where and under what circumstances are history teachers to learn to teach as I have been describing. Policies and contributory practices are important here. I frame the rethinking of history education as a systemic reform problem. As such, I attempt to speak to most of the audiences I noted in the foregoing. I argue that they all have important, though different roles to play in rethinking and thus re-imagining history education along the lines I lay out. I describe how I envision their different and sometimes overlapping roles and suggest collaborative steps each might take if they were disposed to rethinking history education in ways that promote student understanding.

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Much of this book, and the research I undertook to write it, was made possible by a grant from the Spencer Foundation. I especially wish to thank Lauren Jones Young at the Foundation for her encouragement on this project. It is important to note that, despite the Foundation’s support, the work here does not necessarily represent its views or an endorsement of the arguments it contains.
I want to acknowledge a debt to two historian colleagues, and I hope still friends of mine, Daniel Ritschel and David Sicilia, who often listened generously as I ranted on about my ideas and tried to persuade them of their wisdom. I also wish to thank my colleague, Chauncey Monte-Sano, and current and former students who also supported and listened to my mutterings about it and/or occasionally read and commented on the work in draft stages. The principal of the students is Kimberly Reddy, but also Liliana Maggioni, Kevin Meuwissen, Jennifer Hauver James, and those in my University of Maryland Graduate Seminar on History/Social Studies Education, Christopher Budano, Jeffrey Shaw, Brie Walsh, and Eric Watts. The groups of history majors that were thinking of becoming secondary history teachers, whom I taught through several iterations of an introductory course on history teaching, were most kind and attentive while I tested out a number of the ideas in the book on them initially. In the end, though, all errors of omission and commission are entirely of my own making. My editor at Routledge, Catherine Bernard, has been long-suffering in support of this book and I thank her for her efforts. Finally, I acknowledge the memory of my friend and mentor, Jere Brophy, who through good humor and his characteristic wry wit always found time to offer me words of encouragement. I only wish that he was still here to read and critique this book.

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Fifty-three years old on his next birthday and from solid Anglo New England stock, Bob Brinton has been teaching U.S. history for almost three decades. By some lights, he is a master. Much admired and respected, he heads up the social studies department at Oak Hollow High School in a large suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic region. The district adjoins an urban core. Once a predominantly wealthy suburb with a panoply of country clubs and spacious homes surrounded by smartly manicured lawns, the portion of the district served by Oak Hollow has slowly evolved as the urban environment next door expanded, seeping over its invisible geographic borders into its suburban neighbors’ backyards. As a result, Oak Hollow’s student population grew increasingly less European-American and more African, Asian, and Latino/a American. Despite these rather profound demographic changes, Bob Brinton’s teaching has remained largely unaffected. He approaches his U.S. history classes much as he has done throughout his long tenure.

Brinton’s favorite historical period is the American Civil War, largely because he so admires Abraham Lincoln. Brinton is somewhat the Lincoln aficionado. He has read most of the best-sellers on Lincoln and finds him a true, red-white-and-blue American hero, who historian John Bodnar might refer to as a quintessential patriot of the officialized history of the nation.¹ Brinton spends 12 class sessions on Lincoln. In fact, his entire treatment of the Civil War turns on Lincoln’s axis. Little is said about the war itself, the lengthy military campaigns, the profound death, destruction, and dislocation, the soldiers who gave up their lives on both sides of the line, or of the raft of causes historians have explored for why the war was fought. Rather, Brinton entreats his charges to Civil War history as Lincoln biography, beginning with his early years in Illinois and ending with his assassination.
What drives Brinton’s curricular and pedagogical choices is his conviction that America has lost its connection to the patriot–statesman–hero, one, on his view, perfectly epitomized by the life and presidency of a man commemorated in the massive edifice anchoring the west end of the Mall in Washington, DC. Brinton sees his role as refurbishing and then burnishing that patriot–hero archetype in the minds of his high school students. He labors intently to show his pupils how great leaders, such as Lincoln in particular, have shaped what he considers to be the most incredible national experiment known to human kind, the creation and development of the United States of America.

Brinton is unapologetic about his flag waving and the trafficking he does in American exceptionalism. He wants to burn the image of Lincoln—the savior of the Union, the slave emancipator—onto the neural networks of those 16-year-olds sitting in front of him. He wants them to cherish Lincoln as much as he does, to understand the sacrifice such great patriot heroes are willing to undertake in service of the nation. He has no difficulty noting that we Americans have not seen a national leader of Lincoln’s caliber since, perhaps (and only perhaps), Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He laments the loss of such great American leaders and appears to be in the business of challenging his students with the memories of the Lincoln he narrates to embrace the archetype fully as a means of kindling the embers of national leadership so long lost.

Brinton, unsurprisingly, loves to talk about Lincoln to his students. It might be better said that he talks at them, for most of the 12 class sessions are spent with Brinton telling stories about the humble Lincoln of lore who rose from the lowly log cabin to reside in the White House and preside over what Brinton believes was the most dangerous threat to American national development the nation ever faced. Brinton has a well-worn notebook containing almost 75 pages of lecture notes that frame his talks to his students, although he seldom cracks the notebook’s cover anymore. He can recount the stories the pages contain at will. Students spent a good share of the time taking notes on Brinton’s talks, following a time-honored tradition in history courses.

Brinton is a powerful storyteller; always has been. His students generally report enjoying his talks, feeling stimulated listening to his verbal nuances and dramatic flourishes. Students regularly vote him as their favorite teacher and clamor to get into his sections. Rarely is there a seat left open in his classroom of 32 chairs. However, students can be heard occasionally to complain about how his tests are difficult because he is so picky about details, especially true with regard to the 40-item multiple-choice exam at the end of the Lincoln unit. Brinton also is known to complain that his students do not do as well as he would like them to on that test.
wonders why their memories are so thin, especially since his stories are so rich and vivid.

A good measure of students’ difficulties in doing well on Brinton’s test on knowledge of the Civil War can be traced to his insistence that they carefully read the textbook, *The History of the United States*, Daniel Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley’s treatment of the subject. This treatment spans almost 30 pages and deals with much more about the Civil War than Lincoln’s role in it alone. Because Brinton devotes so much of his classroom time presenting Lincoln, he relies on the textbook chapter and his students’ consumption of it to fill in missing details that round out the story. It is a pedagogical choice rationalized on the basis, he says, of the importance of Lincoln and his role in preserving the nation and ending slavery. For their part, some students confess that they find the textbook sleep-inducing and therefore do not attend to it well enough to score successfully on the roughly one-third of the 40-item exam that deals directly with textbook substance not discussed in class. They say that they wish Brinton would either take time in class to review the textbook chapter, or dispense with assigning it altogether and simply test them on his Lincoln narratives.

* * * * *

Directly across the hall from Bob Brinton, Nancy Todd teaches five sections of the same U.S. history curriculum every day to students who were not lucky enough to get into one of his sections. Todd has been teaching for six years and has been mentored by Brinton since her arrival at Oak Hollow. Brinton likes her very much and enjoys mentoring her. He remains puzzled, however, by her teaching practice, largely because she approaches it much differently than he does. She spends less time on Lincoln per se and focuses more on the historical scholarship surrounding the causes of the Civil War and what its conclusion portended for those who experienced its destructive consequences.

Todd sees Lincoln as a complex man, very much a person of his time, conflicted about race, slavery, and its impact on the union of states, but also someone who adhered to a view of African-Americans that was imbued with a sense of their intellectual and personal inferiority. He pitied them and lamented their condition, but was far from understanding them as the equal of whites. In her three-period pedagogical rendition, Lincoln is neither glorified nor commemorated, but treated as a man thrust into an untenable situation, who chose to do what he thought he had to in order to solve what appeared to be intractable national problems. Yet, and much unlike Brinton, she seldom shares her view of Lincoln directly with
her students. Instead, she insists that students read Lincoln “in the flesh” as it were and begin building their own interpretations of the man and the sixteenth President.

She begins her three-session treatment of Lincoln, much as she did many historical topics in the school district’s U.S. history curriculum, with questions: Who was this man, Abraham Lincoln? Are the labels, “Savior of the Union” and “The Great Emancipator,” fair and accurate ones? Like Brinton, Todd keeps notebooks. However, in her notebooks, Todd had collected and collated selected source documents, speeches Lincoln had made, archival records, newspaper accounts and editorials, descriptions of Lincoln’s policies and their effects, written by historians both more recent and at some remove from the present. Students are given copies of these source materials and invited to read them carefully.

Todd teaches her students that history involves an exercise in which investigators, armed with perplexing, but intellectually fertile questions of the sort just noted, pour over documents and the residua from the past as they work to answer their questions. The documentary record is to be understood as a form of evidence for making claims about, say, who Lincoln was and whether or not the labels and descriptors often associated with him—modest and unassuming, brilliant and perspicacious, national savior, emancipator, patriot—are valid. It is the students’ task to study some of this source material with an eye to building an interpretation or understanding of Lincoln and his role in the Civil War. Claims about and interpretations and understandings of Lincoln that develop from the sources she supplied need to be supported by evidence drawn directly from those sources.

Convinced that they are all capable of such efforts, Todd teaches her students how to build arguments relying on such evidence-based claims. In short, she models for them how historical accounts are written, a practice that characterizes activity in the discipline of history. Students then get a turn to write their own. The invitations to write concern Lincoln vis-à-vis the questions she presents to them that guide their perusal of the source material. She assesses the students primarily on their capacity to build an evidenced-based account and demonstrate budding prowess in citing sources. She is preparing them for the appearance of just such a question on the unit exam.

It seems that there was always a student or two, perhaps in an effort to condense and simply their task, who ask about drawing from the Boorstin and Kelley textbook. Todd reminds these students that the textbook holds no privileged epistemological status in her classroom and needs to be understood as only one additional source. She also cautions about relying too heavily on the textbook, for, on her view, it contains
no traces of the source material its authors had used to build their account, despite its authoritative, omniscient tone. There would be no way to check the accuracy of its claims short of going to other source materials, many of which she just gives them anyway, she often gently needles. After one class period and a portion of the next, during which she roams the room observing how students are using the sources and providing guidance where she thinks necessary, she brings the class back to frontal attention. She begins with the label “Savior of the Union.” She calls on a student, asking her to address whether the label is accurate. After this student provides a response, several others are summoned to do the same. After 15 minutes, Todd has covered the chalkboard with student interpretations of Lincoln. With what remains of this class period, an intense debate frequently ensues. Students differ in their assessments of Lincoln. Some believe that Lincoln indeed deserves the label while others find it exaggerated, preferring to draw in other historical agents as also important to the effort at preserving the union. As students offer their assessments of the label’s accuracy, Todd sometimes pauses to remind them to indicate the sources upon which they are drawing.

In the class period that follows, time is spent judging the claim that Lincoln was the “Great Emancipator.” Students’ evaluations almost always vary. Some insist that Lincoln’s own words betray his racist sympathies, that he saw the slaves as intellectually and morally inferior. Others note that Lincoln appeared increasingly uncomfortable with the ways slaves were treated. While not necessarily disagreeing with their classmates’ claims, another cluster of students argues that the Great Emancipator label was more, rather than less accurate because, after all, Lincoln did spearhead an effort that would later result in the end of slavery. A student will typically remark that Lincoln was only responding to a long line of abolitionist rhetoric, and, being the pragmatic politician that he was, believed that to salvage a union of states, he had to play the abolitionists’ game.

During such discussions, Todd guides and occasionally cajoles students. She typically says little other than to ask questions about evidence for claims and query students about where they think the preponderance of the evidence lays. Near the conclusion of this sort of class, Todd brings the discussion to an end by observing two matters about which she has often reminded them: that it was often in the nature of historical investigations to end in some dispute with multiple accounts competing for attention, and that it is exceptionally important to make every effort to judge historical agents such as Lincoln in the context of their past, rather than from the viewpoint of our present. She then will spend five minutes describing the unit test that would occur the following day.
Here again, Todd’s pedagogical choices differ from Brinton’s in crucial ways and, as her mentor, a bit to his ongoing chagrin. Although U.S. history courses are not tested under the state’s accountability regime, the school district in which Oak Hollow sits has pursued a long-standing policy of centralized unit exams. Curriculum specialists in each subject domain develop test banks. Teachers are required to base 80 percent of their unit tests on test-bank items. But teachers are free to develop items of their own for the remaining 20 percent. All items in the history test bank are multiple choice, focusing students principally on recalling (or recognizing) correct details from a list of distracters. Because the history curriculum must be standardized in order to standardize items in the test bank, the history textbook serves as the central repository of details, ideas, and historical figures around which items are written. Brinton draws all of his items from the test bank, exercising his 20 percent professional latitude by using all the Lincoln questions available. He also has been known to submit Lincoln questions to the curriculum office, successfully getting on average one or two questions accepted every year.

Todd uses her degree of professional freedom to invite her students to write. Typically, her unit exams include one or two items in which she supplies students several excerpted source documents, often containing conflicting perspectives or otherwise discrepant accountings. She then poses an investigative question. Drawing from the accounts and citing them as evidence, students are to craft an argument that stakes out a position vis-à-vis that question. The Civil War unit exam she often uses contains one such prompt on Lincoln:

Some claim that Lincoln can be understood as the Great Emancipator. Others claim that this label exaggerates his legacy. Using the documents I have supplied you and drawing from them to support a position, address the following question: Is the label Great Emancipator an accurate one in describing Lincoln and his policies?

As she was wont to do, she tells students that the question is designed to be provocative, but can create the sense of a false dichotomy, and therefore students are free to stake out middling positions as long as they adequately defend their stance with documentary evidence. Students sometimes wonder if they can cite sources beyond those provided on the exam. Todd will note that this is acceptable and encouraged, but such sources must be identified.

Todd reminds students that she will be relying on the scoring rubric she often uses in grading these interpretive essays, one she always lays out
for them early in the semester. Because the prompt effectively requests the assumption of a position for which there was no definitive correct answer, Todd’s rubric contains criteria focused more on procedural components. It hinges on four categories:

(a) Stakes out a position and argues it effectively;
(b) Defends position by clearly citing evidence from documentary sources;
(c) Shows evidence of having assessed the reliability of sources; and
(d) Demonstrates understanding (of events, persons, and ideas) by displaying the capacity to reason within the historical context.

Each category is scored on the three-point system with 2 being the highest score and 0 being the lowest. By this point in the semester in which they deal with the Civil War, and following persistent pedagogical effort on Todd’s part to that point, students are typically averaging scores between 6 and 7 relative to the maximum 8 possible points they could attain on such essays.

Although Todd chooses to focus her students’ attention concerning the Civil War around investigative issues and complex, thick historical questions (e.g., What was the impact of the abolitionist movement on the outbreak of the war? Should the South have been permitted to secede from the United States and form a separate country? Why did Southerners believe their cause was just, despite the apparent ravages of slavery?), her students consistently do somewhat better on the standardized multiple-choice test items than do Brinton’s students. The only exception to this rule is with regard to the Lincoln items, over which Brinton’s students most often hold a slim edge. This only adds to his mild vexation for he is convinced his students should perform much better than Todd’s, especially on the Lincoln questions. Despite getting somewhat better grades on average and finding her investigative approach engaging, Todd’s students often grumble about how hard her course is, how much work and writing they have to do to succeed. In private moments, though, a number of them concede that they learn much, find the investigative approach engaging, and believe that they develop a much deeper understanding of history through Todd’s efforts. Nonetheless, some of them say that they would prefer to take the course with Brinton, if only because they think his version is easier to master.

**FROM COMMON TO UNCOMMON TEACHING PRACTICES**

Those familiar with the research on history teaching will recognize Brinton’s approach as fairly common pedagogical practice. His efforts
might be even construed as better than average. Students clamor to get into his sections. They claim to find his Lincoln lectures interesting and believe that with average effort they can do well in his course. He is a compelling storyteller, whose delivery and cadence keeps students awake and reasonably engaged. His take on Lincoln is in line with the most high school textbook treatments and with common public memories and understandings of his greatness as a leader during a deeply troubling period in American history.

As such, Brinton traffics largely in an inspiring, commemorative, heritage-infused approach to teaching U.S. history. After Maurice Halbwachs,7 we might call it part of a collective-memory project, one in which school-based versions of United States history play an important role in socializing and Americanizing the young, habituating them to celebrating and revering national heroes who sacrificed much to fuel the development of the most powerful (some might also say exceptional) nation on Earth. Along with the typical United States history textbook, teachers such as Brinton can serve as crucial conduits through which the schools’ version of collective-memory is delivered.

This collective-memory project, to use this term as shorthand, can be characterized in its school form by a nationalist-oriented commitment to rendering the history of nation building in the United States as one of relentless progress in overcoming the difficulties that beset a democratic experiment, one bent on wresting unum from pluribus. Respect for the difference that beliefs in pluribus allow underwrites southern states exercise of secession from the union, for example. In valuing unum over pluribus, Lincoln’s greatness lies in the ways in which he draws the line, refusing to acknowledge Southern secession, and going to war to preserve the nation as constituted by its amalgamated states. This is Brinton’s view at least. Lincoln becomes the patriot hero because he prevents the nation-building experiment from crumbling. The United States triumph over forces designed to render them Divided States. On Brinton’s view, there may be a no more important national leader than Lincoln in this regard, the likes of whom are desperately needed to arrest the country’s twenty-first-century slide toward political and cultural polarization.8 Brinton’s narrative register puts the importance of a strong, unified nation at the center, with patriot heroes such as Lincoln (along with Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and FDR) orbiting in tight, commemorative arcs around that center.

It is probably fair to say that thousands of U.S. history teachers across the country put this narrative register on display in some form every day. That register is reinforced by the textbook, by local and national history assessments, in the media, and by national leaders with about equal frequency. The narrative is official United States history and that official
history is the narrative. It is crucial to the maintenance of the collective-
memory project and its role in birthing distinctive American identities. Without it—that is, the capacity to recount at least the rough contours of the nation-building narrative arc and the heroes responsible for its progress and success—one cannot claim that identity fully, or so the sentiment goes. History teachers such as Brinton are deeply and unapologetically complicit in the project’s instructional design and delivery.

Not so Todd, which is what most profoundly perplexes Brinton. Todd is a rare iconoclast in her treatment of United States history, someone who seldom appears in accounts of research on history teaching. Although there is an implicit narrative arc to her treatment of U.S. history because she follows the textbook’s general periodization scheme, it is more nod to chronology than narrative. Rather than simply retrace the officialized narrative, Todd wants her students to openly investigate the American past on which that narrative is based. She asks questions and requires her students to ask and then address those questions with her. How was it that African slaves ended up in Jamestown in 1919? What was their experience like? What can be argued were the causes of the American Revolution? What happened at the so-called Boston Massacre, and what effect did it have? Why are Lewis and Clark so celebrated in American history? Was Andrew Jackson really the “people’s President”? What was life like for average workers and ex-slaves in the south after the Civil War? We American’s talk a lot about our freedom birthright, but why were indigenous Americans repeatedly denied this birthright? Is the idea of Manifest Destiny a positive or negative force in American history, or both? If such questions disrupt the narrative arc in some ways, Todd accepts it because she finds that the narrative borders on possessing powerful ideological components and to present it without question participates in subtle indoctrination. In spite of firm convictions in this regard, she has not dared to share these views with Brinton.

Like many teachers who teach against the grain of common practice, Todd closes her classroom door, asks her meaty historical questions, provides her students with source material they can use to investigate and address those questions, and they have at it, so to speak. She also quietly but deliberately teaches her students how to go about this process, what sort of epistemological stances they will need to adopt to understand sources as evidence (rather than as what really happened), to identify and attribute them, assess their perspective, and judge their reliability and value in making historical claims. Her classroom functions frequently like a history seminar in which participants debate ideas, cite evidentiary support for their positions, dispute others’ claims, and, in the end, agree to disagree. In contrast to the collective-memory tableau that primarily infuses Brinton’s
practice, Todd could be said to be engaged in a disciplinary approach, one history specific that looks on the former approach with some skepticism. Two very different teaching approaches, distinguished by visions of the American past that are partly at odds and marked by disparate understandings of what students need and are capable of, residing a mere 30 feet from one another on the second floor of Oak Hollow High School.

**VEXING DIFFERENCES?**

What can we say about the differences in these two approaches, the ones epitomized by Brinton and Todd? Such differences trouble policymakers and educational reformers. How can two teachers, both professionally certified and licensed in the state of their practice, conceptualize the very same subject matter so differently and go about it as though they had never encountered one another? Of course this is not the first time such questions have animated discussions about ways of teaching history. Over 40 years ago, following the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik, the threat that the United States had fallen behind its Cold War arch enemy rattled the nation. What students were learning in schools and how they went about it became the focus of educational reformers, largely on the assumption that changes in practices and approaches were direly needed if the United States was to catch up to its rival. Much of the reformist energy was targeted at the study of mathematics and science. However, education in the social sciences and history did not escape attention. With respect to history education, and specifically American history, the most notable attempt to reformulate how the subject was taught and learned took place under the aegis of the Amherst Project, with Richard Brown as its director.

**RETHINKING HISTORY EDUCATION: THE AMHERST PROJECT AS ANTECEDENT**

In an address to the annual convention of the National School Boards Association in 1965, Richard Brown observed, “I do not need to tell you people who are so closely connected with education that there is raging on every side nothing less than a revolution in American education.” He then observed, “The revolution is, in fact, long overdue, nowhere more so than in the teaching of history. As a nation we have little sense of our history. We have less sense of what history is. What passes for it far too often is a frightful blend of antiquarianism and patriotism.” Amplifying his critique, Brown added, “The critical qualities, the reasoned temper and
judgment and perspective that a study of history ought to provide, are precisely those intellectual qualities which, as a society, we lack the most.”

These worries, Brown told his audience, were the source of work on the Amherst Project. Cautiously optimistic, Brown anticipated that the Project would indeed bear fruit, and it did for over a decade.

Thirty-one years later, and two years following the initial release of the National History Standards, Brown was asked to write a retrospective on that project for the journal, *The Social Studies*. Scholars have debated the impact of the broad-based New Social Studies reform movement, a federally funded effort designed to change teaching by focusing students’ attention away from common lecture and memorization approaches, typical of teachers such as Bob Brinton, and toward the disciplinary referents and inquiry-based practices of the subjects they studied in school, United States history in the case of the Amherst Project. The Amherst Project had in mind teachers such as Nancy Todd. The larger reform movement originated out of the Woods Hole Conference in the late 1950s and was prompted by the Cold War arms race and fears that American education had lost its capacity to retain an intellectual and technological edge over the Soviets. Many have claimed that the revolution the movement hoped to achieve ended largely in limited success because it resulted in few lasting changes in the way subject matter in general and history in particular were taught in school. While acknowledging the critics’ claims, Brown’s retrospective is less sanguine about reports of the movement’s many failures.

Brown asks, “What happened? How did the tiger get away? Was the ‘revolution’ overstated? Misconceived? Was it, after all, simply one more swing of the pendulum that throughout the twentieth century, has oscillated between basic education and progressivism? What, if anything, was its [the Amherst Project’s] legacy?” Answering his own question, Brown observes, “however one characterizes it, the message has never gone entirely out of fashion. Evidence abounds that, in the nineties, it is beginning to receive new attention. Remarkably, a quarter of a century later, two units of the Amherst Project . . . are still in print.” Laying out one example of the project’s impact after another, he continues, “Even the cosmetics that dress up modern textbooks and find their way into the controversial National History Standards for United States History bear witness to some impact . . . of what has gone before.” Shifting to prognostication, Brown argues, “The signs of renewed interest are bound to increase. An age venturing onto the Information Superhighway can expect changes aplenty in what is demanded of education, even in what it considers ‘education’ to be. The premium clearly will be on students learning how to learn, in order to be able to use information literally at
their fingertips.” History teachers such as Nancy Todd reflect the premium placed on teaching students how to learn and thereby reflect Brown’s prophetic sentiments.

“The polestar of the Amherst Project,” Brown noted, “was the idea that students learn best when they are acting as inquirers, pursuing into evidence questions that grow out of their own lives. [. . .] We [project directors and participants] saw both “knowledge” of the historical past and the development of inquiry skills as important goals that would be best achieved together. Neither was an end in itself.”

The first phase of the Amherst Project began in the late 1950s when Van R. Halsey, then Assistant Dean of Admissions at Amherst College, assembled a group of area high school history teachers and college historians to discuss what pre-collegiate students should know about history at the point of their graduation from high school. Halsey began with the historians. Unanimous in their conclusion, the historians said they assumed entering students would know virtually nothing, even though the historians were aware that students had taken American history courses, for example, in at least three iterations before college. Halsey then asked the historians to explain what they would like students to know.

Despite the absence of a unanimous response to this question, the historians generally agreed that they cared less about students possessing a fixed body of knowledge and more about them having the capacity to work with cognitive tools that formed a critical approach to the history they might study. The historians, Brown explains, “wanted students to understand that ‘history’ was at best an interpretation of what had happened in the past, and they wanted students to be able to doubt.” The high school teachers retorted by wondering how they were to accomplish this feat if the only curriculum materials they had to work with were history textbooks that conveyed the idea that the America past was a known story, recorded in an unassailable narrative, and designed principally to be memorized and recalled by students. The teachers wanted different materials to supplement the textbooks, materials that would “enable students to question evidence, to doubt, to interpret—to see, in short, what the historian did and therefore what ‘history’ was.”

Armed with these responses, in the summer of 1959 groups of history teachers and historians sat down to design new curriculum units to be tried out informally by the teachers. From there on, the Project expanded its reach across the country with the help of publishing companies who produced the units en masse. Federal funding followed and the staff of the project expanded. Between 1965 and 1970, workshops on how to teach history as an inquiry into the past aided by the published curriculum units proliferated.
Difficulties ensued, however. Amherst Project participants soon learned that knowing how to teach these new curriculum materials, and the investigative practices that underpinned them, required that attention be paid to history teachers’ knowledge about the discipline and its structure and to the preparation of teachers. But educating better teachers was not sufficient. The obsession in schools with relaying a stabilized narrative of U.S. national development, presented to students as a fait accompli, was so deeply rooted that the Project turned its attention to changing the culture of schools themselves. Educational development teams were designed and put in place across the country. The workshop approach toward changing practices and approaches became the signature pedagogy of the Project. And then, just as the workshop approach began to make headway, the Federal funding ran lean and Americans became increasingly distracted by the troubles of the war in Vietnam. By about 1975, the Project had lost its momentum. The Nation At Risk report with a symbolic signaling of the importance of returning to age-old, basic forms of education and schooling emerged off the presses in 1983.

AN ENDURING LEGACY?

Despite the demise of the Amherst Project, Brown’s cautious optimism and hopeful prognostications, offered up in his retrospective accounting, show some signs of coming to fruition. Although the accountability movement—ushered in by the passage of the No Child Left Behind act in the early twenty-first century with an operationalized emphasis on testing relatively low-level cognitive capacities—could be understood as tempering Brown’s prophetic enthusiasm, one could argue that the landscape of history education in the United States continues to change, and perhaps fairly dramatically. Through engagements with history teachers under the auspices of the Teaching American History grant program, historians, who for much of the latter half of the twentieth century sat on the sidelines, have found renewed interest in what happens in history courses at the pre-collegiate level. Historians have also begun talking more about their own teaching practices, as well as the role they play in the preparation of history teachers.

A conference at the University of Virginia and Monticello in the summer of 2006, attended by over 45 historians, history teachers, and history education researchers resulted in a white paper, “The Next Generation of History Teachers: A Challenge to Departments of History at American Colleges and Universities.” It was sent to all post-secondary history departments in the United States. On the paper’s cover page, the