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Reading & Rewriting History

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Several years ago we toured a swanky new middle school rising on the broken asphalt of an urban parking lot. Paid for with private funds, this public school's mission statement read like a recruiting poster for Microsoft: young people would gain the skills not only to cope with the "information demands of the digital age" but to "flourish in it."

A 13-year-old guide led us to a classroom that could have doubled as a product rollout for Apple. Amidst banks of gleaming Macintoshes, the teacher circled among students working on their "country reports."

We sidled up to one group huddled over their textbooks and a stack of printouts from the Web. In neat letters at the top of their "knowledge poster" we spied the word "Pakistan" and the phrase "parliamentary democracy . . . religious freedom for all." We posed a straightforward question to the group: "How do you know that's true?" A pigtailed girl with a gleam in her eye--clearly this quartet's leader--grabbed her book and thrust it under our noses: "See," using her finger to locate truth, "here, page 242, it says right here." We persisted: "How do you know *that's* true?"

From this youngster's quizzical expression, we might have thought our question had been phrased in Martian, not English. A second girl came to the rescue by summoning us to her I-Mac, "Look," pointing to the Government of Pakistan's official website, "It says it here, too." We continued, unmoved: "But what if we went to India's site and it said that Pakistan was a totalitarian regime that oppressed Hindus and other religious minorities. What then?" The students put their heads together and in an instant arrived at their response: "We'd vote," they said.

We begin with this vignette because it captures a truth we've encountered time and again in our school visits. In social studies classes, students amass piles of information, and sometimes even become quite articulate about what they learned. But the moment the discussion turns to assaying the quality of information, voluble students turn mute. Asked to exercise judgment, they instead throw up their hands . . . and vote.

We recognize that some would cry foul at our question by claiming that the ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of a textbook is beyond the ken of the typical middle school or even high school student. Young people should first learn the facts, according to this view, and only when they get to an Advanced Placement class or to a college seminar, would they learn that historians argue over competing interpretations and sometimes even question the veracity of accepted facts.

When the world presented itself in measured doses—the daily newspaper on our doorstep, the big three networks on TV, and a weekly visit to the public library—such a stance might have sufficed (but even that's debatable). Not debatable is that this Rockwellian world has long passed. Ask any middle schooler with a research project how to spell the word "library" and you'll get a response in six letters: G-O-O-G-L-E.

What happens, exactly, when we bestow on Google the role of quality control? Try typing “Holocaust” and “crematorium” as keywords and your surfing will take you to an official-looking website for the “Institute for Historical Review,” its homepage proclaiming “truth and accuracy,” a dedication to “promoting greater public awareness of key chapters of history,” and a dispassionate statement of its “non-profit 503 (c) tax-exempt” status. Follow a few links and you’ll learn that, contrary to what you might have believed, the Holocaust never occurred. In our age of new technologies, every crackpot has become a publisher and the ability to judge the quality of stories can no longer be “for extra credit.”

The place to teach young people to ask questions about truth and evidence in our digital age is the history and social studies classroom, and we should not delay. As a concrete example, consider a unit we designed for the fifth grade, students’ first systematic encounter with American history in the curriculum. Our approach begins with a unit on Pocahontas, John Smith, and Jamestown.ⁱ

It turns out that elementary schoolchildren know a lot about Pocahontas. Many can recite specifics: she saved John Smith, she was an Indian “babe” and princess, daughter of a chief. In fact, the knowledge that students bring to the classroom shows the reach and potency of one of our most successful contemporary storytellers, the Walt Disney Corporation. Pocahontas, a svelte, free-spirited nineteen-year-old, and John Smith, a dashing hunk of a colonist, fall in love, flaunting orders that there be no contact between the Indians and colonists. In this tale’s dramatic climax, Pocahontas prevents her father, Chief Powhatan, from cudgeling Smith to death. Pocahontas’s act of courage leads both sides to lay down arms and ushers in a new era of understanding between two

warring cultures. In the movie version, the characters are visually stunning, the plot straightforward, and the moral lessons clear.

Yet, this dramatic climax—Smith’s rescue—may never have happened. The only eyewitness who left a paper trail was Smith himself, and his two accounts of the event are riddled with inconsistencies. The first, written in 1608, the year it supposedly occurred, makes no mention of the threat or rescue, and uses words like friendship and kindness to describe meeting Powhatan. “He kindly welcomed me with good words and great platters of sundry victuals, assuring me his friendship and my liberty within four days.” The second account, written sixteen years later, uses words like barbarous and fearful, and includes the claim that Pocahontas “laid down her own [head] upon his to save him from death.”ⁱⁱ

Why is the rescue mentioned in one account but not the other? Was Smith scared of being viewed as less of a man if the truth was revealed about an Indian girl rescuing him? In the first account was he merely trying to describe this new land and unfamiliar peoples, choosing to omit personal stories? Or was he capitalizing, in the second, on Pocahontas’s fame after her move to London as Indian princess and wife of John Rolfe, thus casting himself as character in her early life now that she was dead and unable to respond? (Pocahontas died in 1617.)

In our unit, students compare Smith’s two accounts. They read his words and identify factual differences and similarities between them. They struggle to explain the differences they see in the primary evidence. Only then do they turn to accounts about what historians say about this event.ⁱⁱⁱ

There, more puzzles await. Students examine four interpretations of this alleged rescue. Two historians assail the veracity of Smith’s later account on multiple grounds, such as the lack of corroborating sources and the inconsistencies between the two accounts’ details and flavor. Other historians take Smith at his word, but even while accepting its truth, claim that Smith missed the point. This “rescue” posed no real threat to limb or life but was actually an Indian ritual meant to signify death and rebirth, symbolizing Smith’s assumption of a new tribal identity under Powhatan’s patronage.

What *are* the facts of the story? What do these facts mean? There are no easy answers. Designed to teach the interpretive and evidentiary nature of history, our unit pushes students to delve into the evidence themselves. Students read, evaluate, and synthesize source material through carefully constructed lessons that include guided worksheets and structured discussions. They use a timeline to figure out that Pocahontas was a little girl (10 or 11) when the supposed encounter with Smith occurred—hardly the Barbie-in-deerskin of Disney’s story. Students go on to consider parallels between investigating historical stories and how their school principal might investigate a cafeteria food fight.

In one classroom where we piloted our materials, seventh-grade students responded indignantly to the Disney version, and expressed outrage at being fed a distorted, if not patently false, story. At the end of the unit they vented their frustration by writing letters of complaint to Roy Disney. Anna, an articulate 13-year-old, wrote the following:

I am sure that you know the basic facts: Matoaka (Pocahontas’s real name) was ten or eleven when the capturing of John Smith in Virginia took place. She married John

Rolfe, and died in England. Instead of showing Pocahontas as she was, Disney instead chose to perpetrate the myth of a handsome man: captured by Indians in North America, and about to get his brains smashed out, John Smith is saved by the typical media-fashioned woman (almost naked), with whom he falls in love. What confuses me is that Disney must have done extensive research before making this movie. So why does it seem like just another “cartoon?” Maybe instead of taking true stories and straining the truth out of them, Disney could create a story with realistic people (especially women) and an intelligent plotline that tries to tell the truth.

Reading primary and secondary sources constitutes the heart of our curriculum, But reading is part of a two-part equation that *must* be accompanied by writing.

Therefore, as capstone to this unit, students are thrust into the role of authors, rewriting their textbooks to better reflect the truth of the story. Although our unit begins with a movie to spark students’ interest, the movie is only a corridor that leads to the core tasks of literacy

Literacy is the key word here, for the teaching of history should have reading and writing at its center. Years ago we might have expected this to be the case but that time is no more. In some underfunded schools, teachers struggle to cope with the low reading levels by reading the textbook aloud to students so that they at least “get the content.”^{iv} In other classrooms, writing in social studies has all but disappeared, replaced by PowerPoint assignments, complete with bullet-points and animation. But an argument on why the USSR disintegrated can no more be defended using bullets than we can journey to Moscow on the wings of a Frommer guide. Working through successive drafts of the cause and effect essay--making sure paragraphs connect and assertions are backed by

evidence--is hard and inglorious work, but there are no shortcuts. No celebration of multiple intelligences or learning styles, which takes the form of “skits” or “illustrated knowledge posters,” equips us to answer those who would deceive us the moment we open our browsers. Skits and posters may be engaging, but leaving students there—engaged but illiterate—is an incomplete lesson that forfeits our claim as educators.

We are aware that we have crafted a decidedly old-fashioned message for a technologically savvy world. We are also aware that our message differs from what one hears in the tired battles known as the “history wars.” There, the focus immediately shifts from why teach history to *which* history to teach: a so-called “critical” history of broken promises and false hopes (where everything’s up for grabs except this narrative’s underlying assumptions), or a story of flawless heroes that prepares youngsters for an adulthood of History Channel reruns. Neither narrative begins to capture the complexity of this nation’s history nor prepares citizens to function effectively in the future.^v

We need an approach to teaching history where the criteria for success have less to do with intoning loyalty oaths (to either side of the political aisle) than the ability to participate in the literate activities our society demands. This means teaching students to be informed readers, writers, and thinkers about the past as well as the present—a goal Republicans *and* Democrats should be able to embrace. Our democracy’s vitality depends on it.

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ⁱ This unit was designed as part of PATHS (Promoting Argumentation through History and Science), an NSF-funded project that aimed at helping elementary school students understand the nature of evidence in history and science, Principal Investigators, Sam Wineburg, Reed Stevens, Leslie Rupert Herrenkohl, and Philip Bell. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors only.

ⁱⁱ For the Smith documents, see Smith, John. (1608). A True relation by Captain John Smith. In Tyler, Lyon Gardiner (Ed.). *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907). Pages 27-71. Retrieved online facsimile edition June 3, 2004 at www.americanjourneys.org/aj-074/. p. 48, and Smith, John. (1624). The generall historie of Virginia, New -England and the Summer Isles.

printed by I.D. & I. H. for Michael Sparks. Retrieved June 14, 2004 at

<http://www.columbia.edu/~alj10/approaches/Pocahontas/document.html>. To help elementary school students comprehend these original documents we took slight liberties with the language, modernizing spelling and capitalization and eliminating non-essential words. Purists might object to the adulteration of primary source documents; educators acquainted with the crisis of literacy in our inner-city schools might, on the other hand, applaud our efforts to put primary sources (even abridged ones) into children's hands.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example: Barbour, Philip. (1969). *Pocahontas and Her World*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company; Lewis, Paul. (1966). *The great rogue: A biography of Captain John Smith*. New York: D. McKay Co; Lemay, J.A. Leo. (1991). *The American dream of Captain John Smith*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia; Adams, Henry. (1867). Captain John Smith, *The North American Review*. 104, 1-30.

^{iv} Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz (1999) *Reading for Understanding*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

^v See Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Temple, 2001).

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Whatever one writes, be it a story, reportage, poem, novel, job application, or even a personal email, haunts its author with lingering doubts over whether it was good enough. No matter how many re-readings and revisions one suffers through, one's sense of satisfaction is never complete. Perfectionism and self-deprecation feed literary insecurity and rejection letters redouble it. And should you wish to continue reading this story, please visit the original version at perfidy.press. I ask you to do so only because medium.com cannot properly render its content. There you'll find two versions of a scene to compare, contrast, and comment upon, which I urge you to do should you be amenable.