Thinking Historically Can be a Natural Act: Creating a Classroom Culture that Fosters Historical Thinking

Bruce A. Lesh
Franklin High School
Reisterstown, Maryland
Identify the source of this statement:

“Surely a grade of 33 out of 100 on the simplest and most obvious facts of American History is not a record in which any high school can take pride.”
A. The 2011 report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results declaring “little growth in students’ knowledge of history.”

B. A 2007 report entitled *Failing Our Students, Failing America: Holding Colleges Accountable for Teaching America's History and Institutions*

C. The 2006 NAEP report which demonstrated that “Students Gain Only Marginally on Test of U.S. History.”


E. The 1987, NAEP report.


G. Reports of the 1942 *New York Times* history exam that prompted historian Allan Nevins to write that high school students are “all too ignorant of American History.”

H. All of the above

I. None of the above
Answer: I—None of the Above
A 1917 report by professors J. Carleton Bell and David McCollum who tested 1500 Texas high school students to determine their sense of history. They discovered:

Elementary level overall score – 16%
High school level overall score – 33%
College level overall score – 49%

"History is on the way down and possibly out [of the curriculum]."


"History is in crisis...the situation is nationwide, affecting both secondary schools and higher education in every part of the country."


"...the lamentable state of history in our educational system..."


"But the importance of a shared memory appears to have lost its foothold in American higher education. As we move forward into the 21st century, our future leaders are graduating with an alarming ignorance of their heritage—a kind of collective amnesia—and a profound historical illiteracy which bodes ill for the future republic."

*Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*, 2000
“We learn that there has been little appreciable change in students’ historical knowledge over time...the consistency of these results casts doubts on a presumed golden age of fact retention. Appeals to such an age are more the stuff of national lore and a wistful nostalgia for a time that never was than a reference to a national history whose reality can be found in the documentary record.”

Sam Weinberg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*
Methods of Instruction in Social Studies/History

Larry Cuban labeled social studies a content area of “persistent instruction”
  – a single teacher standing in front of a group of 25-40 students, talking.
    • Despite reform efforts, this structure has persisted


“The most common pattern, employed by the vast majority if social studies teachers, is that of teacher-centered instruction. This pattern includes activities using the textbook and teacher as sources of information for assignments, recitation... and individual seatwork. Talking by the teacher (presenting information, explaining, and clarifying) exceeds talking by students, whose responses are generally confined to answering teacher’s questions”

(Cuban 1982; Goodland 1984; Hertzberg 1985; Bracey 1991; Bracey 1997; Trifan 1997; Oberly 1997; Gough 2004; Stacy, 2009)
History is Boring!

Indiana University's Center for Survey Research (1994) National Survey
– Asked to "pick one word or phrase to describe your experience with history classes in elementary or high school."

"Boring" was the single most frequent description and negative descriptions significantly outweighed positive ones

In 1513, the Dutch to search for anyone was of the type over America’s resources. But nor the past would begin learning to read history when in elementary school classes..WRAPED AS Bruce VanSledright with a foreword by Larry Cuban, came into social...
Historians ask questions that frame a problem for them to study.
“The point of questions, is not to see whether students have read a particular text; rather, it is to provide direction and motivation for the rigorous work of doing history.”

Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools
Central Questions

• Who should bear responsibility for the Triangle Shirtwaist fire?
• Jacob Riis: Documenting or Manipulating the Past?
• What motivated the United States Government to authorize the CIA-sponsored Guatemalan Coup of 1954: The Threat of a Cold War Communism or Banana’s?
• In the Iran Contra affair, was Oliver North a Patriot, Pawn or Outlaw?
• Did deindustrialization make America stronger or weaker?
• Does the advertisement poster accurately portray the settlement of farmers in Kansas?
• How accurately do clips from Iron Jawed Angels depict the effort to secure suffrage?
• The Black Power Movement: Was it Revolutionary, Racist, or Reactionary?
• Did Ossian Sweet die a man or live a coward? Was it worth it?
Historians gather and ask questions of a variety of sources.
“In the initial investigative phases of their work [historians] occupy themselves with reading and digesting the residues of the past left behind by our ancestors. Much of this residue remains in the form of documents or sources. Source work then becomes the staple in the investigative lives of these experts.”

Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America’s Past*
Source Work/Historical Literacy

Text: What is visible/readable--what information is provided by the source?

Context: What was going on during the time period? What background information do you have that helps explain the information found in the source?

Subtext: What is between the lines? Must ask questions about:

- Author: Who created the source and what do we know about that person?
- Audience: For whom was the source created?
- Reason: Why was this source produced at the time it was produced?
Sourcing: When a reader thinks about a document’s author and why the document was created.

Contextualizing: When a reader situates a document and its content in place and time.

Corroborating: When a reader asks questions about important details across multiple source to determine points of agreement and disagreement.

http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/why.php
Historians develop, defend, and revise interpretations
Elements of a History Lab

- A **central question** that does not have one answer.

- **Source work**—Historical sources are evaluated and the information gained is applied to the development of an answer to the lab’s central question.

- The employment of **literacy skills** to evaluate historical sources.

- The development, refinement, and defense of an **evidence-based answer** to the guiding historical question.
Developing an Historical Investigation

• Identify the focus question to be posed for your investigation

• Determine the historical sources you will use

• Identify what information the sources provide that would assist students’ investigation of the focus question

• Predict the possible interpretations students would develop in response to their investigation of the sources

• How would this investigation help you cover the curriculum?
John Brown: Historical Marker

You have been commissioned by the state of West Virginia Historical Trust to develop an historical marker that will be placed along the roadside adjacent to the area impacted by John Brown and his followers. Your task is to develop the inscription for the marker that describes your interpretation of John Brown and his actions. Your inscriptions should take into account:

- John Brown’s beliefs and the actions he took based on these beliefs (Kansas, Missouri, Harper’s Ferry)
- The various reactions to John Brown (artistic, and other)

Why I came to this decision (What documents most impacted your decisions and why):

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No. 1 • John Brown, a man who had a fanatical belief that he was chosen by God to overthrow black slavery in America.

No. 2 • For 40 years, John Brown reflected on the hopeless and miserable condition of the slaves.
JOHN BROWN'S RAID ON HARPERS FERRY

by Jason Glaser

illustrated by Al Milgrom, Bill Anderson, and Charles Barnett III
"...IT WAS HIS JOHN BROWN'S PRINCIPAL DOCTRINE THAT A MAN HAS A PERFECT RIGHT TO INTERFERE BY FORCE WITH THE SLAVEHOLDER, IN ORDER TO RESCUE THE SLAVE. I AGREE WITH HIM. THEY WHO ARE CONTINUALLY SHOCKED BY SLAVERY HAVE SOME RIGHT TO BE SHOCKED BY THE VIOLENT DEATH OF THE SLAVEHOLDER. BUT SUCH WILL BE MORE SHOCKED BY HIS LIFE THAN BY HIS DEATH. I SHALL NOT BE FORWARD TO THINK HIM MISTAKEN IN HIS METHOD WHO OBTAINED SUCCESS TO LIBERATE THE SLAVE."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

JOHN BROWN
MAY 9TH, 1800 - DEC 2ND, 1859
Kansas City, Missouri
ERECTED TO
THE MEMORY OF
JOHN BROWN
BY A GRATEFUL
PEOPLE
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<th>Information Provided</th>
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<tr>
<td>James Schouler, History of the United States of America under the Constitution, 1891</td>
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<td>The chapter from George Washington Williams, History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880, titled “John Brown—Hero and Martyr.” (1881)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview with Russell Banks, Author of Cloudsplitter</td>
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<td>Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown, 2005</td>
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“Of Pilgrim pedigree and revolutionary fighting stock, our grim hero was one of those stern-faced sons of righteousness who read their Bible, rear great families of sons and daughters, and fight poverty’s privations handicapped, with every chance of worldly success against them. John Brown’s very name, rugged and familiar on the tongue, claims kin for him with a host of common people of English blood. Failing in one means of livelihood after another, he settled with his family on a farm among the lonely Adirondacks.

Insanity ran in Brown’s family, and one of his sons in Kansas was a victim of malady. Yet monomaniacs may plot most cunningly; their folly develops more properly at the stage of action. What moonlight madness do we see in that constitution drawn up and read to confederates over the Canadian border, wherein John Brown announces the provisional government of the United States which he intends, as the new Cromwell, to establish.

John Brown was no Caesar, no Cromwell, but a plain citizen of a free republic, whom distressing events drove into a fanaticism to execute purposes to which he was incompetent. He detested slavery, and that detestation led him to take up arms not only against slavery, but against that public opinion which was slowly formulating how best to eradicate it. Woe to the conquered. The North made no appeals for that clemency which slaveholders had alone to consider. Brown had not been lenient to masters, nor were masters bound to be lenient to him.”
The chapter from George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880*, titled “John Brown—Hero and Martyr.” (1881)

The son of a laborer, Williams enlisted at age 14 in the Union Army and fought in the Civil War. Upon leaving the army in 1868, he underwent training as a minister at the Newton Theological Institution and was ordained in 1874. In the following years he served as pastor of several churches, edited and published several short-lived journals, and served in the Ohio House of Representatives from 1879 to 1881. By this time he had become interested in the study of history, and after doing copious research, he had his *History of the Negro Race in America* published in 1882. There had been several previous works written on this subject by black historians, but Williams’ work was the first relatively objective account that strove for historical accuracy rather than functioning as a work of black apologetics or propaganda.

“On the 9th of May, 1800, at Torrington, Connecticut, was born a man who lived for two generations, but accomplished the work of two centuries. That man was John Brown, who ranks among the world’s greatest heroes...He was not in sympathy with any of the parties, political or anti-slavery. All were too conservative to suit him. So, as a political orphan he went into Kansas, organized and led a new party that swore eternal death to slavery....He denounced slavery as a curse of the ages; affirmed the manhood of the slave...said he could see no use in talking. “Talk is a national institution; but it does no good for the slave.” He thought it an excuse very well adapted for weak men with tender consciences. Most men who were afraid to fight, and too honest to be silent...the slaves, in his eyes, were prisoners of war; their tyrants, as he held, had taken up the sword, and must perish by it. This was his view of the great question of slavery...

John Brown is rapidly settling down to his proper place in history, and the “madman” has been transformed into a “saint.” When Brown struck his first blow for freedom, at the head of his little band of liberators, it was almost the universal judgment of both Americans and foreigners that he was a fanatic...John Brown said to a personal friend during his stay in Kansas: ‘Young men must learn to wait. Patience is the hardest lesson to learn. I have waited for twenty years to accomplish my purpose.” Those are not the words of a mere visionary idealist, but the mature language of a practical and judicious leader, a leader than whom the world has never seen greater. By greatness is meant deep convictions of duty, a sense of the Infinite...to which the appeals of the innocent and helpless are more potential than the voices of angry thunder or destructive artillery. Such a man was John Brown. He was strong in his moral and mental nature, as well as in his physical nature. He was born to lead; and he led...Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, and John Brown have to wait the calmer judgments of future generations. These men believed that God sent them to do a certain work—to reveal a hidden truth; to pour light into the minds of benighted and superstitious men. They completed their work; they did nobly and well, and then bowed to rest....”

Oswald Garrison Villard, publisher of the New York Evening Post and The Nation, was the son of railroad tycoon Henry Villard and grandson of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. He used his fortune to promote liberal causes, including women’s suffrage, anti-imperialism, and Negro uplift. Villard originally supported Booker T. Washington, believing education was the solution to the “Negro problem,” but the Brownsville affair and Atlanta riot convinced him of the need for a more militant strategy. The “Committee for the Advancement of the Negro Race” (1906) he envisioned became the blueprint for the NAACP. Villard funded the NAACP’s budget and provided free office space in the Evening Post building. He resigned as NAACP chairman in 1914 due to irreconcilable differences with W. E. B. Du Bois, but remained a board member until his death in 1949.

“Now, fifty years later, it is possible to take an unbiased view of John Brown and his achievements, even if opinions as to his true character and moral worth diverge almost as violently as in 1859. There are those in the 20th century, appointed to teach history in high places, who are so blind as to see in John Brown only the murderer of the Pottawatomie, a “horse-thief and midnight assassin.” Still others behold him not merely a sainted martyr of the most elevated character, but the liberator of Kansas, and the man who, unaided, struck their chains from the limbs of more than three million human beings.

Something compelled him to attack slavery by force of arms, and to that impulse he yielded, reckoning not at all as to the outcome, and making not the slightest effort to plan beyond the first blow. Without foresight, strategy or generalship, he entered the Harper’s Ferry trap confident that all was for the best, to be marvelously preserved from the saber which, had it gone home, must have rendered barren his entire life, his sacrifice and his devotion.
“We need allies who are going to help us achieve victory, not allies who are going to tell us to be nonviolent. If a white man wants to be your ally, what does he think of John Brown? You know what John Brown did? He went to war. He was a white man who went to war against white people to help free the slaves. ...White people call John Brown a nut. Go read the history, go read what all of them say about John Brown. They’re trying to make it look like he was a nut, a fanatic. They made a movie on it; I saw a movie on the screen one night. But they depict him in this image because he was willing to shed blood to free slaves. And any white man who is ready and willing to shed blood for your freedom—in the sight of other whites, he’s nuts...So, when you want to know good white folks in history where black people are concerned, go read the history of John Brown. Why, I would be afraid to get near John Brown if I go by what other white folks say about him. If we want some white allies, we need the kind John Brown was, or we don’t need any.”

Interview with Russell Banks, Author of *Cloudsplitter*

Russell Banks is the author of sixteen works of fiction, many of which depict seismic events in US history, such as the fictionalized journey of John Brown in *Cloudsplitter*. His work has been translated into twenty languages and has received numerous international prizes. His book tells the story from the first-person perspective of the fictional character of Owen Brown, John Brown’s third son and his principal lieutenant in the Kansas wars. The book was criticized for taking novelistic license with the facts, describing events that never happened, and placing Owen at scenes where in reality he was not present. The author was also criticized for the numerous historical mistakes in the book.

“I think the reason white people think he was mad is because he was a white man and he was willing to sacrifice his life in order to liberate Black Americans. I think it's as simple as that. Black people don't think he's crazy, generally -- very few African Americans regard Brown as insane. If you go out onto the street today, whether you are speaking to a school kid or an elderly woman or a college professor, if it's an African American person you're talking to about John Brown, they are going start right out with the assumption that he was a hero because he was willing to sacrifice his life -- a white man -- in order to liberate Black Americans. If you speak to a white American, probably the same proportion of them will say he was a madman. And it's for the same reason, because he was a white man who was willing to sacrifice his life to liberate Black Americans. The very thing that makes him seem mad to white Americans is what makes him seem heroic to Black Americans. And that paradox, to me, goes to the heart of the racial divide in American culture. He stands astride in the most fascinating and revealing way, I think. The two largest racially definable segments of our population view the same figure, the same set of facts, with completely opposing points of view.

I think he's so important today for a gathering of reasons. Certainly because he is so revealing to any one of us willing to look at our ongoing racial divide, [and] the opposing ways in which he is regarded by white and American and Black Americans. But, he also, in his life, raises very basic and ongoing questions about political violence which we live with, deal with and puzzle over and are tormented by today -- violence in the service of an ideal, of a principled cause. This is a part of our lives today in so many ways. Whether it's an abortion clinic in upstate New York or a federal building in Oklahoma City, it's something that we deal with, we have to face and encounter and not try to understand and contextualize it somehow.”

Louis DeCarlo, Jr. is an ordained minister and author. He holds graduate degrees from Westminster Seminary and New York University. “Fire from the Midst of You” situates Brown within the religious and social context of a nation steeped in racism, showing his roots in Puritan abolitionism. DeCaro explores Brown’s unusual family heritage as well as his business and personal losses, retracing his path to the Southern gallows. In contrast to the popular image of Brown as a violent fanatic, DeCaro contextualizes Brown’s actions, emphasizing the intensely religious nature of the antebellum U.S. in which he lived. He articulates the nature of Brown’s radical faith and shows that, when viewed in the context of his times, he was not the religious fanatic that many have understood him to be. DeCaro calls Brown a “Protestant saint”—an imperfect believer seeking to realize his own perceived calling in divine providence. In line with the post-millennial theology of his day, Brown understood God as working through mankind and the church to renew and revive sinful humanity. He read the Bible not only as God’s word, but as God’s word to John Brown. DeCaro traces Brown’s life and development to show how by forging faith as a radical weapon, Brown forced the entire nation to a point of crisis.

“A deeply religious man and father of a large family, he believed that slavery was not going to relent in the face of political compromise or moral outcries from abolitionists....Brown...put black liberation first and foremost—not only as a political belief but as a personal ambition. As black people have long realized, their famous ally is considered fanatical and insane largely because he presumed their humanity in a society North and South that categorically dehumanized them. White Americans have long glorified violence and fanaticism when it pertained to their nationalistic interests...

...Brown is misunderstood by modern scholars and writers...because of his strong religious beliefs. However different their political and social views, even his nineteen-century opponents had a better understanding of religion than do many biographers and scholars today. That he considered himself ‘an instrument of Providence” smacks of delusion and fanaticism in modern and postmodern perceptions. That he likewise believed that all of the Christian scriptures reflect the same God at work in the history of redemption is likewise indigestible to most people in a post-Christian society.... Brown was a man of faith, and well read in the Bible and Christian literature. Like many Christians, he was converted as a youth, and he grew up in a theologically conservative, evangelical, and Calvinist home....Even after he committed himself full time to the abolitionist struggle, he reminded a church attendee, and faithful Bible student. Furthermore, he and his family represented a unique strand of the abolitionist movement. A devotedly Christian people who believed the Bible to be the inspired and infallible word of God, they were also Biblical egalitarians—racial dissenters from the racialist beliefs of many white Christians. The Browns applied the biblical doctrine of humanity the image of God to the frontier as well as the slave market, and were thus righteously indignant at the social, political, and ecclesiastical realities of society steeped in white supremacy. Like many Christian abolitionists, the Browns understood the Golden Rule as mandate to fight slavery by undermining it in overt and covert political acts, such as anti-slavery groups, participation in the Underground Railroad, and support of candidates who held similar opinions regarding slavery. John Brown’s war on slavery was undoubtedly an extension of the Christian legacy of his family.

An evangelical Christian, he not only read the Bible as God’s word, he read the Bible as God’s word to John Brown. He believed that the scriptures continued to speak to life situations, radiating fresh truth and directives
John Brown: Historical Marker
You have been commissioned by the state of West Virginia Historical Trust to develop an historical marker that will be placed along the roadside adjacent to the area impacted by John Brown and his followers. Your task is to develop the inscription for the marker that describes your interpretation of John Brown and his actions. Your inscriptions should take into account:
• John Brown’s beliefs and the actions he took based on these beliefs (Kansas, Missouri, Harper’s Ferry)
• The various reactions to John Brown (artistic, and other)

Why I came to this decision (What documents most impacted your decisions and why): ______________
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What challenges would this method present to you as a teacher?

What challenges would this present to your students?
Instructional Implications---Students

• Students must be taught to critically evaluate authorship, purpose, and audience for a variety of historical sources and determine how these factors impact the information derived from a source.

• Students must become confident with ordering evidence and applying that evidence to support their answer to the historical questions.

• Students must be willing to end an investigation with multiple (evidence-based) answers to an historical question (History is an interpretive discipline).
Instructional Implications---Teachers

• Teachers must teach students to critically evaluate authorship, purpose, and audience for a variety of historical sources and determine how these factors impact the information derived from a source.

• Teachers must be willing to end an investigation with multiple (evidence-based) answers to an historical question (History is an interpretive discipline).

• Teachers must make hard choices about how to deal with curricular requirements that are not addressed by a history lab. Coverage versus depth conundrum