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Developing a “Theory of Instruction”:  
Teaching History in the Middle Schools

Susan Abernathy

College Scholars Project

Dr. Jinx Watson, Dr. Judy Neff, and Dr. Jack Reese

12 May 1998

In my own study of history at the university level I have become intrigued with the notion of how one translates a course of some depth into a unit of study at a middle-school level without sacrificing the complexity or integrity of the subject matter. Would it be feasible to teach students methods of historical research and analysis, allowing them to be historians, instead of presenting history in a classic textbook approach as an objective reality in the past that can be committed to memory? Would such a method of instruction be developmentally appropriate for the middle-school ages -- eleven, twelve, thirteen years of age? In order to understand who the middle-schoolers are, what they are like cognitively, socially, and psychologically, the work of psychologists like Erik Erikson, Carol Gilligan, Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner and others will help to flesh out a general portrait of adolescents. In order to understand how to teach history to adolescents it is important to examine the nature of history as a discipline and to understand its inherent problems. Historians' reflections of their discipline will clarify what it means to be involved in the study of the past, and recent works by social studies experts can relate these disciplinary issues to current debates. In order to integrate the portrait of adolescence with an understanding of history, a qualitative study was conducted of six seventh- and eighth-graders in order to find out when the study of history had been particularly meaningful to them. What methods stimulated their intellectual curiosity, and did they gain a sense of competence from their study? The earlier exploration of the nature of adolescence and its relationship to the study of history will provide a framework for the qualitative study, and from these three components a "theory of instruction" for the teaching of history in the middle-school will emerge.

John Dewey writes that education must begin "with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, habits."<sup>1</sup> One must understand the child and her world before one begins to consider how to teach her. Jerome Bruner, writing on how people come to know and learn, suggests that one of the greatest hurdles in teaching is finding the

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<sup>1</sup>Jerome Bruner, On Knowing. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1964. 117.

language and ideas to explain an idea that the learner would use if he or she were explaining it to the teacher.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the characteristics of their development and the nature of their mental functioning can help to flesh out a picture of who middle-schoolers are, making it possible to develop coherent strategies for teaching history that are appropriate for young adolescents.

## **Understanding Children's Thinking**

Just as context is important in understanding historical events, so is the social environment for understanding child development. Erik Erikson focuses on the social development of children and formulates a set of stages through which people normally progress: in his schema normal social development results in a healthy sense of identity.<sup>3</sup> He characterizes the stage of preadolescence as a time of conflict known as Industry versus Inferiority. In this period pre-adolescents actively seek to discover who they are, and they leave no rock unturned in their search. They take an interest in things that are important or unique to their culture; they act as “culture-sponges,” absorbing what it means to be an adult member of their society. Their industry in self-discovery, though, is offset by a sense of inferiority. As the peer group challenges the immediate family for influence, pre-adolescents feel a strong desire to be accepted and needed. Young adolescents may remain in this stage or may begin to take part in Erikson's fifth stage of development, that of Identity versus Identity Diffusion.

Erikson asserts that the adolescent's job is the search for identity. He characterizes the conflict at this stage as one between a strong sense of oneself and all the potential selves one could be.<sup>4</sup> In one's search for identity, conflict arises when one is faced with a myriad of possibilities of who one could become. The desire for self-discovery that emerged in the previous stage combines with a need to be able to define oneself, making the search for identity a crucial part of adolescence.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>3</sup>Guy R. Lefrancois, The Lifespan. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1984. 34.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 37.

This new focus on self-discovery, though, necessarily engenders a certain egocentrism in adolescence. According to Erikson, it is an egocentrism born not of selfishness, but of “self-centeredness.”<sup>5</sup> This egocentrism often manifests itself in a mono-perspectival approach to cognition, with adolescents tending to examine problems and dilemmas from their own perspective without considering the point-of-view of others involved. Robert Elkind notes that adolescents often develop what he refers to as a “personal fable” which belies their belief in the complete uniqueness of their own experiences.<sup>6</sup> In the journey to discover who they are, adolescents see themselves as venturing into uncharted territory -- no one has ever felt like this before! Historical understanding could potentially be impeded by adolescents absorbed in their personal fable, unable to empathize with the historical characters. Being able to think one’s way into another time, to experience life as historical characters did, is an essential part of historical understanding. Much like a novel demands the reader’s involvement with the main character, looking at the fictional world through the protagonist’s eyes, historical empathy requires the assumption of a perspective other than one’s own.

Robert Selman, who outlines the social roles that children play, developed stages of social development that differs from Erikson’s schema. He finds that at around the ages of 10-12 children begin to be able to assume a “third-person or mutual perspective.”<sup>7</sup> They are able to take a step back and watch themselves act and be acted upon, to see what an objective observer might see, all of which is different from a mono-perspectival approach. As children move into adolescence, their point-of-view shifts to what Selman refers to as “in-depth or societal perspective-taking.”<sup>8</sup> An awareness that there is a certain group perspective in their culture that makes group consensus about laws and morality possible begins to dawn. This newly-found societal perspective is responsible for the internalization of moral codes that also occurs in adolescence. Piaget

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 309.

<sup>6</sup>E. Phillip Rice, Child and Adolescent Development, New Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 352.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

refers to this taking-in of mores as a change from a morality of constraint (following rules for fear of getting caught) to a morality of cooperation (laws have come about through group consensus and need a consensus before they can be changed).<sup>9</sup> Adolescents are engaged in the world in the process of coming to know themselves, and during this time of interaction they develop a new awareness of their group or societal identity.

Erikson views this journey for self-discovery as resulting, though not completely ending, in a resolution of the internal conflicts, Industry versus Inferiority and Identity versus Identity Diffusion. Such a resolution would engender a “*feeling of competence*.”<sup>10</sup> Many psychologists have touched upon the need for children to have a sense of mastery or competence; competency and the search for identity seem inextricably bound together. In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the most important need of human beings is the need for self-actualization, and Maslow describes self-actualized people as utilizing “their talents, capacities, potentialities, etc.”<sup>11</sup> Jerome Bruner writes that competency and a sense of one’s own potency as a learner represent the driving force behind such discovery and self-actualization.<sup>12</sup> Erikson warns, though, that the flip side of competency is rage at perceived failure.<sup>13</sup> Frustration and anger are the result of not developing a sense of mastery. Adolescents, then, are not only involved in a search for identity but their psychic makeup demands that they feel useful and powerful in the identity they generate.

Carol Gilligan weaves another strand into the complex web of adolescent development. She poses the question, “Do girls and boys develop a sense of self in similar ways?” Gilligan concludes that, in fact, men and women undergo very different processes of identity development, and charts like those of Freud, Erikson, and Kohlberg classify females as underdeveloped because these charts are based on the male life cycle. Gilligan finds that boys acquire a strong sense of self by gaining mastery over what it means to be

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 364-5.

<sup>10</sup>Lefrancois, 38.

<sup>11</sup>A.H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality. New York: Harper and Row, 1970. 150.

<sup>12</sup>Bruner, 89.

<sup>13</sup>Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963. 68.

an adult male in their society and by separating and differentiating themselves from their mothers. This atomic notion of identity is the one described by Erikson in the last two stages of development in his life-cycle chart. Gilligan finds in her research, though, that girls' identity formation occurs in the context of relationships, not separation; a girl comes to know herself through relationships.<sup>14</sup> When development is characterized by separation, women are chronically underdeveloped because these theories of development do not take sex differences into account.<sup>15</sup> Gilligan finds that men and women have two very different ways of constructing morality: a female notion of morality that involves a sense of responsibility in the context of relationships or a male conception of morality that includes understanding what is right and what the rules of one's moral code dictate.<sup>16</sup> Based on Gilligan's research the importance of historical empathy is again seen; if female identity is centered on one's ability to care, then the ability to empathize with historical characters can increase female adolescents' connection with social studies. Levstik's quotation of Jennifer, a fifth-grader who enjoys historical fiction, illustrates this point:

The social studies [text]book is old and doesn't have much information in it like [fictional] books do ... and they give you a lot of information that no social studies book ever tells you.... the social studies book doesn't give you a lot of detail. *You don't imagine yourself there because they're not doing it as if it were a person.* That would be a very interesting social studies book if they told a few things about the people as if it were from their own eyes... But the textbooks don't like to be interesting especially [emphasis added].<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note, however, that researchers have stressed the importance of all students' ability to empathize with people of other historical periods.<sup>18</sup>

The research of Erikson and Gilligan focuses primarily on the social development of adolescents. But what about their intellectual development -- how do adolescents change in their cognitive capabilities? One of the first and most influential people to examine

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<sup>14</sup> Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>17</sup> Jere Brophy and Bruce VanSledright. Teaching and Learning History in Elementary Schools. New York, Teachers College Press, 1997. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 12.

children's cognitive development is Jean Piaget. The result of his research involving his own two children represents a series of developmental stages through which all children pass, and each stage is marked by "strikingly different perceptions of the world and adaptations to it."<sup>19</sup> His dialectical view of development is based on changes in knowledge and capabilities; for example, he studies the way children's understanding of the conservation of matter changes, eventually being able to recognize that if the same amount of water is poured from a tall skinny glass to a wide short glass the amount of water remains the same.<sup>20</sup>

The stage that immediately precedes adolescence in Piaget's schema is the "concrete operational stage". Children in this stage have stopped relying completely on their perceptions and intuition for information in the world around them; their thought processes are now based on rules of logic.<sup>21</sup> Instead of sensory data being their main avenue for understanding the world, children who are concrete operational have internalized a system of logic that can override their perceptions. They can now distinguish that the two differently-shaped glasses contain the same amount of water even though the amounts may look different. At this stage children can also group items into classes and understand the concepts of seriation and of number, and with these abilities Piaget asserts that children can differentiate between historical epochs -- ancient times, the more recent past, and the present time. Concrete operational children, however, are still tied to the real world, unable to deal with theoretical situations or hypothetical thought.<sup>22</sup>

Once adolescents become "formal operative", they are no longer bound to the world of the concrete. "Formal operative" thought is characterized by its flexibility; if after constructing a hypothesis based on one's observations one realizes it is not valid, this same person can consider other possibilities and either modify the existing construct or compose

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<sup>19</sup> Lefrancois, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 40.



a new one.<sup>23</sup> One is now able to consider not only what is, but what could be, and this ability to see the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal accounts for the intense idealism of adolescence. There is usually a gap, though, between adolescents' behavior and their professed moral beliefs, which Elkind attributes to adolescents lacking the experience necessary to translate general moral beliefs into concrete action.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent psychologists have found problems in Piaget's work. Many feel that "formal operative" might be more characteristic of the ages of fifteen to twenty instead of eleven to fifteen.<sup>25</sup> Bauman found in 1978 that only about 40% of the population had reached the formal operative stage by the time they graduated from high school, and Arlin and later Kuhn found that only 50% of adults were fully formal operational.<sup>26</sup> Piaget maintains that the characterization of ages 11 to 15 as formal operational is correct because there is an increase in the use of formal operational thought at this age, even if they have not completely entered the formal operational stage. Samson concludes that cognitive abilities develop gradually, without definitive breakthrough points as Piaget's schema sometimes suggests.<sup>27</sup> Others have leveled criticisms at Piaget for formulating his theories around thinking in the natural sciences, making it difficult to apply them to the social sciences. Historical thinking is qualitatively different from scientific thinking which attempts to formulate theories that generalize based on details; historical thinking is both non-linear and does not attempt broad generalizations. In the words of one social scientist, 'history is about unique particulars.'<sup>28</sup> Despite these criticisms Piaget's work is considered seminal in the world of cognitive psychology because, as Bruner writes, he realized that "an intrinsic and self-contained logic characterizes mental operations at any stage of development."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rice, 419.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 421.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Brophy and VanSledright, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>29</sup> Bruner, 8.

Bruner, another pioneer in the field of cognitive psychology, focuses on the “process of knowing.”<sup>30</sup> How do children come to know things and what is the most effective way of guiding children to discovery and knowledge? In response to the first of these queries, Bruner emphasizes discovery and creativity -- flip sides of the same coin. Bruner equates learning with discovery, the process of “finding out.” Through the exercise of problem-solving students make discoveries, and expository teaching that emphasizes the facts does not allow students to *do* the learning, to discover.<sup>31</sup> The creative act of inventing, on the other hand, occurs in the context of detachment, when it is possible to divorce oneself from the obvious and the known -- Bruner refers to this process as “journeying without maps.”<sup>32</sup> The creative act is important to students because it gives them a sense of mastery, of competence. This sense of potency comes from going from a superficial understanding of a subject to a profound grasp of it, profound enough to allow a student to not only manipulate the subject but also generate a new creation according to the rules of narrative which they have internalized.

As for the most effective strategy of imparting knowledge, Bruner raises the question of how one can teach the heuristics of discovery and creation. Bruner finds two steps to be essential. The first is for the teacher to reduce the simpler structures that make up a concept so that the concept can be presented to the child in a “honest though imprecise manner.”<sup>33</sup> For example, in examining a historical event, one might break the event down and look at the economics, politics, demographics, literature, ideology, art, science, etc. that might have influenced or led to this event. Bruner envisages a “spiral curriculum” where one keeps presenting the concept to a child as he ages, each time presenting the idea with more precision and technical vocabulary until the student masters the concept.<sup>34</sup> The second half of facilitating learning involves trying to find the language to explain a concept

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

that the learner would use in explaining the concept to the teacher. Bruner also emphasizes depth over breadth, helping students to form the organizational structures they need to support new knowledge.<sup>35</sup> The structure of knowledge is especially important in the teaching of social studies. Loewen decries the uselessness of having children memorize history factoids without a sense of context. He gives the example of how indecipherable slavery or racism is without understanding the socioeconomic or ideological structures that underlie them.<sup>36</sup> Halldan points out that children naturally tend to give “personifying” explanations, focusing on the exploits of a well-known historical figure, but in doing this they miss the structural explanations for the historical phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> Teaching children how to learn is more essential to Bruner than the children memorizing hundreds of unconnected factoids -- knowing how to learn gives students the means to discover that which they want to know.

## **Teaching History**

Understanding the children who fill the classroom seats is an integral part of being a teacher, but unless the teachers have a firm understanding of the subject, they cannot be an effective teacher. To risk stating the obvious, teachers must know the discipline which they are trying teach. Yet when social studies curriculum is being developed, historians are rarely consulted yet most needed. As two social studies experts have written:

It is critical for history teachers to understand that their subject is a scholarly activity. Scholars ask questions. Their answers are necessarily tentative and subject to revision. To teach history merely as a body of information to be set to memory is an injustice to the discipline itself, as well as to the students.<sup>38</sup>

In order to teach history teachers must understand what history encompasses, including its methodology, assumptions, and concepts.

One of the dangers of history taught without disciplinary understanding is what one historian called “empirical history.”<sup>39</sup> Practitioners of this sort of history approach the past

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>James Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me. New York: Touchstone Press, 1995. 143.

<sup>37</sup>Brophy and VanSledright, 21.

<sup>38</sup>Brophy and Vansledright, 32.

<sup>39</sup>E.H. Carr, What Is History? London:L Macmillan Press, 1961. xix.

with the scientific method, hoping to educe “the facts” by using the correct method: objective quantification will lead to a clear, accurate picture of the past. Sir George Clark resists this notion of “ultimate history” because:

knowledge of the past has come down through one or more human minds, has been processed by them, and therefore cannot consist of elemental and impersonal atoms which nothing can alter ... all historical judgments involve persons and points-of-views ... there is no objective historical truth.<sup>40</sup>

History, in the end, consists of historians who are products of their historical and social environs, sifting through a variety of sources to produce what he or she feels is the most accurate version of the past. No matter how careful the historian is, though, this final picture still will not be History with a capital H because evidence always comes from humans who can never be a hundred percent objective. Historians cannot simply compile facts, and the subsequent choosing and ordering of facts necessarily involves critical interpretation. E.H. Carr bemoans this “belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently” of the historians’ interpretation, calling it a “preposterous fallacy” while realizing that it is a commonly-held fallacy.

If there is no objective historical truth why do textbooks teach history as if there were? Most history texts are tomes (the average is 888 pages and 4 1/2 pounds)<sup>41</sup> that present their portrait of the past as a fate-driven morality play, eliminating all the dilemmas and possibilities that the historical actors faced. When the different causes of historical events are eliminated, the average 888 pages become nothing but unconnected, de-contextualized factoids. History then becomes a process of rote memorization of disembodied information, nothing like the qualitative process of interpretation that Carr described. History without critical thinking or interpretation devolves into something that bears no resemblance to the academic discipline known as history.

Many social studies educators have looked at ways to return academic integrity to social studies, to re-introduce the historical method into the classroom. Many social studies

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>41</sup>Loewen, 14.

experts affirm Bruner's idea that depth is more important than breadth, that one must choose certain areas on which to concentrate rather than memorize pages of facts. He uses the image of "postholing" which involves delving deep into the chosen areas of study.<sup>42</sup> Pausing for a time with one aspect of history allows the teacher to contextualize the information, showing both what is different in this time and what is a continuation of the time before. Contextualization also includes providing a structural explanation of the historical event -- how societal, economic, political or ideological factors affected this event. History has never occurred in a vacuum, and students need to understand the historical context to understand why events unfolded in such a fashion. If students fail to grasp how societal structures affected history they are doomed to view the present as inexplicable and immutable.

Another important facet of learning to be a historian is historical empathy. As the great historian R.G. Collingwood wrote, "History is the re-enactment in the historian's mind of the thought whose history he is studying."<sup>43</sup> This "re-enactment of thought," of thinking oneself into the mindset of historical actors is an important part of historical understanding.<sup>44</sup> To consider what it was like to be an individual in the past allows adolescents to exercise hypothetical thinking skills that are otherwise not engaged in sheer memorization. Many social studies teachers use historical fiction to facilitate this assumption of the historical actor's perspective since readers naturally assume the protagonist's perspective. However, some educators warn that adolescents' tendency to overpersonify history could be reinforced by fictionalized historical accounts told from a single perspective. Historical empathy is a difficult thing since it is not mere emotional response, of which all children are capable, but the taking on of another's perspective, which requires early adolescents to think hypothetically -- "What would my life be like if I lived in fifteenth-century England?"

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<sup>42</sup>Bruce VanSledright, "Can More Be Less?" Social Education 61(1) 1997. 38.

<sup>43</sup>Carr, 16.

<sup>44</sup>Brophy and VanSledright, 12.

The critical thinking skills, the ability to assume another perspective, and a healthy skepticism, all skills learned through using the historical method, are powerful tools that students can use when examining the world in which they live. When students begin to view the past as “contingent upon the actions of people,” they stop viewing the present with passive acceptance.<sup>45</sup> They can examine the structures that make up their society, and perhaps find ways to alter these structures as a means to effecting a change. They can examine the information that television, books, the radio, and increasingly the Internet provide with a critical eye, and notice how the world has changed and how it has stayed the same. History, in a sense, contextualizes the present. Once students learn to use the historical method to orient themselves in their world, they gain a sense of their own potency as learners, leading them to feel competent and masterful.

### **Listening to Students**

The previous pages detail what psychologists, educators, and historians have written about adolescents and history. But what do adolescents think about studying history? Six seventh and eighth-grade students were asked to talk about their experiences with learning history both inside and outside of the classroom. These students have been studying history for nearly three to four years according to Tennessee State Department of Education curriculum guidelines. What sort of historical understanding do they possess after these years of study? What represents their entry points into an enjoyment of the discipline -- was it a particular historical content or a certain teacher's method of teaching? In order to develop a responsible theory of instruction for teaching history to early adolescents, the research and theories of the first part of this paper need to be integrated with an understanding of how some adolescents have come to enjoy learning about the past.

In order to understand the process of learning history from the perspective of an adolescent, the interviews were structured according to the methodology of naturalistic

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<sup>45</sup>Loewen, 126.

inquiry. This method of investigation is qualitative, involving “long, open-ended conversations in which the aim is to understand a particular situation, event or activity from the point of view of the person being interviewed.”<sup>46</sup> The naturalistic interview is fluid, allowing the respondents’ views, perceptions, and concerns to surface. The students interviewed are a mix of seventh and eighth-graders from both public and private schools. They are part of a religious education class at a local church, and each agreed to be interviewed when approached by the interviewer. Their names have all been changed to insure the anonymity of their responses. The student interviews were conducted individually and each lasted less than thirty minutes. The interviews were each tape-recorded and later transcribed. The transcriptions allow the interviewer to use methods of narrative analysis to look for themes or patterns that run throughout the interviews. Since the goal of such inquiry is discovery, the themes that emerge are not necessarily the a priori concerns of the interviewer.

When the students were asked to describe the time when they most enjoyed learning history, six of the seven students couched their response in terms of deviance from the norm. Their favorite experiences with history all took place in the classroom, but these experiences were anomalies because of the teacher. The teachers who sparked the students’ interests were notable because they were different from the students’ other social studies teachers. Carol prefaces her introduction of her favorite history teacher by pointing out how he was different: “ Well, in sixth and seventh grades I had really bad teachers, and they would just say do this page in the book, and then they’d grade it. But this year I have a really good history teacher.” Mark notes that his three previous teachers had all taught just using the textbook whereas his current history teacher uses the newspapers more than the textbook which relates current events the students know about to past events with which they are less familiar. The particular characteristics that the six students noted as setting their favorite experiences apart all had certain elements in common.

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<sup>46</sup>Constance Ann Mellon, Naturalistic Inquiry in Library Science. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990. 47.

Every student's favorite teacher was exceptional in his or her *presentation* of the material. Unlike Mark or Carol's previous teachers who merely assigned pages from the textbook, these teachers actively, personally present the material. The presentations take many forms, varying from teacher to teacher. Mark's teacher brings cut-out newspaper articles to class and uses them as jumping-off points to talking about the past. The teacher Dave enjoyed the most used lectures to tell them about history, beginning every lecture with a story. Other students mentioned their teachers using narrative to draw them into learning about history. All of these teachers personally relate the information to their students instead of conducting what Jennifer, who admittedly does not enjoy history, typifies as a normal social studies class: coming into class, reading the chapter out loud, taking notes on the chapter, and completing a packet of worksheets. When Carol's teacher tells them about the past, she said it was not only "interesting," but also "it's like he was actually there, so he's really good at telling a story and drawing us into it." Oral narrative seems to educate the students' historical empathy much in the way that historical fiction does.

The students' involvement in the material leads them to seek out information not only in the library when they research but also in the classroom through questioning. Mark says the teacher's lectures and stories are easier to understand than the text because "you are hearing from a person ... and you can ask questions so you can know more about it." Carol mentions three times in the course of the interview the importance of teachers answering questions -- "he just set it up so it was really easy for us to understand and we could ask any question." The creation of a stimulating and provocative environment leads to inquiries from the students who want clarification and more information; good presentation by the teacher and thoughtful avenues for student participation seem naturally to lead to the framing of questions, and students feel that it is very important that their questions be answered or channeled in some way.

Another enjoyable characteristic of learning history is the element of participation on their part. Jack's latest assignment in his favorite class is the creation of a trip through



France, telling about the different cities and historical sites and tracing the route taken via an overhead projector. Carol's class conducts debates over topics they have studied.

Jennifer, who describes history classes in general as "boring," recalls the two times she enjoyed history. The first was during Sixties Week when her class researched some aspect of the decade and presented it dressed in period clothing, and the second was a unit on ancient Mayan cultures where her class split into villages and learned about Mayan life. She enjoyed these two experiences because "it wasn't from a textbook or anything, and we actually got to learn interesting things instead of the history of the United States government ... We actually got to do the stuff." Doing the stuff, by recreating some aspect of material culture or researching a class presentation, seems to increase the immediacy of the historical period for Jennifer more than the usual reading aloud of the chapter. The acts of participation described by the students allow them to be creative, to think of hypothetical situations, and to seek out the information in which they are more interested.

Some of the students attribute their interest in certain historical periods to the thoroughness with which the teacher covered the unit. Carol reports her favorite unit is on the United States constitution. She explains that her teacher spent an hour and a half a day for two and half weeks examining the different articles and amendments with them and discussing how these relate to their rights as citizens, thus making the curriculum relevant to them. Jennifer, later in the interview, remembered she also liked history "when we studied a specific person in West Virginia history." There is always a dilemma of depth versus breadth in history, whether it is best to try to spend more time on fewer subjects or to cover more periods in less detail. None of the students mention the latter, but all give examples of their detailed knowledge about a certain subject. Bruner and other educators have advocated a "depth" approach to teaching, and the students' responses support this position.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Bruner, 108.

These students, who would be characterized as “formal operative” according to Piaget and “egocentric” according to Erikson, possess a sophisticated appreciation for good history. However unconsciously, they have responded to methods of teaching that treat history as a scholarly discipline. The different projects described so enthusiastically make it difficult for social studies to become a process of rote memorization. For Carol to participate in a debate, she had to consider what her opponent might ask her, and Jennifer had to imagine the conditions in pre-Conquest Mexico to set up a trade network between Mayan villages. They asked questions about the teacher’s presentations. Their teachers create ways for them to participate that demands not only creativity but also hypothesis-making and problem-setting. The fact that they enjoyed these assignments shows that are able to successfully deal with the demands of abstract thought that Piaget suggests they are not ready for.

The students’ understanding of history includes most of the elements that historians see as integral to the discipline. None of them spoke of wanting to know “the answer” or “the real truth” concerning history. They in fact chafed at the authoritative tone of the textbook, preferring stories, discussion and their own research to the text. Not a single student mentioned an historical figure when discussing their favorite history experiences; no one oversimplified history into a pageant of historical figures. They also demonstrated that they could separate themselves from their own point-of-view in order to empathize with people from another period. Two boys mentioned how their understanding of slavery emerged from non-comprehension to understanding what the slaves’ lives must have in part been like through reading slave narratives and visiting a plantation: their adolescent search for an identity did not impede their historical empathy. Only Carol, however, indicated explicitly that she had some understanding of the structural underpinnings of history. Unfortunately, even some college-level history majors often fail to understand how societal structures influence the course of history. The six middle school students possessed an impressive understanding of a subject that demands much of

them as adolescents cognitively and psychologically. They seem more than prepared for the abstract thought and different perspectives of good history; moreover they seem to naturally like history when it is taught well. History is taught in the middle schools in a thoughtful manner that highlights complexity, and such history seems to be developmentally appropriate for adolescents.

## **Conclusion**

I began this project wanting to know if history in middle schools could contain the complexity and depth of the history classes I have encountered in college and if such complexity and depth is appropriate for adolescents. The most recently-published research in cognitive psychology and social studies seems to indicate that the answer to both these questions is “yes,” and the students’ experiences support these findings. The students respond to the teachers’ attempts to draw them into the material, and they seem to enjoy assuming a historical perspective. Far from being too self-absorbed to empathize with historical characters, they seem to be very curious about other people in other times. They enjoy depth in terms of detail -- this provides them with a sense of mastery, that they can use their knowledge of geography or United States history in conversations and people will be impressed. They enjoy “doing” the learning themselves instead of memorizing what someone wants them to learn. An appropriate theory of instruction for teaching history in the middle schools should incorporate these notions of the teacher’s personalized presentation of the material and students’ active participation in learning.

The research and study also offer certain challenges. How can history teachers incorporate a structural understanding of history into their classrooms while still keeping the history relevant to their students’ lives? How can teachers connect history with their students’ lives while still conveying the idea that people in the past have thought in different ways than we do now? For many teachers understanding history as a discipline is a life-long pursuit, but even the pursuit of such understanding will provide a model of learning for students. More than anything else, the students’ stories and examples demonstrated

that the teacher's enthusiasm begets student enthusiasm, and love of learning begets love of learning.

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