

Girls Can Be President

Generating Interest in an Inclusive History

Melinda Kames

As a public school teacher for eight years, and now as an associate professor of education, I have always searched for ways to interest and engage young students in their history lessons. During the 1997-1998 school year, I asked a dedicated group of ten pre-service teachers and their mentors (“teachers” hereafter) to informally poll students about their attitudes toward social studies instruction. The students, in the third through eighth grades, were from rural and small town settings, a mix of poor and wealthy, male and female, white and minority. The districts were generally not able to afford much computer hardware, so although most of the teachers were savvy with regard to technology, they usually had to depend heavily on textbooks.

The teachers and I constructed a short, basic questionnaire (see box) that students completed anonymously. We found that the 274 students (in the third through the eighth grades) perceived the relation between their lives and history to be weak. On a scale of 1 to 5 (the score of 5 indicating the highest degree of interest and relevance), 92 percent of the respondents ranked their classes low, with a score of only 1 or 2.

These results supported teachers’

general observation that students were having trouble relating to social studies instruction. It was no surprise that they had heard comments such as “Why do we have to study these old white guys?” “I don’t remember anything from that class.” “Why aren’t there more stories for me?”

A Call to Action

The service teachers, concerned about these results and determined to make their own teaching relevant to young students, wanted to develop a more inclusive “action philosophy.” They decided to focus on women’s issues as a beginning, but admitting that their own knowledge in this area was not strong, they began researching and reading about that topic—and also examined the classroom textbooks.

In a 1987 issue of *Social Education*, Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault analyzed the ways in which women and gender were portrayed in social studies texts and curricula.¹ The service teachers summarized the five “phases of thinking about women in history” described by Tetreault in this way:

1. Male-defined history — The

absence of women in the historical record is not noticed, and male experience is considered the only knowledge worth having;

- 2. Contribution history** — The absence of women on the “main stage” is noted, but only in the male-defined context of what determines greatness;
- 3. Bifocal history** — This dualistic approach to history describes the contributions of males and females, leading to the understanding that the male experience has been dominant;
- 4. Histories of women** — This multi-



Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the second and first presidents (respectively) of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association. (1890)

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Students Rank Interest and Relevance

1. I was not interested in the study.
2. I was somewhat interested in the study.
3. I can see the reasons for such a study and can identify with the content.
4. The study is relevant to my life, and I found the unit interesting.
5. The study is extremely relevant and very interesting.



Ruth Muskrat, a Cherokee Indian, presents President Calvin Coolidge with a copy of *The Red Man in the United States*, a survey of American Indian life. (1923)

faceted concept of women recognizes that there are other factors (besides sex) that shape lives, such as socio-economic phase, class, and personal characteristics;

5. **Histories of gender** — This perspective weaves male and female contributions together based on common denominators of experience, citing the particulars of motivation and accomplishment.

Content Analysis

With the use of Tetreault's scale, the teachers first examined the content of our primary sources for teaching, the textbooks. They found that these texts (primarily published in the late 1980s) generally omitted pertinent information on women's accomplishments. They found that most of the information about female contributions appeared to be "added on" to content that the students perceived as "the really important stuff." Historical pictures of females were included with little explanation of their significance. Written information on the daily lives of people of the past, and the interaction between men and women to improve society, was scant at best. The teachers concluded that much of the text describing

female contributions was trivialized, and, in their opinion, barely reached phase 2 on Tetreault's scale.

We ordered samples of new texts, and found that to add the "cultural and gender element," authors briefly mentioned one or two women in a chapter. The teachers thought that this was still not enough information to reach the level of understanding that they hoped to achieve. New social

studies texts were not a purchasing priority for the districts. Updating course material seemed a monumental task at this point in the careers of these teachers, but they decided to try, beginning with the units they were teaching.

Planning and Preparation

The teachers set as a goal creating units of study that would include particular accomplishments by men and women, as well as a description of everyday life during the era of study.² For example, a unit on inventions included innovations created and used by men and women of different ethnicity and social class. Political leaders were studied, inclusive of physical disabilities, gender, social class, and religion. The concept of "nations" was presented from the indigenous point of view, as well as the conqueror's point of view. The everyday lives of people were examined as well as those of the great and mighty. Some unsuccessful attempts at leadership and reform were included as well as successes.

Teaching Methods

Early in the year, the teachers taught what they considered to be Phase 5 (on Tetreault's scale) units of study in ten classes in the third through eighth grades. Half way through the year, however, students in seven of these classes evaluated the lessons

as not interesting or relevant. The teachers decided not to disregard their work so far on improving the content of the lessons, but to turn to the pedagogy and environmental concerns in an attempt to increase student interest.

In teaching a unit about national documents of the United States, one teacher had prepared an additional lesson about the 1848 "Declaration of Sentiments" of the Women's Rights Movement.³ It was a wonderful lesson filled with active learning exercises, but it was perceived as a "tag-on" to the lessons about the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution. Students remarked, "Another one? [sigh]" and "What does this have to do with what we studied?" The teacher was dismayed.

It's not just what we say, but how we say it. By stating, "Now we are going to study another document, the Declaration of Sentiments," the teacher had made clear to the students that they had "wandered away" from the traditional curriculum. The perception was that this new information was not going to prove to be important. We concluded that the lesson had fallen to Phase 2 (Contribution History)—the Women's Rights document was viewed as an appendage, not as a central part of the body of history. That example prompted a discussion of similar disappointments, leading the group



Programmer Grace Hopper is responsible for the computer term "bug." The original bug was a moth that caused a hardware fault in the Mark I computer. (1945)

to conclude that its teaching methodology must be changed.

Through a series of trial and error situations, the teachers found that no matter what the topic of the social studies unit, they achieved the most success when the information was presented in something close to chronological order, thus avoiding the appearance of assigning some sort of priority to any one example, event, or person. Timelines, developed by the students, became more important, and the teachers began to use thematic eras as the basis for units. Students could then compare everyday life with major accomplishments, coordinating the time chronology in their minds, thus creating an understandable setting to which they could relate. For example, if national documents were the topic of a unit, the teachers presented all of the documents in chronological order, and students discussed each document's particular contribution to society.

The teachers also used Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligence* as one basis for their instruction.⁴ When their pedagogy was varied (that is, not always a lecture or discussion), the students were more engaged. There appeared to be a "natural" connection between the infused inclusive content the teachers were presenting and a more inclusive holistic pedagogy, appealing to various styles of learning. The numerous teacher workshop materials based on Gardner's theory presented a wealth of ideas that provided avenues for connecting teaching techniques with the historical information to be learned.

Classroom Environment

A poster of the U.S. presidents, displayed in a third grade classroom, had an empty frame in one corner with a question underneath, "Could this be you?" A girl looked it over and said, "I'd like to be President some day," to which a boy responded, "You



The first female U.S. astronaut Sally Ride answers questions for ABC TV's "Nightline" in a NASA laboratory. (1983)

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

can't. You're a girl." The teacher interjected, explaining that a person does not have to be male to be president, it just happens that all of the presidents so far have been male. The boy scoffed, "Look at the pictures," and walked off.

Later, we discussed this event, concluding that the classroom environment was important, maybe no less than the content of the lessons or the teaching methods. The event also inspired the teacher—not to lecture on the requirements of being president, but to teach a unit on job qualifications, presenting careers spanning all walks of life, infusing materials throughout the unit that were cross-cultural and gender inclusive. Of course, she was also inspired to redesign the classroom environment appropriately for the unit, including posters, books, articles, and teacher materials that portrayed a cross-section of citizens working at various jobs (including the presidency). By the end of the unit, the classroom was full of visuals, videos, slides, music, student-created newspapers, and other projects portraying

the idea that the career market is, or at least can be, gender-inclusive.

Results of Interest

At the end of 1998, the same questionnaire was administered to the same groups of students in the third through the eighth grades. The results were gratifying: No student ranked any class in the lowest two points of the five-point scale of interest and relevance; 34 percent of the students gave their classes a score of three, 53 percent gave a four, and 13 percent awarded a five, "The study was extremely relevant and very interesting."

The teachers summarized their efforts by stating the three components of teaching that seemed to be correlated with student interest.

1. Improve the content of the lessons so as to include not only the successes of white males, but also the achievements of, and challenges faced by, men and women at all levels of society in a given age. Present information chronologically, not ranked by "importance." Aim for Phase 5 of Tetreault's scale, to "define what binds together and what separates the various segments of society."
2. Strive to use various materials and sources (for example, videos, historical fiction for young people, online resources, the library, and the local historical society) and different methods of teaching and assessing (as described by Gardner and others).
3. Create a classroom environment that reflects the content of the unit of study and presents a welcoming face to every child in the class.

Earlier in the year, these teachers tried to change all of their units to be in accordance with a new organizing principle or teaching technique. They got frustrated because they were trying to do too much and were not seeing results. They found



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The caption to this photo of abolitionist Sojourner Truth reads, "I sell the shadow to support the substance." (1883)

that, by using this three-component strategy to revise one unit at a time, the work load was not overbearing and the results were rewarding for the teacher and student.

These three components are goals, not requirements. Not every lesson can be a blockbuster, and there is not always time to enrich the course material. But by taking a

more active role themselves, these teachers appeared to have raised the interest—and maybe even the expectations—of their students in the field of social studies. 🌐

Notes

1. Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, "Rethinking Women, Gender and the Social Studies," *Social Education* 51, No. 3 (March 1987): pp. 170-

178. Useful tables, with "questions commonly asked in each phase," are on pp. 172 and 173.
2. Books that provided a rich, inclusive history include Joy Hakim, *A History of US* (New York: Oxford University Press Children's Books, ten volumes, 1999); Christine Lunardini, *What Every American Should Know About Women's History* (Holbrook, MA: Bob Adams, Inc., 1994); Wilma Mankiller, Gwendolyn Mink, Marysa Navarro, Barbara Smith, Gloria Steinem (eds.), *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to the Present* (New York: Harper Perennial Library, 1995); *The Twentieth Century: A People's History* (New York: Harper Perennial Library, 1998). There is a comprehensive list of resources in *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*, Linda Christensen, Stan Karp, Bill Bigelow, Barbara Miner (eds.), (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 1994). See also the sidebar of websites in this article.
3. "Declaration of Sentiments," in *Report of the Woman's Rights Convention, 1848* (Seneca Falls, New York). www.closeup.org/sentimnt.htm
4. There are many interpretations of Howard Gardner's original work, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). Gardner himself has expanded his offerings with two key titles, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); and *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). There are also numerous workshops based on Gardner's theory. Perhaps the most prolific series comes from Sunlight Publishers, including David Lazear's works such as *The Eight Ways of Knowing* (Palatine, IL: Skylight Publishing, 1999).

About the Author

Melinda Karnes is an associate professor at the School of Education at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

Useful websites include the National Women's Hall of Fame at www.greatwomen.org,



which has a great list of resources; the National Women's History Project at www.nwhp.org, which promotes inclusive history through newsletters and teaching projects; and the search directory of Women Online at www.women.com, which is useful for research on specific topics.