



History Students Going Beyond the Book

Teaching Program Encourages Using Original Sources

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To Danny Thau and his colleague David Burns, it seemed like a fruitful avenue of inquiry: What would have happened to the planet if Ike hadn't launched D-Day exactly when he did--56 years ago today? First they called the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library in Kansas and got hold of rarely seen letters in which Eisenhower takes sole responsibility for the invasion of Europe. Then they went to the National Archives and other libraries to dig through documents, logged onto the Internet and tracked down veterans.

Their conclusion: The Allies might have lost to Hitler if the invasion had not occurred on that very day.

Thau and Burns may sound like professional historians, but they are 15-year-old students at Deal Junior High School in the District. They spent about 20 hours of their spare time on the D-Day research as part of a year-long program involving 600,000 middle and high school students nationwide. Known as National History Day, the program will culminate next week when Thau, Burns and 2,000 other finalists display their research projects at the University of Maryland at College Park.

More than a student competition, National History Day is a campaign to change the way history is taught across the United States. Participating teachers are trained, through workshops and curriculum guides, to stop relying on history textbooks and to send their students to library and museum archives so they can research history just as scholars do.

"The textbook provides the factual information, in chronological order, and that's it," said Cathy Gorn, a U-Md. associate history professor and National History Day's executive director. "History teachers have to use other kinds of information . . . to provide students

with more in-depth understanding."

A debate long has raged among academics over whether history lessons should stress content--important dates, names, places--or the process of historical inquiry and analysis. Gorn and other historians say the National History Day approach, because of its rigorous standards, combines both those elements. Students who do independent research on, say, the Greek victory over Xerxes at Salamis in 480 B.C. will need to know the names and dates associated with the battle and also be able to analyze the role of Themistocles.

In most cases, the projects are done outside regular class assignments. But history teachers who have been through the training say it has had a major impact on their teaching, prompting them to use literature and primary source documents in a way they never did before.

Joan Williams, a teacher at Putnam County Middle School in Eatonton, Ga., who took the training last summer, said she now assigns the novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" as a bridge to the history of the Civil War and uses primary documents she assembled based on reading "Battle Cry of Freedom."

So why aren't more teachers routinely employing these techniques?

One reason is that many teachers weren't properly trained in the field while they were students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 81 percent of social studies teachers did not major or minor in history while in college. In no other subject is there such a large deficit in teachers' educational background.

Another problem is that many states pay little attention to history in their curriculum standards for kindergarten through 12th grade, burying it under a "social studies" heading (Illinois gives it the same status as anthropology and economics, for example). The architects of these standards tend to view history as a mostly irrelevant "pastology" that is useful only when it can enhance lessons on current events, said John Pyne, a historian and New Jersey educator.

Things don't get much better at the college level. A recently released report by the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** says that students at 55 top U.S. colleges can graduate without taking an American history course--and in most cases without any history.

Poll after poll shows that most Americans are historically illiterate; the latest came last month when the Gallup Youth Survey reported that only four in 10 teenagers knew that 1492 was the year Columbus discovered America.

Gorn's organization seeks to change all that. Students select a topic and a thesis based on a national theme--this year's theme is "Turning Points in History"--do their research and then present their project in a format of their choice, such as a paper, video or exhibit board.

Some teachers assign all their students to participate, but most make it voluntary. The students can work alone or with others.

Thau was fascinated with World War II because his great-uncle was a veteran, and he and Burns produced an exhibit board. Paul Matthews, 15, who attends the private Lab School in the District, made a computer documentary about George Washington Carver.

Crystal Esaw, 18, a five-time History Day participant from Cheraw, S.C., tracked down one of the first three blacks to be served lunch at the Greensboro, N.C., Woolworth's during the 1960s civil rights protests, and she wrote a skit in which she performs.

Thousands of students in the Washington area participate--with access to important document troves that others across the country don't have. The National Museum of American History, for example, opens its archives to D.C. public school students on Saturdays upon request.

Prince George's County reflects the program's growing popularity. Three years ago, only 150 students participated. This year, 3,500 did so, with 10 entries reaching the nationals.

National History Day is sponsored by the Civil War Trust, the American Battle Monuments Commission, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and other organizations.

The rules require students to incorporate many methods of research, so those who like to use the Internet for "one-stop shopping" are out of luck.

For historical research, the Internet is both a blessing and a curse, teachers say. Although it has opened up vast amounts of information, many archives have put only 1 to 2 percent of their holdings online.

For some participants, the results of the competition already have been dramatic. Thau wound up donating \$500 he had saved from his bar mitzvah to a planned World War II memorial in Washington. Wesley Bennett, 15, at the Lab School, said his multimedia documentary on D-Day changed his life. "I got confidence that I could do this kind of work, and my grades went up in everything," he said.

The same thing happened to Matthews, who is also in the finals. He has dyslexia and had to labor to do all the required reading.

"I learned you can't give up. You have to go in-depth to understand things," he said. "It was hard for me, but I wanted to do it and set my mind to it. I thought, 'If I don't do it any other time in my entire life, at least I've done it once.' Who would have suspected it would go this far?"

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