Writing History: 
Before and After Portfolios

by

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Before

Text Question: Despite laws passed during Reconstruction, southern African Americans lost civil rights and did not regain them until the 1960s. Explain why.

Typical Answer: The reason that African Americans lost their civil rights and did not regain them until the 1960s was because of how gerrymandering stopped them and it also had to do with what happened when the Ku Klux Klan terrorized them after the Union troops did not protect them and also the poll tax helped.

After

Portfolio Response:

(This week) we studied the “Era of Reconstruction,” of the U.S. At the end of the Civil War, most African Americans expected their lives to improve radically. The following is a quote about how a former slave recalled the excitement she and other slaves felt when they learned of the Union victory and their new freedom. I selected this quote and wrote about it because it holds a particular meaning and interest for me.

“We weren’t there in Texas long when the soldiers marched in to tell us that we were free ... I remem-

ber one woman. She jumped on a barrel and she shouted. She jumped off and she shouted. She jumped back on again and she shouted some more. She kept that up for a long time, just jumping on a barrel and back off again.”

— Anna Woods, from a Federal Writer’s Project interview, 1930s

It made me smile when I mentally pictured how this African American woman (and maybe many others like her) reacted to their freedom. However my smile didn’t last long because I realized that the word “freedom” that was given to slaves didn’t agree with the way I had personally defined it. I wouldn’t say freed slaves received their freedom after the war because they were still being chained up by laws that prevented them from having the same “rights, privileges, and immunities” as were enjoyed by white men. To me, slave’s freedom was like letting your pet bird go free with a rock tied to his legs.

May

During my first years of teaching U.S. History, there were too many times that I returned papers to students only to have them glance at their grade and then toss them in the trash can as they left the room. Much of the student writing I was reading during these
years looked nothing like May’s. Rather — as the first example above illustrates — it was, at best, the textbook or encyclopedia rearranged and paraphrased in not always grammatical sentences and, at worst, these and other books copied word for word. Many students probably had little idea about what they had written and forgot it the minute it was out of sight. That I had to read and comment on this writing made this situation even worse. What could I say? I have no doubt that many students worked hard on their assignments, but in the end, they really didn’t care about the words they were writing down. Some students even asked me, as they prepared to write, “Do you want this in my own words?” It was a very frustrating situation for both teacher and students. The student writing was not at all like the historical writing that I enjoyed and hoped, as a teacher, my students would learn to appreciate and create.

"Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the condition uppermost in its time."

— Frederick J. Turner

These were discouraging moments, but they started me thinking about the possibility of developing lessons and activities which might move students to write pieces that they would want to keep and even read again with appreciation and insight. I began taking steps toward what was to become the “history portfolio” project.

An article published in American Heritage magazine (December, 1984) influenced me as I moved along this path. The magazine had asked a number of working historians to write about the one event in American history they would like to have witnessed. At what event would they have wanted to be a “fly on a wall”? The responses included in the article were engaging, moving, thoughtful, and personal. The passage below provides an example.

Emancipation

The incident that I would have witnessed is that described in Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s Army Life in a Black Regiment. He writes of a ceremony in South Carolina on January 1, 1863, celebrating the coming into effect of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The ceremony was conventional and simple until Higginson got up to speak and waved the American flag before the audience of black soldiers, white civilians and officers, and a large number of slaves, who at the moment were legally receiving their freedom for the first time. As the flag was being waved, Higginson tells us, “there arose ... a strong male voice (but rather cracked and elderly), into which two women’s voices instantly blended, singing as if by an impulse that could no more be repressed than the morning note of the song sparrow, ‘My Country, ’tis of thee, Sweet land of Liberty, of thee I sing!’”

The ceremony ended as the former slaves sang on, irrepressibly, through verse and verse. Higginson motioned the few whites who began to join in to be silent. The moment, as he said, was electric. “Nothing could be more wonderfully unconscious; art could not have dreamt of a tribute to the day of jubilee that should be so affecting; history will not believe it....” This incident epitomizes the most profound moment in America’s social history: that point when millions ceased to be slaves in the home of the free and set in motion the historic challenge that white America make real its own vision.

— Carl N. Degler, historian

This passage illustrates many important elements of historical thinking and writing: narrative and description, analysis and interpretation. The question itself — “tell us about one event in American history you would like to have witnessed” — directs the writer to be selective and to have a point of view. This focus on selection calls to mind historian Mauricio Tenner’s distinction between “history” and “the past.” The past, he says, is everything that has happened. It is impersonal, existing outside of our personal consciousness or experience. On the other hand, history is shaped when students or historians look at the past and consciously choose to study or discuss events, individuals, and groups they believe to be significant. The famous historian Frederick J. Turner put it this way: “Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the condition uppermost in its time.” If we follow this line of thinking, one conclusion might be that when historians choose to study, analyze, and explain parts of the past, their choices reflect a personal interest or connection. This is exactly the opposite of what seemed to motivate the student writing I was reading in my history classes.
I wanted my students to learn to select from the past, to build personal connections to history. I reasoned that they would be able to do this if I allowed them more choice. I began to encourage — actually require — students to think about their readings, mostly from the textbook, write about what they found interesting and significant, and jot down questions about what troubled and confused them. In one assignment, they chose an illustration (a painting, photo, cartoon), described what they saw, explained why it was used in the reading and why it interested them. These departures from “traditional” history teaching were, I believed, a first step towards helping students begin to think historically.

I can clarify what I mean when I speak of “thinking historically” by referring to a framework offered by Peter Seixas at the University of British Columbia. Seixas identifies three basic elements of historical thinking. The first is a student’s ability to identify events of historical significance, and in this process establish criteria for significance. The second element connects to a student’s ability to rethink or refine an historical view as new information is learned. The third element refers to a student’s understanding that choices and decisions were made by historical figures in time periods different than their own. Connected to this latter understanding is the idea that in order for students to make sense of history, they also need to make moral judgments about the events and individuals they are studying. Viewed in this frame-work, historical thinking becomes a process of discovery and clarification.

Compiling a Portfolio
Although I was finding ways to encourage historical thinking, I had not found a satisfactory way to assess what was actually occurring in my classes. Then I learned about portfolios, a devise my colleagues in other disciplines were using to encourage students to think for themselves and to reflect on their work. Simply put, a portfolio consists of selections of student work which the student has chosen and evaluated as his or her “best” work.

During the first semester of 1993-94 school year, my U.S. history students collected all of their writing in a folder kept in the classroom. Thus, the papers in the folder were, for each student, a record of what he or she had thought and written about U.S. History over
this time period. This was important because a collection of writing allows a writer to reflect on his or her ideas and consider their evolution. It allows students to see what they knew and compare it to what they now know. In this context the student writing in my history class became primary source documents, providing each student with a record of his or her thinking which could be revisited and analyzed. This is the idea which drew me to portfolios as a potential assessment tool.

I assigned the history portfolio in lieu of a more traditional final exam. The contents of each student’s portfolio would consist of selections from previous assignments that semester (see box) and a letter to the principal that commented on the selections and responded to a series of quotes from historians, offering a framework for discussing history and the work of historians.

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Portfolio Assignment Part I

Select from all the writing you have done this semester...

1. a thoughtful reaction to an individual or event which caught your attention, explaining why you would like to study this subject further.

2. one quote which you selected and wrote about which holds particular meaning and interest for you. Include the quote and your comments.

3. your best piece of writing on a particular picture or painting

4. your choice of a piece of your writing on an issue which best illustrates your work as an historian as it is described in one of the quotes on the front page.

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I want to discuss the portfolios of four students who wrote in the spirit of the assignment. They were willing to try to make sense of the material they were studying through selection of important individuals and events, interpretation, personal judgments, and reflections on the nature of studying and writing history. These were, by no means, the only students who did this; rather, they are representative of those students who made an honest effort to reflect on their study. Brian, May, Mandy, and Clarence used the opportunity to revisit their work to tentatively explore philosophies of history, to develop historical themes, and to try and use history to understand their own experiences.

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— Mandy

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Reacting to History

One part of each portfolio assignment asked students to choose a thoughtful reaction they had written about an individual or event which had caught their attention. In doing this, they moved beyond mere interest and established, at least by implication, the criteria for significance that Seixas sees as part of historical thinking. Below are the pieces that were included in the four portfolios.

Brian Keeps His Distance

"The Battle of Bull Run" or "The Battle of Manassas" depending which part of the country you were in. Both the Union and Confederates were expecting a short war lasting a few months with one big battle to decide the winner. There were some people like General Sherman who knew the war wouldn’t last a few months, but a few years. The public ignored him. On July 21, 1861 the two armies met at Manassas, the Union army was called the army of the Potomac and the Confederate army was called the army of Northern Virginia. The north was so confident of victory, that onlookers from Washington D.C. came to see the battle. The confederates were outnumbered 2 to 1, but managed to hold on till reinforcements arrived, then counter attacked, confusing the union army, and winning the first battle of the war. This victory also boosted the South’s morale knowing they could defeat the North in battle. By now both sides knew it would be a long war.
Of the four writers, Brian is the most detached and analytical. Brian’s choice of the Battle of Bull Run is based on his understanding that, as a result of this battle, “both sides knew it would be a long war.” Because Brian is a Civil War buff, he applies the criteria many other students of military history apply: The outcome of a significant battle affects the course and the outcome of a war, and (although Brian doesn’t say so) the outcome of a war affects the direction of history.

**Mandy Discovers a Hero**

Ida B. Wells: I admired the courage and spirit of Ida B. Wells when she didn’t get out of her chair which she was told to by a white man. My reactions were “you go girl!” I had to say that because there’s hardly any 4 1/2 feet tall female could stand up for herself back in those days. Even today in America many foreigners give up their dreams and live under people’s shoes. Wells was little but she became one of the famous leaders against lynching and stop the murdering of blacks by whites. The years gone by, she became a full time writer and expressed the bitter feelings inside of her about racism. She fought many ways to lead African Americans to a better condition of life.

Seixas identifies as a characteristic of historical thinking a combination of empathy and moral judgment, plus an understanding of the ways that people in the past made choices and came to decisions in times that were quite different than our own. Mandy’s admiring comment on Ida B. Wells illustrates her effort to understand times quite different than her own. “My reactions were ‘you go girl!’ I had to say that because there’s hardly any 4 1/2 feet tall female could stand up for herself in those days.”

**Clarence Thinks Twice**

Clarence has little, in his original reaction, to say about the event he chose, The Louisiana Purchase. But after learning about other examples of the “harsh” treatment that other groups received, he returns and elaborates on it, arguing that it both represented and helped set the stage for other mistreatment.

**Original Reaction:**

The Louisiana Purchase was essential to United States history. It extended the land of the American territory, although I believe the colonists would have moved westward without it.

**Revised Version:**

Although the Louisiana Purchase extended the land of early America, it was done at the expense of the Indians. In purchasing the territory no one thought with regard to the Native Americans who could have cared less what America did. This was also done with regard to the African people, they were also transported from their homelands where they peacefully resided. thriftfully I do not blame the Indians for retaliating with violence, I certainly would if my home and family were being threatened.

The Americans were not finished at telling them to get off the land, (which rightfully wasn’t theirs to begin with) while transporting them to other places they kept the Indians in concentration camps where
hundreds of thousands died. Although we have not reached this point in history, Americans also put
Japanese people in concentration camps during World
War I, [at this point we had not yet studied
Japanese relocation; it's not clear this was simply a typo or an actual error in factual know-
edge] they also passed laws keeping Chinese out of
this country. This relentless persecution of other
cultures only proves the harsh nature many Amer-
icans used to possess.

Future Study: In the future I would like to study
more about how the Indians reacted to their new
settings and future placement on reservations.

For Clarence, the Louisiana purchase is significant
because it set in motion a chain of events which
resulted in mistreatment of the Native Americans.

May Links Then and Now

After reading the section, "The Cherokee Solution,"
I was not only outraged but also disgusted by the
unthoughtful ways Southern whites treated the Chero-
kee because they were hungry to obtain Cherokee land
to grow cotton. It was bad enough that settlers took
away land that didn't belong to them but they went a
little further by pushing off the Cherokees into the
desert. The settlers themselves came to the colonies in
search of a new life and to experience the feelings of
striking it rich by owning farms and so on. They all
shared experiences of suffering of wanting the op-
portunity to be able to cross the ocean so they could
have what they were deprived of in their own land.
Then, from these experiences, they should be able to
stop and compare what they had gone through and
what they were doing with the Indians: they settled in
a new land because they were deprived of what they
wanted and in doing so, the Native Americans were
deprived of what they have. I feel that situations are
somewhat the same. If settlers had thought of that,
maybe they would take smaller and easier steps in
their westward expansion.

The situation faced by the Cherokee caught my
attention and I would like to do further study of
the tribe because I am very eager to learn what
became of them after their removal. Being an im-
migrant from Vietnam, I experienced the hardship
of my trial of tears when my family and I and
thousands of my people left our country because of

communism. We found a better life in the United
States after we left our mother land. But what
about the Cherokee, did they find a better life after
they left theirs? And what happened to them to-
day? This is what I would like to learn.

For May the underlying reason for selecting the Chero-
kee removal is her sense that it allows her to better
understand her own experiences. May had experi-
enced her own "trail of tears" when her family fled the
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ans looking toward the past for answers to explain her
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Readers will note that each piece has a different
focus, both in its content and its historical signifi-
cance. A richness emerges which brings different
information and a different perspective to class
discussions that would be harder to create if all the
students were responding to the same text or
teacher-created questions.

Throughout the semester students seemed attracted
to situations about which they could make moral
judgments and express empathy with those who have
been wronged. May chides European settlers who
came to America for opportunity for depriving the
Native Americans of their opportunities.

When, in another context, Mandy writes of Recon-
struction she says,

"During this particular period blacks became freed-
men, and I feel happy for them. Then the minute we
are not paying attention, the laws which sup-
ported them failed. I think its heartbreaking be-
cause the laws could provide rights but couldn't
stop discrimination..."

However, as outraged as students are by mistreat-
ment, they do not seem able to bring to their thinking
the other half of Seixas’ empathy equation: an understanding that people in the past make choices … in times quite different from our own. Even so, by making judgments about the stories, they may have come to a better understanding of their own moral standards and how these standards might be applied to and have been formed by history.

Thinking about Historical Thinking

Another element of historical thinking, according to Seixas, concerns the question, “How do students know what they know about the past and how has that knowledge been shaped?” To help students think about this question, I asked them to write a letter to the principal reflecting on the choices they had made for their portfolios, and in this process they began to think about how their ideas had been shaped.

Below are excerpts from the four different letters students wrote to our principal in which they take a stab at this question, “How do I know what I know?” We start again with Brian, the only one of the students who might be seen as a history buff.

My name is Brian and I’m a student in Mr. Pesick’s fifth period U.S. History class. History has always been my favorite subject. This may sound weird, but I enjoy learning and reading about history...

I’ve been thinking. I can’t think of any country in the world that didn’t have a civil war. I guess having a civil war is one of the things a country must go through. I think it’s a test to see if the country was strong enough to survive...

What is impressive here is that Brian refines and revises his view of history to the point that he is able to construct a theory about the role a civil war might play in a nation’s history: “I guess having a civil war is a one of the things a country must go through. I think it’s a test to see if the country was strong enough to survive.” Obviously, Brian’s knowledge of the Civil War is shaped by a knowledge of history that goes beyond what he has learned in my class.

In contrast to Brian, Mandy’s connection to history is more personal:

I’ve been in Skyline for almost two years … My native culture is back in China, but because I am Chinese [this fact has had] … a great impact on my point of view.

... History, I believe is worth studying because somehow in the semester I’ve learned how to live in the present by knowing the past. I never hate what other people do to me because forgiving is a way to free myself. I’ve picked the Ku Klux Klan. I figured that blacks might be a little painful studying this particular subject …

As a student historian my biggest concern about war is the soldier. They fought and died. I cherish their distribution of blood. They are like a secure wall protecting us from terrors. They build our kingdom.

The issue I picked expressed my own religious cultures. Chinese had tough times in the past, but I think we’re thankful too because America led us to great wealth and settle in the Gold Mountains.
I don’t consider myself an historian. My point of view is to hold my own interests and not follow other people’s footsteps.

Mandy’s statement that one can learn to live in the present by studying the past is an intriguing and powerful comment. As a relatively recent immigrant to the U.S., she does use the history she has learned to help her redefine her view of the present. I can only speculate on what Mandy was thinking, but there are clues: Her comments on Reconstruction at the beginning of this article and the sentences of her letter in which she talks about not hating people for what they do to her exhibit a sensitivity to the feelings of black students as we studied slavery. This sensitivity stands in contrast to the racial tension that sometimes divides students at our school, a tension that is often apparent between the African-American students and the recent immigrants from Asia. Mandy’s comment suggests that her added knowledge of history has made the present a more complex place but, at the same time, a more understandable one as she refined her thinking in order to make sense of her experiences.

Unlike Mandy’s tentative and elliptical discussion of what she learned, May’s analysis is in no way hesitant.

...To be truthful, I used to hate history. I could never understand what I have read because well, it’s boring, and I detested answering questions in the back of each chapter ... The questions that I (now) have to answer are not facts but rather ... my personal opinions on what I’ve read ... I am able to be creative and say what I want to say because the answer is not going to be A, B, C, or D.

Having the freedom to be creative and say what I believe, the work that I put in my portfolio reflect what I think are to be important. Being an immigrant from a war torn country called Vietnam also reflects much of my writing in this portfolio ... As you will see, my reactions to historical events usually deals with freedom. I find freedom important in the past because it effects the present. The following work illustrates who I am ... After all, history is... the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another. (Jacob Burkhart) May

Mandy’s comment suggests that her added knowledge of history has made the present a more complex place but, at the same time, a more understandable one...

After looking back over her work and choosing selections for her portfolio, May notes that much of her interests relate to her experiences as an immigrant from a “war torn country called Vietnam.” She makes this point because she has developed a concern with freedom, both as an historical issue and current concern. It becomes for her an important enough insight to be connected to the quote from the historian Jacob Burkhart, “history is ... the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another.” In her reading of American history, May has focused on the theme of freedom, as she asks her readers to consider how its ebb and flow have impacted peoples lives.

May’s comment can best be understood in the context of our class activity. I had asked students to respond in writing to the question, “What is the meaning of freedom?” We discussed their ideas as we read letters from ex-slaves discussing what freedom meant to them. We read other historical accounts of how individuals and groups tried to make freedom a reality, and we studied ways efforts to achieve freedom had been resisted. All along the students were asked to revisit their initial definition and refine it based on what they were learning. It was in this context that May produced the writing that begins this article: “However, my smile didn’t last long because I realized that the word ‘freedom’ that was given to slaves didn’t agree with the way I had personally defined it.” Of the four students Clarence had the most outward struggle trying to refine his philosophy of history:

...The quote I believe most illustrates my, and most others work, is number four, “History is ... the record of what one age finds worthy in another.” I only write about things that are relevant today. An example of this is the issue of racial diversity. It is a hot topic in today’s society and have consequently altered our morals to include acceptance of other cultures. The quote I most disagree with is number two, “Historians ought to be precise, truthful, and quite
unprejudiced and neither interest nor fear, hatred nor affection, should cause them to swerve from the path of truth, whose mother is history." Each historian uses his or her own ideals in presenting history or else we wouldn't have so many different versions of history. Historians only write on what interests them, some write on racial issues and some on political issues. This is what makes history special, the different and complex versions allow each student to decide what is true to them on the basis of their morals.

Clarence

In his view, "each historian uses his or her own ideals in presenting history or else we wouldn't have so many different versions of history."

Connecting his view to Burkhart's, Clarence writes, "I only write about things that are relevant today." From his perspective these are issues connected to racial and cultural diversity. In this context he explicitly challenges the notion that historians can be truthful, precise, and unprejudiced. In his view "each historian uses his or her own ideals in presenting history or else we wouldn't have so many different versions of history." Following this line of thought leads Clarence to a very relativistic sense of historic truth: "...the different and complex versions allow each student to decide for themselves what is true to them based on their morals." Clarence hints at that selectivity that comes in to play as people weigh the validity of different historical accounts and choose which stories and evidence to discuss. Are different historical perspectives competing truths or different interpretations of the same event? Clarence struggles with this question as he attempts to explain and justify his own historical point of view.

The quotes from established historians are part of these reflections because I specifically asked students to reflect on how they viewed their work within the context of philosophies of history and the work of historians. The quotes represented some very complex ideas. We discussed them in great detail, but we had not discussed how they might be connected to the students' work. In this regard they were on their own. Their selections, though, reflect how they struggled to come to terms with these concepts as they very tentatively attempted to enter into a historical discussion over purpose and perspective. In May's and Mandy's letters they argue for the idea that what historians choose to study reflects what their own time period finds worthy of note in the past. For both of these recent immigrants, what is worthy of note are questions of freedom and issues connected to cultural encounters. Brian, who has taken on a very authoritative voice, identifies in a part of his letter not quoted here with the statement from Cervantes, "Historians ought to be precise, truthful, and quite unprejudiced..."

Remaining Questions

This "history portfolio" project was designed to promote student thinking and learning through written reflection. I was curious to find out whether students who create portfolios selected from their writings done on topics that catch their attention would produce analysis that comes closer to "historical thinking." For these four students my answer would be a tentative "yes." This, however, was only a first attempt at this kind of project, a first draft which raises many questions and issues that can only be addressed as the project itself is revised. In its present form the portfolio project raises several issues.

One important issue connects to teaching history in diverse classrooms. Three of the four students discussed issues of freedom and discrimination as both historical and current concerns. May and Mandy looked at immigration issues. Clarence, an African American student, directly discussed issues connected to race in each of his excerpts. If we think of these pieces of writing as starting points for discussion, might the chance to choose topics be a way to draw students into a discussion that is fueled and informed by diverse student perspectives? But when we open up discussion in this way we also create new responsibilities for the teacher. Once students are drawn in, developing and expressing a viewpoint, how can the discussion be structured and informed so that the students don't end up with a historical relativism which suggests that all opinions are equally valid if they are based on a personal view? Choice may create interest, but it's important to take advantage of that interest by teaching how to find, weigh, and use evidence to support opinions.
Secondly, while examples of historical thinking may be found in the portfolios, there is little evidence that the students actually understood that they were thinking historically. Can we speak of students’ thinking historically if they are not aware that this is the case? Will they transfer this skill to other situations unless expressly asked to within a specific instructional framework? Can the kind of reflective thought asked for in the portfolios help make thinking historically more visible for students?

Finally, what role does instruction play in this endeavor? Each of these students was considered an above-average student. I have no doubt that if they had been asked to answer prepackaged questions they would have completed that work and done it well. But for a student like May this would have been too limiting and frustrating. She wants to be “creative and say what I want to say because the answer is not going to be A, B, C, or D.” May might have seen her past work in history as boring, but she also got good grades. How representative is May? I do not yet know how many students, unlike May, are made to feel uneasy when they are no longer able to depend on the trusty end of chapter questions as a way of completing history assignments.

But I can say that each of the four students I’ve profiled here valued the work they had done during the school year and valued the opportunity to revisit it. If their work is seen as a starting point, it represents a kind of embryonic historical thinking. But this kind of writing and thinking does not happen on its own; the teacher has to ask for it — encouraging, supporting and evaluating its development.

References
Burkhart, J. Quoted in American voices (1992), Glendale, Ill: Scott Foresman, p. xxii.


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