

FORUM

How Do AHA's Findings Square with the History of Teaching Controversial Issues?

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Despite incendiary headlines about the controversies apparently inflaming the teaching of history to American children, a new report by the American Historical Association finds that the most pressing issue for the vast majority of secondary school history teachers is not managing such raging conflicts. On the contrary, most of the three thousand history teachers interviewed in this self-reported study struggle to ignite interest in history, rather than contain outrage, among students, parents, and the educational decision-makers with the power to direct more resources to this subject area. Americans are not histrionically panicking about the material students are (not) learning or the sorts of citizens being made in history and social studies classes. Rather, in most communities, the opposite is occurring: the discipline of history, with its demands of deep reading and engagement with the unfamiliar, inspires apathy rather than intense engagement, unproductive or otherwise.

To be sure, there *are* a minority of teachers whose professional lives are consumed by these headline-grabbing politics. Significantly, these pressures issue from both left and right: conservative politicians and parent groups rail against perceived anti-American or otherwise subversive influences, while overzealous progressive administrators are prone to enforce a moralizing form of anti-racist orthodoxy. While it may seem intuitive—or in the case of some states, legally imperative—for teachers to avoid certain “divisive concepts” such as slavery or sexuality, the findings of the AHA report suggest to me that if our shared goal across our diverse educational landscape is to increase interest and investment in history, a generative, and feasible, path forward is to *invite* teaching about controversy into our classrooms rather than avoid any issues that might ignite it.

On this count, the history of curriculum is illuminating (if somewhat dispiriting). Bitter fights over curriculum have taken up outsized attention—proportional to the effect of the curricula in question—for decades. Sometimes these fights are centrally about history instruction, and at others only tangentially about it. Combatants in these conflicts have been remarkably consistent in their intense opinions about the dystopias to which teaching the “wrong” history will supposedly lead: 1930s screeds against “Red” teachers that conjured the specter of children turning against their parents and

patriotism are almost identical to today's outcry about "woke" educators nefariously grooming children for all sorts of subversion. While those arguments usually come from the political right, the educational vision from the left has been no less grandiose, from confidence that filmstrips of faraway cultures and "inquiry" units about developing nations could inoculate children against Western imperialism to the conviction that saying the Pledge of Allegiance is an act of dangerous indoctrination. Despite decades of such drama, the AHA study confirms with contemporary data what is also likely true historically (though I believe this is the first study to try to track it in this way): history educators are largely preoccupied with more mundane issues such as their own need for deeper content knowledge on certain topics, creeping testing requirements that serve to deprioritize history, and rising historical and civic illiteracy. I've heard many versions of the same joke told among history educators: "Indoctrinate them?! I can't even get them to do the reading!" In this way, little has changed, and the culture-war fights that drive much popular discourse about history education can obscure what is actually transpiring in most classrooms, and how we might imagine a more exciting future therein.

If the national nature of these curricular fights is overstated, however, these battles can be all-consuming for those who are embroiled in them, not a distraction from "real" issues, as some conclude. The historical record furnishes ample evidence of the consequences of these fights, from administrators and teachers losing their jobs to developing health issues to facing threats of actual physical violence. Such experiences surely feel familiar to those who live in districts today where parent groups are threatened with FBI surveillance or teachers deemed to have the wrong politics are doxxed on social media. The takeaway of the AHA report should *not* be that culture-war issues are a mere smokescreen and unworthy of our attention, a common claim that is as unproductive as the generalization from cherry-picked examples that culture-war issues are tearing American schools apart.

It's notoriously difficult to draw generalizations about American public schools, which the AHA report, and all serious scholars, acknowledge are incredibly diverse. That said, historians track change over time, and it is unclear if educational controversy is really more widespread than it was in the past. On the one hand, because of social media, news of local curricular events spreads exponentially faster than it did in the age of pamphlets, inspiring actors across the country, and the political spectrum, to take action. Whether they entail conservatives such as Parents Defending Education or progressives organizing as Educators for Palestine, such networked responses absolutely fan the flames of controversy with new intensity. They can have policy impact in a way that was uncommon historically as well, whether the consequences are "divisive concepts" laws in some red states, or California's ethnic studies requirement, which has precipitated several other states to follow suit.

On the other hand, a different trajectory is suggested by another key insight from the AHA study – seemingly unrelated but actually pertinent – which is that "history teachers are replacing textbooks with the internet," to quote a *New York Times* headline. What makes this finding newsworthy is that teachers are drawing from a diversity of sources of varying perspectives and quality. From the perspective of classroom controversy, however, this shift away from textbooks that are written by teams of experts and often adopted at the state or district level is relevant as well. First, the fact that teachers

are individually selecting materials from a sea of online content means that there is far less administrative control over what is being taught. Second, controversies over textbooks have often been especially high stakes because they have resulted in revisions of textbooks that are then adopted by entire states, and thus stand to shape many more classroom experiences. This shift away from textbooks may positively signal greater teacher autonomy and creativity, but the lack of pedagogical uniformity in an already diverse system makes it even harder to trace trends.

All of these factors, as well as the fact that despite the AHA study's impressive breadth and depth, it is a relatively small, self-reported sample, make it hard to draw precise conclusions about the relationship between today's curricular controversies and those of the past. But rather than wave away its findings, or only issue unsatisfyingly vague calls for future research (though we do need it), we can confidently glean a different lesson that can helpfully inform history instruction, and perhaps even lead us toward a future in which students are more engaged in history, and less cleaved to culture-war poles, in the classroom or otherwise.

That lesson is: classroom controversy consistently looms so large in the media and our collective imagination and memory because drama is *interesting*. The alternative is watering down contested topics like slavery, war, crime, and sexuality, which leads to *boring* history, or silence. Bulging textbooks that ploddingly attempt to "include everyone" are notorious perpetrators of this alienating approach; I consider it progress if these tomes are not the anchor of history instruction. Rather than striving to avoid conflict, teachers should embrace *teaching the controversy* as a way to understand the issues that have energized and divided Americans over time and today, as well as the perspectives of those who hold different beliefs. Too often, teaching controversial issues is presumed to require endorsing a "side" in a way that is inappropriate. But teaching the 1619 Project or the Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum—to use the example of two contemporary renderings of US history from opposite political ideologies—should not mean promoting either of its ideas wholesale. Rather, it should be a means for understanding how and why these educational projects are different, evaluating their merits, and assessing how these interpretations have shifted over time and why they inspire such passions. Some worry that incorporating such materials in the classroom would amount to indoctrination, but in a moment when we contend with not only the apathy about history conveyed in the AHA report, but also poor reading skills, chronic absenteeism, and endless sources of distraction, this approach may be our only avenue to invigorate the inspired sort of history education we sorely need.