

USING CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE AS HISTORY

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Do you believe history is opinion? If so, why? Is it because your Aunt Hattie describes Cousin Julius as a derelict while your sister describes him as a young man looking for direction? One event influencing me to view history as opinion occurred in a history research seminar. Desiring my students to view history as opinion rather than undisputed facts in a text, I recreated a similar event during student teaching.

The first day I was to teach American history I was nervous. There they were; twenty-five pairs of eyes sizing me up. I could almost hear them think, "Will she be difficult or easy? Will we be able to take advantage of her?" I heaved a deep breath and passed out a mimeograph sheet entitled "Treatment of Slaves." Account one on the sheet was from a black history text. A typical sentence from this account read, "The purpose of the (slave) codes was to control the slaves in order to keep them from starting rebellions." On the other hand, account two was from a state history of Missouri. The tone of this interpretation read, "While there were some incidents involving the abusing of slaves, public opinion and state law generally assured the slaves of good treatment." Each student read the account in class, then compiled his/her own list of similarities and differences between the two accounts.

After this exercise we discussed the writing of history. I used questions like, Can different accounts be written about the same thing? and Why do you think the accounts are different? This exercise enabled students to understand that different accounts of the same event are possible. To reinforce the lesson I asked each student at the end of class to write what happened the first ten minutes of class. I collected the papers and saved them for the next lesson. The following day I returned the papers and asked several students to read accounts. The object of the lesson is illustrated by some of the papers. One student noted,

Your were sort of scared, jumpy, and friendly. If someone didn't under-

stand something you made an extra effort to explain. You tried to humor a little. Like things that really can be boring you had a way of making interesting. We usually fall asleep.

Another student said,

There was this new lady in front of class when I walked in. She was writing tons of homework on the board. The bell rang. She explained it and started talking about the writing of history.

And still another student observed,

First, you took attendance. You messed our names up good. "Cipilla, Cipale, uh, no it's Cipolla." Then you talked about our assignment. I think that was ten minutes.

After several students read their accounts I posed this problem to the class.

"Suppose ten years from now someone tried to reconstruct the class situation when I first started teaching? Suppose also that your papers were the only records?"

The class concluded any history from their papers would be inaccurate. I then asked,

"If two historians read your papers would their accounts of the event be the same?"

The students said no since one historian may know and like me, and write a complimentary account of me, while another historian may not like me, and write an unfavorable account of me. I then extended the lesson to the text asking, "If different people can write different accounts of the same event, are the authors of your text describing unquestionable facts when they describe a particular event?" No was the overwhelming response.

Lessons allowing students to act as historians, then to compare opinions will enable students to view history as interpretation. Perhaps the lesson did not impress students as dramatically as an Aunt Hattie and Cousin Julius, but the lesson worked.