

Questioning and Preparation for Teachers of History

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When history education researchers discuss historical inquiry they describe a process of asking questions about and investigating human experience using skills and concepts from history and the social sciences. Classroom teachers often see inquiry quite differently. As noted in *Teaching History for the Common Good*, purpose has a great deal to do with how (or whether) teachers implement practices as challenging as historical inquiry. Purpose alone, however, cannot prepare a teacher to conduct instructional practices for which their own experience as learners has ill-prepared them. Questioning, for instance, is an often over-looked feature of historical inquiry. Too often teachers do not see questions as opportunities to engage students in reflective, disciplined inquiry—using historical skills and concepts to build a deeper understanding of the world or encourage civic engagement. Rather, their purposes focus more on motivating students to learn content covered on a test. As a result, teachers tend to be less interested in students building evidence-based interpretations than in whether students got the “right” answer for a test. Drawing on a number of studies that examine this and other challenges involved in formulating questions that motivate and sustain historical inquiry, this paper argues that teachers must themselves learn skills, concepts and content so deeply that inquiry initiated by historically compelling questions becomes normal practice.

Keywords: History Education, Questioning, Inquiry, Teacher Preparation, Aims and Purposes of History Education

Generally, when history education researchers discuss historical inquiry they describe a process of asking questions about and investigating human experience using skills and concepts from history and the social sciences. The extent to which that process is open-ended, cross-disciplinary, thematic, or guided by civic and disciplinary purposes, however, shifts across grade levels and over time, and often frustrates our ability to make sense of its various classroom incarnations. As Keith Barton and I have noted in *Teaching History for the Common Good*, purpose has a great deal to do with whether teachers implement any evidence-based practice, much less one as challenging as engaging students in historical inquiry. Purpose alone, however, does not fully prepare a teacher to conduct instructional practices for which their own experience as learners has ill-prepared them. Questioning, in particular, is a crucial but often over-looked feature of historical inquiry.

We find the lack of attention to questioning puzzling on several fronts, beginning with the focus on source work in the history education literature. Questions motivate source use, sustain inquiry and connect inquiry, implicitly or explicitly, to informed civic action. There is no source without a question. There are historical objects of one kind and another, of course, but they only become sources in relation to a historical question.

But not any question will do.

Questions elicit answers in their own likeness. Insignificant questions, pointless questions and silly questions get insignificant, pointless and silly answers in return—and even quite young students recognize such questions for what they are. A group of third graders (age 8), for instance, generated a set of questions they ultimately identified as ridiculous (Levstik & Smith, 1996). Finding out the number of doors or windows in their community, they decided, did not constitute useful or interesting information. Their teacher spent considerable time building their capacity to generate more significant questions, with the result that their final inquiry investigated the historical roots of several local community

issues.

As Keith Barton and I point out in *Teaching History for the Common Good*, problematic questions are often less ridiculous than ahistorical. Asking students how they might have acted in difficult historical circumstances, or if people in the past should have acted differently in those same circumstances, for instance, rarely elicits historically-grounded responses (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Analyzing the agency available to historical actors, on the other hand, more often leads students to reflect on what was possible in the historical moment. When a group of thirteen year olds investigated the differential power and influence of nineteenth century women enslaved as cotton workers, women working in textile mills who spun slave-grown cotton, immigrant seamstresses who turned textiles into garments, and women who could afford to purchase the garments, they were better able to explain labor controversies and the eventual development of protective legislation for women and children. Students were not asked what *they* might have done; rather, they analyzed the choices available to people in the past, and considered the ways in which groups and individuals employed that agency. In the process, they also learned something about the history of effective civic and political action.

Some questions are so confusingly simplistic, they are both ridiculous and ahistorical. Rather than lead students to ask critical questions of the sources they encounter or to consider the complexity of historical knowledge construction, such questions misrepresent the past by oversimplifying it. A world history teacher asks students if *Alexander the Great* was really great. The question is utterly meaningless. First of all, there is no standard that renders a historical figure unequivocally great. Instead, such a question invites ahistorical responses. One student decides Alexander was terrible because he slaughtered elephants during a battle, and current sensibilities render that unconscionable. Another admires Alexander's military prowess, equating conquest with "greatness" and ignoring the perspectives of the conquered

or even Alexander's own people. Finally, a student declares that Alexander was not so much great as narcissistic. In no case did the initiating question generate evidence of deep historical understandings regarding the complexity and consequences of conquest in Alexander's time.

This should not be surprising. Although the dynamics of questionings pivotal role in historical inquiry remains largely untested, a consistent research finding is that students *and* teachers struggle to develop questions that motivate and sustain historical inquiry (Aulls, 2008; James & McVay, 2009; Rossi & Pace, 1998; Rothstein & Santana, 2013). More optimistically, when teachers craft historical questions that require students "to interpret texts, make connections, solve problems, support or dispute ideas, or ask further questions" (Dull & Morrow, 2008, p. 398), even primary age students ask "critical questions of texts and consider the complexity of historical knowledge construction" (James & McVey, 2009, p.348).

Unfortunately, few students have this opportunity at any age. And, when students do engage in such activity, it occurs most often in high-ability, low-diversity schools—an equity issue that should give history educators pause (Dull & Morrow, 2008). Although this is a concern for all students, it is particularly so for minority and low-income students who appear to have the least opportunity to engage in any form of substantive historical study. Ironically change I to in, I some countries, at just the point when we have evidence that children begin developing their ideas about history and the past at an early age, and can engage in cognitively appropriate inquiry even in the early years of schooling, schools provide reduced opportunities to do so (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010).

As teacher educators, then, our obligation is three-fold. First, we have to model the development of well-thought out and historically situated questions that generate curiosity as well as skepticism and require students to integrate complex and divergent information from various sources. Second, we have to engage students in inquiry, not just talk about it. Third, we need to take time

to help our students develop compelling questions for themselves, and use them to develop inquiry-based instruction.

To be good teachers of historical inquiry, teacher candidates must engage in inquiry in themselves. And, just as should be the case with school-age students, teacher educators mentor the process *in class*. Initially, at least, question development takes a great deal of time. If simply asked to generate questions, teacher candidates generally produce questions with the same problems as described above. Over the years, I have developed a progression of experiences for my my teacher candidates (middle level education majors). I start by involving them in an inquiry that introduces them to the process as outlined in *Doing History* (Levstik & Barton, 2015). This past year, my students worked through an inquiry based on a graphic novel, *Abina and the Powerful Men* (Getz & Clark, 2014), based on an 1876 court transcript of a West African woman who was wrongfully enslaved. The initiating question had to do with whether the author's historical and graphic representations of Abina's story were historically justified. The authors provided the primary and secondary sources they used to create their interpretation. I organized my students in pairs and provided templates to help with their analyses. The question of accuracy and interpretation absorbed them even more powerfully than I had anticipated and the final presentations set off considerable discussion about historical interpretation. Everything they needed was provided for them in researching the Abina story. Next, I had my students work through an historical archaeology inquiry. We used the same initiating question and sources that had been used with 10-13 year-old students in investigating Davis Bottom, a working class neighborhood located not far from the education building at the university. I added the requirement that they develop a graphic novel or digital documentary interpreting some aspect of the community through a historical theme (i.e. haves and have nots, uses and abuses of power, population shifts).

Once students have engaged with thought-

provoking historical questions, they can better critique other questions. For instance, I used these three questions collected in seventh and eighth grade (12-13 year olds) classes in the U.S. and had my students edit them.

- Did Abraham Lincoln Issue the Emancipation Proclamation because it was morally right or because it was politically expedient? (Eighth grade U.S. history)
- What does it mean to be human? (Seventh grade ancient world history)
- The Agricultural Revolution: How revolutionary was it anyway? (seventh grade ancient world history)

The second question generated the most conversation: Was it historical? Should the question ask how ideas about being human changed over time? Was it so broad a question as to be meaningless? Might it generate a lot of interesting questions from students? Wouldn't it be a good question to open the study of world history? And so on. Eventually, different groups of students developed inquiry-based units of study around variations on these and other questions they developed—but it took a full two-hour class period to make the questions workable and some groups further edited their questions as they went along.

I think that time was well-spent. The final inquiries were interesting, historically sound and more focused on significant historical content. That said, I have not followed these students into their first teaching positions and I think transferability is an issue if they enter schools where questioning is not a priority and inquiry not a central feature of instruction. One of our doctoral students at the University of Kentucky just completed her dissertation examining how teachers understood and used what she identified as “compelling” questions (Mueller, 2015). The results are not encouraging, and much of the reason goes back to purpose. The teachers in the study saw inquiry as a way to motivate students to learn content on high stakes assessments. Questions weren't so much a way to engage students in reflective, disciplined inquiry—using historical

skills and concepts to build a deeper understanding of the world or encourage civic engagement. Rather, their purpose was to motivate students to learn content that would be covered on the test. As a result, teachers were less interested in how evidence-based students' interpretation turned out to be than in whether they got the “right” answer as established by a questionable test.

Once again, we circle back to purpose, but also to going deeper in our teacher preparation so that teacher candidates learn skills, concepts and content so deeply that inquiry initiated by historically compelling questions becomes teachers' default position—it is not a radical departure from normal practices, but the new normal for effective instruction.

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