

2017

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ScholarWorks Citation

Straub, Sarah (2017) "What about the Little People?: Empowering Middle School Students to Discard the Great Man Theory," *MLET: The Journal of Middle Level Education in Texas*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/mlet/vol4/iss1/1>

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What about the Little People?
Empowering Middle School Students to Discard the Great Man Theory

“We’re about to watch a video. And, you should react to what you see. Many of you won’t even notice anything out of the ordinary, though. See if you can even catch the falsehoods and the misrepresentation of members of society in this film about the Virginia House of Burgesses.” I wanted to prepare my students for what they were about to see. They are seventh graders, and the time to leave the Great Man Theory behind has begun!

Although I am in my eighth year in education, it was my first experience teaching this content. Though I had district provided curriculum, I lacked resources to adequately give students a culturally responsive look at history, so I took to the internet. The accounts had nonplussed me that I had read on various websites, and so I figured that perhaps a YouTube video might catch my attention. I was amazed that historical inaccuracies could be portrayed as fact, and that my students would learn these fallacies as realities unless they were taught to view history through a critical lens.

As the video concluded, I could tell that we were in for the long haul. Hands raised tentatively and many students looked sideways at each other. I prompted, “Think back to when many of your peers laughed during the video. *That’s the moment.* What happened?”

“It was the part about how the House of Burgesses was filled with rich white guys,” one student offered.

“Yeah, it was saying how the poor folks don’t got no power. And they made those folks look stupid. They gave ‘em big, fake eyes and made ‘em talk stupid.”

And the conversation had begun. My students did not yet have the language to articulate their discomfort with what they were seeing. It is our responsibility as critical pedagogues to

help them develop fluency in their own history. “What else did you notice in the video? Think about a group of people that was dismissed – almost cast aside as though they were not vital to the story?”

The class puzzled for a minute and then – CLICK – the lightbulbs turned on and hands shot skyward! “It said that the Virginia House of Burgesses was the first representative government in America... but then a couple of Native Americans popped up.” The narrator joked that Native Americans really had the first, but there was no need to count them since no one else did. As someone viewing this video through a critical lens, I could understand the sarcasm that had been attempted – but what about my students? Could they?

Students began to shift in their seats and the grumbling started. Questions formed and swirled around their heads. One student, in clear frustration, blurted, “Well, then *why* do you teach us that the Virginia House of Burgesses is the first when you also are teaching us that it wasn’t? What’s the point?”

I smiled to myself. Looking around at my classroom filled with excited and engaged black and brown students, I knew that *now* was the time to share with them that history as they know it is only part of the narrative.

One of my colleagues at University of Houston is also a history teacher at another middle school in the area. She always starts her school year by clarifying to her students, “I don’t do dates and I don’t do old, dead white guys.” And the jaws of our patriarchal, white, Eurocentric history buffs drop. Perhaps they don’t know that they can expand history to include more than just those old, dead, white guys. Perhaps they don’t know what our middle school students know.

Although the Great Man Theory is considered incomplete by many scholars, the societal impact that it continues to have cannot be discounted. The formulator of this theory, Thomas Carlyle, wrote, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men” (Hirsch, 2002). Considering history through this lens, Carlyle argued, was “profitable” – by examining the lives of the heroes of history, one had the capacity to unearth greatness in themselves” (Carlyle, 1888, p. 2). Perhaps this can be the case. Perhaps not.

Proponents of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010) would argue that a history that ignores – either intentionally or not – the history of whole groups of people is not only inaccurate but also detrimental to the learning of students who are a part of these marginalized groups. True culturally responsive teaching uses the “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). If you think about your own classroom and draw a blank, stop thinking about what you’ll teach tomorrow and *start* thinking about how you are going to get to know the human beings with whom you interact daily.

When I first found out I’d be teaching US history, I was so excited. I remember learning about the CRO carving outside of the abandoned Roanoke colony. I remember learning about Tecumseh and the role that he played for his people. I couldn’t wait to share stories and compare the plight of our Native populations at the hands of the Europeans back during the colonial period with that of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Dakota Access Pipeline.

When I looked at the district-provided syllabus, however, not a single day was dedicated to our nation’s indigenous populations. Also glaringly absent was a period of time intentionally dedicated to the history of our African American students. Our district – proponents of “diversity” initiatives – seem to have forgotten to pass that along to our social studies teams.

The rationale is that those “extras” aren’t being tested on the STAAR exam – our state-mandated test. So, I needed to be creative. And I needed to be serious. YouTube is fine and all, but it was time to enroll the same heavy hitters in my quest for presenting a culturally responsive history to my students. Howard Zinn to the rescue!

Zinn’s *A Young People’s History of the United States* is written at a level accessible to most high school students. Zinn argues that it is not “unpatriotic” to present a critical history to young people. He is not “worried about disillusioning young people by pointing out flaws in the traditional heroes” (Zinn, 2009, p. xi). These traditional heroes are not perfect. We expect our students to grow from reflecting on their own flaws. We can also expect the same for our history. Our understanding of how our society came to be can grow if we can analyze the flaws in our *collective* history. For my seventh graders – many identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) – who read below a fifth grade level, bringing this text to them presented some challenges. And the challenge was worth it. We have supplemented our course with excerpts from Zinn which challenge and shock my students.

One example of this was when we discussed the “starving time” for the Jamestown colony. We learned that British colonists “roamed the woods looking for nuts and berries, and they dug up graves to eat the corpses” (Zinn, 2009, p. 16-17). This is a simple idea. The white colonists were starving. They were desperate. They found food by digging up graves. And yet, when I began to test for comprehension, I found that almost universally, my students had decided that it was impossible that white people did this. It must have been the Indians. Again – I had an opening for a critical conversation. And I had the easiest starting question: “Why?”

The purpose of this article is to radicalize your thinking as a critical educator. Sure, you’ll find recommendations on reading passages. It is quite possible to spark a debate by

showing something inflammatory. And yet, it's so much more. Question the materials that with which you have been provided. Think about your intended audience. The adage rings true, "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it" (Santayana, 1998). That is a heavy responsibility and one of which we must take heed. Our students cannot process through and critique a history that they do not learn.

It is simple. Our curriculum is catering to the idea that what is most important historically is the same thing as what has been decided is worthy of becoming a test question. It is our imperative to fight against this idea. Our history is complicated. The tasks that we require of our students should be complicated. Students can process more than basic facts. Students can engage in dialogue. They are capable of engaging in debate. And they are smart enough to doubt you when you only tell history from the traditional patriarchal white Eurocentric perspective. They can question and they *must* question. Show them how.

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