

History is Fun!

by Will Fitzhugh

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Editor's Note: In this piece Will Fitzhugh reminds us that there is great enjoyment for students in working hard at a challenging task and successfully accomplishing it. History can and should be as rewarding as the efforts that we see our students putting forth on the football practice fields, on the basketball practice courts, in the sweltering wrestling rooms, and on the long cross-country training routes. By sugarcoating the intellectual challenges of reading and writing history, by trying to "make history fun," we may be sucking the real fun right out of it. [Joe Ribar, Editor]

A large number of Social Studies educators experience difficulty, despite their many imaginative efforts, in "making history fun" for their students at all levels in our schools. One clue to the problem might be found in an analogy. Imagine what a hard time teachers would have in making movies enjoyable for young people if they began by preventing them from seeing any movies. They would have to show filmstrips about movies, take field trips to buildings where movies have been shown, have speakers come in who once saw a movie, etc. And none of it would work...

Aaron Einbond—who won a Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize from *The Concord Review* in 1995 for his history paper on John Maynard Keynes when he was a student at Hunter College High School in New York, has now graduated from Harvard, earned a master's degree on a Marshall Scholarship at Cambridge University, and is working for his Ph.D. at Berkeley—was invited in 1997 to speak to the 100th anniversary meeting of the New England History Teachers Association. He said, among other things, "History does not have to be made fun. It is fun."

Social Studies educators have set themselves two impossible tasks. First, they neither ask students to read a history book, which is the way most people get interested in history, or to write a history research paper, and second, for ideological reasons, they try to limit the range of student interest to current social problems in their immediate environments.

The Progressive argument that little kids can only care about their home and neighborhood cannot stand before the fact that lots of kids are fascinated by dinosaurs and superheroes, which are very rarely seen in contemporary communities, and that most kids love fantasies of faraway people and great adventures. Kieran Egan of Simon Fraser University has pointed out that if Piaget is right that youngsters are only capable of concrete operations, how can their enjoyment of Peter Rabbit (etc.) at an early age be explained?

When Harry Truman was competing with one of his classmates to be the first to read all the books in the school library in Independence while they were still in high school, no one had to try to convince him that reading was fun. He had found that out himself. One of his heroes, David McCullough says, was Gustavus Adolphus, who was not a resident of Independence, Missouri, at that time.

We have evidence that the majority of U.S. high school students now graduate without ever having written one history research paper, and it seems likely that most graduate without ever having read a single complete history book, unless they did it on their own. The historian Sheldon Stern, in a study of state history standards just done for the Fordham Institute, found that “The option of writing a serious history essay is not available in even the best state social studies and history standards.”

This constraining pedagogy is an excellent way to kill interest in any subject, and without interest, students will gain very little knowledge of anything, and our students’ ignorance of history at every level through college is now well documented by the ACTA study and the NAEP reports.

It is easy to imagine how interest in and knowledge of baseball would die out if young people were prevented from watching games or playing them. Naturally we take sports too seriously to attempt to develop interest in them in any such foolish way.

When it comes to history, however, we limit most students to social studies textbooks which give them too little information on everybody and everything to make it possible for them to get involved in the subject matter. So they are bored, and any frantic efforts to engage their interest without having them read and write are for the most part doomed from the start.

Lots of students from all over are, like the small-town farm boy Harry Truman, fully capable of reading complete history books and becoming fascinated with the actual fun of history while they are still in school.

A good research study of the number of high school students who actually read one history book before they get their diploma remains to be done, but the decline of the history term paper makes it very likely that that number is quite small and growing smaller.

To those who would argue that reading a history book and writing a history paper are either too hard or not very important for high school students, someone should certainly suggest: “Try it. They’ll love it!”

Students are shortchanged when they are discouraged from reading history and writing term papers in school, and they are not only less ready to benefit from further education, but also less likely to understand and value the freedom and democracy that have been handed down to them as well.

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