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We Interrupt This Moment: Education and the Teaching of History

Jennifer Tupper
University of Regina

Abstract

The history that students learn in schools supports a view of the past that casts men as dominant and universal subjects. As such, the way that students understand the past will inevitably influence the way they think about the present and consider the future. Rather than perpetuating dominant narratives, this paper argues that history and social studies teachers much engage in a re(hi)storation through the pedagogical process of interruption as a means of bringing into view that which has always been there but has been neglected, abandoned and forgotten.

> *There were still women surgeons at the end of the seventeenth century, but women healers were increasingly associated with witchcraft and the practice of the black arts. As medicine became a science the terms of entry into training excluded women, protecting the profession for the sons of families who could afford education. Women were forced to the bottom. Midwifery, an exclusively female branch of medicine, was taken over by the male doctor when rich women gave birth. The female midwife attended only the poor. (Rowbotham 1973, p. 3).*

Not so long ago, as I was teaching a group of third and fourth year university students with minors in social studies education, I encountered a distressing but not necessarily surprising comment from one of my students. As a class, we had been discussing the importance of including multiple perspectives in the content of social studies and the students in the class had seemed supportive of this approach from the moment we first began discussing it. Half way through the semester, I dedicated a three hour block of time to exploring the representation of women in social studies curriculum as well as issues of gender inherent in the structure and content of the discipline. While this was an obvious extension of our multiple perspectives discussion, it did not receive the same widespread support, and was indeed met with open resistance from certain members of the class. One student in particular asserted that women had not been widely included in social studies curriculum for good reason. When I asked him to elaborate he suggested that had women been engaging in important historical activities, then surely they would have been included in the curriculum.

The implication here is palpable. This student believed that women played only a minor role in history and were thus not deserving of any in-depth study in social studies classrooms. Rather than being angry with this student for what I perceived as a troubling perception of the past, I reminded myself that he was a product of his own schooling. It is possible, even probable, that he had little if any encounter with the lives and experiences of women in his own history lessons, hence his views on what had historical value. Thus, another implication that emerges from this encounter is the role that social studies and history classrooms have played in perpetuating historical narratives that privilege men as dominant historical actors with little critical reflection on the exclusions and omissions inherent in such a study of history. To imagine that women were not doing anything of importance and are therefore not worthy of study in schools is distressing, but sadly not surprising.

> *Many people claimed that medicine was an unsuitable field for women, arguing that the study of the human body and the dissecting course would cause them to lose their 'maidenly modesty.' They also claimed women had weak nerves, unstable health, poor powers of endurance and could not withstand the stresses of medical life. In short, the home was the place for women; the world was the place for men. In response, those in favour of women doctors pointed to the many women healers of the past. They also pointed out that the many women who toiled long, exhausting hours in factory sweatshops were proof enough of women's ability to endure hard physical labour. The question of female endurance, they suggested, was merely a smoke screen to keep women out of the well-paying professions. (Merritt, 1995, p. 90).*

Joan Wallach Scott (1999, p. 17) in her book Gender and the Politics of History, maintains that history as a discipline has failed to reflect upon knowledge of the past, choosing instead to reproduce it. From her perspective, studies of history have perpetuated a view of the past whereby men are well established as dominant and universal subjects, central historical actors who have come to represent moments of historical significance. Because of this, Scott believes that historians face a particular challenge,

> to make women a focus of inquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative - whether that narrative is a chronicle of political events (the French Revolution, the Swing riots, World War I and II) and political moments (Chartism, utopian socialism, feminism, women's suffrage), or a more analytically cast account of the workings or unfoldings of large scale processes of social change (industrialization, capitalism, modernization, urbanization, the building of nation-states).

I would argue that not only are historians faced with a particular challenge in relation to the inclusion of women in historical narratives as Scott asserts, but so too are educators invested

with the challenge of teaching history to students, and connecting students with history. It is no secret that history and social studies curricula have tended to reflect a canon of accepted truths and acted as vehicles for cultural hegemony and ideological reproduction (Dolby, 2000; Osborne, 2000). In her examination of the teaching of history, Nadine Dolby (2000, p. 158) writes about a student, Susan, who believed that historically "there weren't a lot of leading ladies" and even though she wanted to know more about women, she seemed to accept the universality of male history, she seemed to accept that "women's history is of minor value and only of interest to girls and women." What this suggests is that the universality of male history is so normalized in historical discourse that even young women accept that the (in)activities and (in)actions of their foremothers are not worthy of significant study. In my own research with five high school social studies teachers, there was an awareness that the history taught in schools was narrowly constructed and failed to reflect multiple experiences and perspectives. However, each participant struggled with ways of approaching history in more inclusive ways beyond the confines of the curriculum and in relation to the realities of high stakes testing and educational accountability. The challenge is what we, as educators do with this knowledge. How might we approach the teaching of history knowing full well that what we are mandated to teach is not reflective of the multiplicity of historical narratives and experiences?

> *No woman, then, has any occasion for feeling that hers is an humble or insignificant lot. The value of what an individual accomplishes, is to be estimated by the importance of the enterprise achieved, and not by the particular position of the labourer. The drops of heaven which freshen the earth, are each of equal value, whether they fall in the lowland meadow, or the princely parterre. The builders of a temple are of equal importance, whether they labour on the foundations, or toil upon the dome (Cott, N.F., Boydston, J., Braude, A., Ginzberg, L., Ladd-Taylor, M., 1996, p. 135).*

Canadian educator Ken Osborne (2000) maintains that we need to ask ourselves how the study of history might contribute to what our students should know about the world in order to live fully as citizens and human beings. This question, coupled with Scott's call for reflection on historical knowledge, has implications for the way in which we approach the teaching of history in schools regardless of the existence of canonized knowledge in curriculum documents. In the discussion that follows, I attempt to elaborate on this point and argue not only for a new approach to teaching history, but for a re-discovery or re(hi)storation of the past in the hopes that it will at the very least influence and at the very most transform classroom practice so that comments, such as the one made by my student, no longer emerge from historical consciousness.

> We wanted to petition the men, we said, to let us own our land as they owned theirs…The town had waited on a factory company in the north part of the place for their taxes for years, till the company failed, and they lost several thousand dollars by it. We had our share of this money to pay; a larger share, as it appeared

> by his books, than any other of the inhabitants, and there was no risk in waiting for us to pay. But they were men, and we are women. (Kerber, 1998, p. 90).

The italicized text that I have interspersed throughout this writing is my attempt at re(hi)storation through the process of interruption. The notion of interruption is not new in education and has been discussed as a vehicle through which thinking and learning might be transformed. Michael Apple (2002) refers to a "politics of interruption" in the context of critically exploring the events of 9/11 and attempting to understand the complexities of the terrorist attacks beyond the superficial and simplistic rhetoric espoused by the American government. For Apple, it is crucial to interrupt dominant discourses which often present only a very narrow view of events if we are to engage in transformative teaching. Similarly, Roger Simon, Claudia Eppert, Mark Clamen and Laura Beres (2001, pp. 286-287) speak about the need to re-appraise "current presumptions about the past and its inheritance." For these authors, the process of remembrance, of bringing into view that which has been lost so "that one might 'know' what happened" is a call to examine the pedagogical terms on which the teaching of history is founded. Dwayne Donald (2004, p. 25) suggests that we must contest the official versions of history and society "through a process of active and critical re-reading as a way to re-present what has been left out." I believe, however, that there is an important precursor missing from these conversations. Before we can engage in remembrance, before we can memorialize "that which has been known but now must be told again" (Simon et al. 2001, p. 287), before we are able to critically re-read the past, we must first engage in the process of interruption. Interrupting dominant historical discourse creates the spaces through which a re(hi)storation of the past can occur.

> *Despite her important contributions and influence in certain areas, the Indian woman in fur-trade society was at the mercy of a social structure devised primarily to meet the needs of European males…By the turn of the century some of the bourgeois had stooped to the nefarious but profitable scheme of selling women to their engagés. At Fort Chipewyan in 1800, when the estranged wife of the voyageur Morin tried to run away, she was brought back by her Indian relations, only to face the prospect of being sold by the bourgeois to another engagé. (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 88-89).*

It is no secret that we are socialized to believe that interrupting the speech of another is poor etiquette and that we must always let the other person finish speaking before we begin. But what if their speech is seemingly without end? What if we believe that the words of an individual are incomplete, representative of only one perspective in the midst of many? Must we remain silent for the sake of politeness all the while anxious to be heard ourselves? What is lost in this moment? Why is it that we accept the interruptions that occur on television, in the form of commercials, or even, in more extreme cases, when programming is interrupted for the sake of 'breaking news'? *WE INTERRUPT THIS PROGRAM…* The term 'breaking news' is an interesting one for it implies only just happening, on the verge of historical significance, and as

such offers a justification for interrupting television programming. Yet breaking also implies being shattered, no longer whole, damaged in some way. When something breaks, it is often discarded, thrown away. That is the legacy of women's lives and experiences in relation to the historical narratives that students encounter in schools and textbooks. For women, there have been no interruptions, no moments of historical significance worthy of memorialization, or at least that's the implicit message embedded in the history taught in schools. Thus, I believe, as in 'breaking news', that interruptions are necessary - pedagogically imperative particularly in the context of historical narratives.

Re(hi)storation is about restoring something that already existed in the first place but that has been neglected, abandoned, and forgotten. The official versions of history that students encounter in schools must be interrupted as a means of restoring that which has been lost, so that all students, male and female, white and non-white have an opportunity to see their lives and experiences reflected in historical narratives. Here it is useful to return to Donald's (2004, p. 49) work and remember that "the responsibility to tell a story is given to all of us because stories are all that we are." But how might teachers, mandated to teach a required curriculum, engage in such historical interruptions? Pedagogically speaking, it requires teachers to interrupt their own historical knowledge, to bring to mind that which they think they know and that which they might need to know if they are to approach the teaching of history differently. I am not suggesting that teachers need to re-read or read anew vast tomes of historical narratives. Rather, what I am suggesting is that teachers, in teaching the history prescribed in the curriculum, allow spaces for 'breaking news' that might otherwise be overlooked, that they allow for what Simon et al (2001, p. 296) describe as a "shattering of the hermeneutic horizon on which past and present meet and within which historical interpretation becomes possible." It can be as simple as asking students to consider their own understandings of the past, to consider what they know and what they do not know, to consider what is missing and why it might be missing, and how all of these things might inform our present understandings and influence the way we think about the future. It can be as complex as working with students to step outside their own historical consciousness long enough so that this consciousness might be disrupted, interrupted. It might entail using gender as a category of analysis in all historical discussions, or it might require specific moments of interruption in which students and teachers take a step back from the topic at hand, allowing historical spaces to open up, allowing for flexibility and fluidity.

I recently took a group of third-year teacher education students to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Museum in Regina as part of a three-day off campus experience. Many of my students had visited the museum previously and were familiar with the displays and artefacts it housed. On this visit I asked each student to consider three questions as they moved through the museum: Whose story is being told? How is it being told? Whose story is not being told? The questions were my attempt to "interrupt" my students' interactions with the past. Many of them commented to me during and after our experience at the museum that it was as if they had visited the museum for the first time. Such questions, when used in the classroom, create the necessary pre-conditions for students and teachers to pause in their reading of the past so that they may critically re-read it. For my students, the questions created a need for each of them to "interrupt" his or her own historical understanding and engage in the process of re(hi)storation in very real and meaningful ways.

Returning to the comments of my student which began this discussion, it was necessary for me, in that moment, to interrupt the narrative in-process. Rather than disagreeing with, or becoming angry with this student for what was so apparently a narrow view of the past, I needed to take that moment to push him outside of his own historical location as a white man, to interrupt if you will, his sense of himself, and his sense of the past regardless of any perceived risks to my own position as teacher. For it is in those moments of interruption that remembrance, memorialization, and re(hi)storation are made possible. And it is in these moments that we can engage in new pedagogical practices of historical understandings.

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