

**Agency, Digital Literacy, and Social History: New-Age Pedagogy in the
Twenty-First Century**

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The modern education system has undergone an epoch of extensive change throughout the last few decades. As the world begins to integrate with the digital landscape, pedagogy across disciplines has evolved to encompass a wide range of new methodologies, insights, and inclusivity. For the history instructor, these changes represent both a daunting and exciting transformation for teaching young minds the proper avenues for critical analysis. More significantly, however, new-age curriculums have shifted to incorporate more diverse narratives into the academic fold. With the influx of twenty-first-century sensibilities surrounding culture, history, and the role of the student, the modern history educator must incorporate various research methods into their course curriculum. Education scholars, both in the field of history and outside of its parameters, designate the significance of these augmentations. For instructors like Zaretta Hammond, the combination of neuroscience and practical applications of “thinking theory” have reshaped the meanings of teaching in the digital age. Through examining the weaknesses of history education, the use of digital media practices, abolitionist perspectives, and the utilization of various historical methods within the classroom, an expansive, more comprehensive application of history begins to emerge at the forefront of educational consciousness.

In the academic anthology *Slavery and Public History*, historians James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton underscored the significant controversies about teaching enslavement to general audiences. Within the second chapter, “If You Don’t Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be As It Ought To Be,” David W. Blight characterized how historical misremembering left the public virtually unaware of enslavement’s deep history within the United States. In analyzing colonial plantations in Williamsburg, Virginia, the historian described how white guilt,

quasi-racist performances, and the notions of “reverse racism” impact how general audiences learn and understand a darker aspect of their national narrative.¹ From white officials describing the NAACP as “a racist hate group” to audiences on plantation tours feeling uncomfortable learning about enslaved barracks, this monograph expressly intersected the connections between history education and public history.² To fully understand this debilitating historical dissonance, one must understand how history education has left many without a masterful grasp of the national and global past.

According to Natalie Wexler, author of *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System and How to Fix It*, only eighteen percent of modern eighth graders have a proficient understanding of history.³ For Wexler, this disparity between STEM and the humanities underscores many concerns beyond federally mandated testing. The scholar recounted that the emphasis on math and science played a significant role in formulating this decline in historical comprehension; however, the reading ability also contributed to the inaccessibility of history for many students. While Wexler exclaimed that legislation such as “No Child Left Behind” fundamentally disadvantaged humanities education, the scholar did not go far enough in discussing the role of racism, marginalization, and culturally responsive pedagogy.⁴

For educator Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, Wexler’s weaknesses became rectified. Within this monograph, Hammond discussed

¹ David W. Blight, “If You Don’t Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be As It Ought To Be,” In *Slavery and Public History*, ed by James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, (New York: The New Press, 2006), 19-24.

² Ibid

³ Natalie Wexler, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System and How to Fix It*,(New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 1-9.

⁴ Ibid

the importance of new-age pedagogy in helping disenfranchised students acclimate themselves to the rigor of the modern classroom. For example, one of the most powerful aspects of her methodologies stemmed from her emphasis on relatability and language. Hammond underscored the importance of establishing a personal connection with students in the first chapters. The scholar described a student moving to sharpen his pencil in one instance. When the educator asked, “can you take your seat,” the student promptly replied, “no.” For many, this blatant refusal to accept authority seemed uncouth and rude. However, for a culturally responsive teacher, the issue lies in the difference in linguistics between cultures. As a white educator, the teacher had grown accustomed to seeing questions as demands. For the Black student, however, the question was simply that—a mere suggestion.⁵ Hammond underscored that disciplinary action should not be offered so willingly by the educator; rather, a closer look at a cultural difference needs to influence how one addresses students. Hammond highlighted that language is directly conflated with cultural heritage. The analysis of the “dependent versus independent learner theory” connected language, culture, and pedagogy to Hammond’s overarching arguments.⁶ Dependent learners cannot think critically about assignments, finish tasks alone, or fully comprehend the readings without outside help. Independent learners, in contrast, have higher reading comprehension skills, can work autonomously, and demonstrate high levels of rhetorical analysis abilities. Therefore, understanding these concepts allows educators to diversify and creatively complicate their curriculums. Moreover, for many children from diverse backgrounds, collectivist learning provided more intuitive educational styles than individualistic

⁵ Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, (California, Sage Company, 2015), 58-60.

⁶ Ibid, 20-50.

assignments. For example, Hammond reported that Hispanic students scored higher on testing, performed better in classrooms, and felt safer when educators provided group-based instruction.⁷

In interviewing my colleague, Kevin Ugarte, a speech-language pathology graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), I hoped to better grasp the meaning of this collectivist learning. Coming from a white background, my knowledge of Hispanic heritage, cultural values, and daily life underscore only an academic perspective.

Kevin related this to his experience with collectivist identity in education:

So, we had to talk about this in our cultural and linguistic diversity class! We discussed how our cultures can influence our practice in the future and what the implications are in that context. If I'm talking from a Latino perspective, I would say that services provided to an individual are more family-centered than singular. The medical aspect of a traditional approach is more like "individual—" specific goals, wants, and needs for that particular person. Family-centered is more like "I'm including your family too. What do you want, but also what does your family want? How can I modify my approach to satisfy both of your needs?" So, that would be a typical implication of my background. Also, you can't ignore the influence of religion on this type of stuff. Religion always gets included in medicine with my family. Supposedly, many Latino people think that God leads them to whatever path unfolds before them—everything is predetermined by God and you can ask him for help, but ultimately it's out of your control. You have to take that into consideration. You have to understand family dynamics. The decision maker is normally the father in this patriarchal makeup, or it's a multi-generational house where everyone gets a say. I would say also another implication is shame around mental health in Latino culture. This is not a topic many people bring up with their clients because it's essentially taboo. So, I would say that to improve your practice with your clients that have these different experiences, you have to become educated and you have to be open about learning and accepting yourself. This is very hard because...from my experience, my parents would say that it wasn't a "thing" to have these mental disorders when they were younger. It's more like a problem that is black and white, far more concrete, with easy solutions that permanently remove these executive dysfunctions. But now, American culture is slowly learning that these issues are much deeper, and we have an understanding that it's not like that, it's something you deal with forever, and you have to find ways to cope and move on. So, that being said, once someone of my background has that information, education, and experience, they can provide better services. They can be willing to take our clients' needs even further into consideration, deeper than just surface-level concerns. Once you're able to bond with these students, you're able to gain their

⁷ Ibid.

trust and that's important. Another one of our...let's say "common characteristics" that Latino people share is that respect is a very important aspect either in medicine or in language.⁸

Understanding the importance of dependent and the independent thinking has fundamentally transformed my learning product. Last year, when I created the original product, I felt as though ideas represented strong, creative, and interactive assessments. However, my product does far more for different types of learners than previously in understanding the writings of Hammond, Wexler, and even lectures from Dr. Rwany Sibaja. For example, in my lesson on the American Revolution, I had previously utilized a "fishbowl" discussion focused on primary source analysis and a discussion of "revolution." However, after reading literature from various sources, I have better understood how to incorporate this theory of learning into my everyday practice as an educator. By extending all my lessons to include project-based learning alongside digital media, dependent learners can begin transitioning into independent thinkers. The utilization of crowdsourcing websites such as Zooniverse formally allows pedagogy to extend past the confines of traditional worksheets or lectures. By grouping independent learners with dependent learners in tackling critical analysis, a more comprehensive curriculum falls into focus and allows students to excel where they would have otherwise struggled.

Understanding the connections between dependent, independent, collectivist, and culturally responsive teaching help to bolster one's pedagogy. While many of these examples stem from disciplines outside historical frameworks, their insight helps illustrate the changes in how history educators must approach student learning. Understanding that many students in one's class come from various backgrounds can help the history educator better underscore their points of view and the types of history discussed. In the monograph, *We Want to Do More Than*

⁸ Kevin Ugarte (graduate student) in conversation with the author, November 2022.

Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom, scholar, and activist Bettina L. Love illuminated how community-based education can help lead to a safer, more inclusive classroom. In one of her chapters, Love detailed the rich history of Rochester, New York, and the Black community leaders that helped the schools around the community.⁹ More significantly, Love continually exclaimed the significance of intersectionality and activist pedagogy. In reading her perspective, my product of learning has abundantly begun to include these conversations about race, class, and oppression on a systemic scale. Take, for example, my lesson plan on the Haitian revolution. Previously, I had students listen to a lecture about the events of the Revolution. My justification for this aspect came from the sensitive and controversial nature of the events.

The Haitian Revolution, America's most successful revolt by enslaved persons, represented a violent and perhaps traumatizing aspect of world history. However, after closely reading the academic literature, I have now allowed this lesson plan to combine digital media and a celebration of identity more effectively. In Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn's article, "Unpacking the Suitcase and Finding History: Doing Justice to the Teaching of Diverse Histories in the Classroom," the scholars discussed the importance of agency and intersectionality when teaching difficult topics of oppression and marginalization.¹⁰ While the instruction of an oppressive system represents a significant benchmark for history teachers worldwide, diverse student learners also need to feel validated and safe within the classroom setting. Therefore, I have amended my Haitian revolution lesson to help better dependent learners gain strength in reading comprehension while celebrating the various identities and experiences encapsulating this liberation movement. Just as Hammond and Love decried the importance of celebrating

⁹ Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, (Boston: Bacon Press, 2019), 63-81.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 3-17.

diversity and allowing students to see themselves as historical actors, the utilization of programs like Zotero has fundamentally altered the course of my pedagogical understanding. Moreover, utilizing Zotero to deconstruct and analyze monographs such as *The 1619 Project* or *Common Winds: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* allow dependent learners to hone their comprehension skills while also understanding the nuance of racial politics and marginalization.

Activist teaching maintains a monumental place within the education system. History remains composed of diverse, almost infinite questions that continue to fuel curiosity. For social studies instructors, helping students acclimate themselves to past experiences remains vital—there is something interesting for everyone within the confines of history; students simply need guidance finding fascinating topics and themes. With the influx of the digital age, access to various modalities of history has become far more accessible than in decades past.¹¹ In T. Mills Kelly's 2013 monograph *Teaching History in the Digital Age*, the scholar argued for using new technologies to influence student learning. More importantly, however, Kelly discussed why digital literacy remains essential for historians-in-training. In outlining a student who edited a video clip of the Nuremberg Trials to have the infamous "Jaws" motion picture score, Kelly understood the importance of using digital strategies to help students begin thinking more critically.¹²

Using resources such as Omeka, teachers can monitor student understanding of history and media more effectively. Taking from Kelly's methodology, I have transformed my French Revolution lesson plan into an interactive, digital mapping project that incorporated traditional

¹¹ Michael Lovorn, Patrick Manning, and Molly Annis Warsh, "Entering a New Era in World History Education," in *The History Teacher* 50, no. 3 (2017).

¹² T. Mills Kelly, "Introduction," in *Teaching History in the Digital Age*, (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 1-5.

pedagogy and intersected with activist teaching. For example, before my finalized draft, I simply had the students make thematic timelines of events like “The Storming of the Bastille.” However, I have now expanded upon this project, utilizing the timelines to help students understand the difference between factual sources of information and biased accounts. While mapping, students must catalog their found artifacts to help them see the connections between geography and society and how digital resources represent a double-edged sword. Like Kelly, students not only acquire the skills to become digitally literate but also fully begin transitioning into independent thinkers capable of inquiring like a historian.

The digital revolution, however, can also become a powerful tool in enfranchising marginalized demographics or those historically left out of the popular canon. In the article, “‘Victims of History’: Challenging Students’ Perceptions of Women in History,” scholars Bridget Lockyer and Abigail Tazzymant underscored the importance of teaching feminist theory within the classroom. Social history, a facet of historiographic methodology that focuses on average citizens’ mundane and ordinary lives, finds incredible power in shaping feminine aspects within the historical canon. The scholars wrote that the historical erasure of women within academic and educational history has left many women alienated from the subject.¹³ The history of gender and sexuality represent highly significant focuses for those engaging with the sociopolitical orders of the enigmatic past. Within my research, the French revolution and the various proto-feminist undercurrents provide an extensive reach into this fascinating subject matter. While continuing with the Omeka mapping project, student-centered research allows them to critically examine women like Olympe de Gouges, an eighteenth-century feminist who helped craft the document “Declaration of the Rights of Woman.” Throughout my graduate school

¹³ Bridget Lockyer, and Abigail Tazzymant, “‘Victims of History’: Challenging Students’ Perceptions of Women in History,” in *Teaching History*, no. 165 (2016): 8–15.

tenure, I have heavily focused on the role of gender and sexuality in creating various systems and societies. Utilizing this specific methodology allowed my curriculum to integrate experiences outside the traditional “white male perspective more fully.” This facet, in tandem with digital strategies like Zotero or Omeka, allows young girls and women in my classroom to center themselves on living history. As Hammond discussed in her monograph, the creation of understanding and solidarity between student and educator bequeaths productive learning.

Lastly, I have chosen to update the comic book project I administered a few years ago. In American society, comic books have held significant cultural value since the 1930s. Images of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman represent household names that characterize the American spirit. For students, the comic book strip underscores a recognizable and easily interpreted avenue for historical cataloging. In the article “Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic Novel,” scholars Alicia C. Decker and Mauricio Castro underscored the long legacy of utilizing graphic novels within the classroom. From best-sellers like *Maus* to interactive projects, the utilization of the comic book proffers a way for teachers to connect with their students and provide creative outlets for dependent learners.¹⁴ Moreover, historians discussed the importance of utilizing these stories to underscore actual historical events. For example, teaching the history of World War II can often represent a daunting task. Decker and Castro delineated the use of Golden Age stories to help students better understand United States’ perspective in dealing with Nazi war crimes.¹⁵ Within my lesson plan, however, I have given students full creative agency in undertaking the events of the revolution. In constructing a biographic comic strip in groups, artistic students, talented writers, and dependent learners can all come together to illustrate events like the Latin American

¹⁴ Alicia C. Decker, and Mauricio Castro, “Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic Novel,” in *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (2012): 169–87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Revolution. While still having room to grow, this class project underscores the importance of both traditional pedagogy and new-age strategies that diversify the curriculum.

This product of learning does not represent a finalized product. While its aspect does include over 200 hours of work and research, the lesson plans must continually evolve to match the state of education. Just as I have included digital strategies with Omeka, Zotero, and Zooniverse, new data collection programs will continue to emerge. Moreover, new influences and continuities will augment the modern history classroom as educators transform the pedagogical landscape. Education scholars, both in the field of history and outside of its parameters, designate the significance of these augmentations. For instructors like Zaretta Hammond, the combination of neuroscience and practical applications of “thinking theory” have reshaped the meanings of teaching in the digital age. Through examining the weaknesses of history education, the use of digital media practices, abolitionist perspectives, and the utilization of various historical methods within the classroom, an expansive, more comprehensive application of history begins to emerge at the forefront of educational consciousness.

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