

Teaching American History the Public History Way by Briann Greenfield and Bruce Reinholdt

Public historians often define their professional identity by their absence from the classroom. Indeed, “history outside the classroom” is commonly provided as a simple response to that difficult question, “What is public history?” But the Teaching American History Grant Program is quickly changing that old axiom and making public historians active participants in classroom education.

Championed by Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, the discretionary grant program administered by the U.S. Department of Education is designed to raise student achievement by improving teachers' understanding of and appreciation for traditional U.S. history. In the last five years, TAH has appropriated over \$600 million dollars toward history education. The program allows school districts to craft their own programs for teacher enrichment. Many have focused on cultivating “historical thinking skills” and the use of primary source documents. Others have worked to incorporate new instructional technologies and facilitate mentor-teacher relationships. But as a requirement of the program, all local education agencies must collaborate with history content providers such as institutions of higher education, non-profit history organizations, libraries, or museums. A brief glance at the Department of Education’s web site suggests the extent to which museums, libraries, and historical societies have become active participants in classroom education. Of the six featured programs, five list at least one museum as a grant partner, and many have extended their reach to include more. In Connecticut, where we work, the story is the same. A variety of TAH programs in the state have used museum, historical society, library and archival resources as key components of their programs. Through these projects, public historians are clearly becoming more directly involved in classroom education. They are working to locate appropriate primary source documents for classroom use, constructing “history trunks” with reproduction artifacts to facilitate hands-on learning, teaching the teachers about their local history, attracting teachers to bring their

students to their sites as well as visiting classrooms with museum resources. At Central Connecticut State University, we have been thinking about the relationship between public historians and teachers for some time. Our History Department houses a Secondary Education Certification Program in History and Social Studies as well as a MA program in Public History. Originally conceived as a way to serve those students who did not want to teach, the Public History program began, almost from its inception, to attract teachers. Surprised as we were, we found immediately that teachers and public historians have much in common. Both must know their audiences, tailor content

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knowledge to the public’s needs, make history relevant, practice shared authority, confront popular perceptions of the past and continue to develop historical analysis and critical thinking. In this sense, public history is not just a career track, but a way of thinking about the past.

Recognizing the connection between public history and classroom practice led us to adopt an administrative model for our TAH grant which placed public history at its center. While not unique, our TAH staffing is different from most in that we have a historian as our project director rather than a school official. While the project director’s responsibilities include program planning, budget supervision, and many other administrative responsibilities, her perspective as a historian strengthens the program and brings content to the fore. The program director is joined by a colleague with the title of “public historian.” Both the program director and public historian report to a faculty member in the History Department who serves as the project’s academic director. While other programs use public historians as content and material providers our model makes public historians full participants in the shaping of classroom

practices. The project director and public historian function as a team. Together they make decisions about what content topics to cover, skills to emphasize, and sources to select. As a result, teachers are frequently exposed to techniques commonly employed in museums. They learn how to analyze non-traditional sources such as material culture artifacts, images, oral histories, landscapes, and the built environment. They participate in interactive learning exercises and they explore new activities. Indeed, a recent workshop session focused on using exhibition building as an assessment to sharpen students' interpretation, selection, and writing skills. The

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net effect is that the practice of the public historian, especially when applied to the analysis and use of primary source materials, is regularly and consistently modeled for our teachers. The public historian is not an occasional visitor who "parachutes" in only to quickly leave. Instead, he is a permanent staff member who can offer support and advice as teachers experiment with new techniques.

In developing this staffing model, we justified the inclusion of a public historian with the rationale that he or she would function as the teachers' "legs." Teachers, even the most enthusiastic and well-supported ones, rarely have the time to visit local historical societies and locate new materials. One of the primary missions of our public historian is, therefore, to find excellent primary sources for our teachers and make them ready for classroom use. While most TAH grants have chosen to work with larger historical organizations because of the presence of their professional staffs, having our own "in house" public historian has allowed us to draw on a greater variety of local history organizations, including smaller historical societies.

Tapping the resources of these local historical societies has been good for our teachers, especially when it means that they can engage the histories of their own communities and use resources and professional networks right in their school districts. Nearby history is often

particularly relevant, and we have found that both our teachers and their students are interested in exploring their communities' past. Certainly there are difficulties with this approach, especially since mandated testing and time constraints leave few opportunities to focus on local history. Still, all history is local, or at least the national story can often be effectively told through local materials. By carefully selecting our themes, we have tied local events and examples to broad themes and issues that teachers already address in their classrooms. As a result, the TAH grant program is not only helping locate primary source materials that have often been out of the public eye, it is bringing local history into community schools.

While TAH is focused on local school districts and curriculum development, participating historical societies also stand to benefit from the program. Here it is more difficult to document effects. However, with their participation in TAH, public history organizations, their staff, and volunteers have an opportunity to become more aware of school curricula requirements and state standards. Armed with this new knowledge, they can strengthen their educational services, creating programs with clear curricula connections, integral to instruction and reflective of historical analysis and critical thinking. We have noticed that teachers are recognizing the professionalism of today's public history organizations and that they increasingly see museums, historical societies, historic houses and archives as storehouses for classroom resources. In a sense, public history institutions and teachers are growing professionally together.

As a result, participating teachers and local public history professionals are building new professional networks. History teachers' professional networking is often limited to other teachers as opposed to other historians. By bringing together university-based scholars, teachers, and public historians we are seeing the development of new professional networks. In 2006 the OAH reported 1,700 teachers among its members, a statistic born out by teachers' clear presence at the annual meeting. The TAH symposium that preceded the OAH annual meeting last March affirmed the growing partnerships among classroom teachers, history educators and public historians. With our grant, all teacher participants become members of the Association for the Study of Connecticut History

and receive the organization's scholarly journal, a publication currently edited in our History Department. They also become members of the OAH and receive a subscription to the *Hog River Journal*, a new magazine of Connecticut heritage. This shift in teachers' professional identity – they aren't just educators, they are historians too – has enhanced the strength of the partnerships among classroom educators and public historians.

While the TAH grant has opened up new possibilities for our department and our profession, some challenges remain for us. High on our priority list is to better use the resources of the TAH office to benefit our public history program. In Connecticut museum education is a growth field. Many historical societies and museums are targeting their limited funds towards their school audience, even though testing mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation is drawing school resources away from History and Social Studies education. Still, many of our public history students are particularly interested in the field of museum education and we have begun to discuss the possibility of offering a concentration in museum education that makes use of our existing certification program as well as the experimental work of the TAH staff. One possibility is to allow public history MA candidates to complete their required internships in the TAH office. Another possibility is funding for a public history graduate student assistant assigned to TAH.

TAH has produced many wonderful benefits – great curricula material, new professional networks, and the cultivation of local historical resources. However, TAH is in a precarious position. No one knows when the funding will run out and what the future will hold. We worry that the short-term collaborations brought about by TAH may not live beyond a particular granting cycle. Let us suggest that if the TAH program was the catalyst for these mutually beneficial professional relationships to begin, then it is incumbent upon all of us to work hard to maintain them. As conceived, the goal of TAH is a narrow one in the sense that it focuses on raising student achievement by improving teachers' knowledge and understanding of and appreciation for "traditional U.S. history." But what we are seeing is a much larger (seismic!) shift in the way we do history. TAH is facilitating relationships between public historians,

teachers, and university-based scholars and helping them collaborate in deep and meaningful ways. As historians concerned with the future of our profession, it is incumbent upon us to further that work and we hope that public historians, uniquely posed as they are to bridge the divides between academic, popular, and local history, will continue as key participants in the process.

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