Research in Historiographical Analysis

As a program participant, you will be engaged in one of the latest techniques for making history relevant and engaging for middle and high school students: historiographical analysis.

“Historiography” may be defined as a study of why and how history changes. It may be further described as a study of how we remember our history, and in doing so, what factors impact what and how we choose to commemorate or celebrate. In some cases, we may even study what has NOT been commemorated or celebrated.

This type of analysis can be done on just about any historical display or body of work, but typically, we are looking at how people account for eras or events of the past. What is their motivation? When we see a monument that commemorates a person or persons... events from the past, what does it include? What is left out? Whose perspective is a primary focus? Whose perspective is secondary, or not included at all? It’s more than a discussion of accuracy. It’s a discussion of agency. To quote noted historiographical analysis expert James Loewen, “History is not what happened... History is what we SAY happened.” – Indeed.

This concise statement calls our attention to the subjectivity of history. Even though our textbooks seem to include an overwhelming amount of “history,” they are not at all exhaustive. Think of all the typical information that is included in an average high school U.S. history book. Now, as a history person, you well know that even with all that IS included, there is also a lot – perhaps even more – that is left out. As an example, generally, there is very little included in text that challenges or questions U.S. policy. Our textbooks really shy away from controversy. Open your textbook and count the number of lines devoted to criticizing U.S. government treatment of Native Americans, for instance.

We can historiographically analyze monuments just like we can analyze a passage of text. Sometimes, we do so by taking students outside the classroom and have them investigate and analyze local monuments, museum displays, roadside markers, murals, or landmarks. How can we accomplish this as efficiently as possible while maximizing student engagement? Join us and find out!

Please feel free to reach out to me with questions about historiography or any other program components. Again, we thank you for visiting our webpage, and we look forward to welcoming you into the program.

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