



Fall 2008

Fellow Members of TNCHE:

In my first “Message from the President” I thought it appropriate to discuss the beginning of the school year and, more specifically, the task of introducing students to the study of history. Like many of you I always find it challenging to really explain to students what it really means to study history and why, in fact, any one should bother with it in the first place. To me it is essential to tackle this on the first day since the rest of the year depends on their understanding of why any of this even matters. Too often they come to class believing that all they ever needed to know was in that behemoth of a textbook, which makes listening to me even more challenging. To them, history is quite objective and there is only one voice, one story, one perspective, end of story.

My step in waking them up to history is to do something they do not expect on the first day. For me, that means doing something active first and leaving attendance and other administrative matters to the end of period. This year I asked them to get out a piece of paper and something to draw with. Their only instruction from that point was to draw our school as best as possible and, when finished, come tape it to the board. Yes, stick-figure schools and students were ok and so were the more abstract interpretations (like the one that seemed inspired by Dali and Monet all at once). Regardless of their artistic talents they all finished within a few minutes and their work was on the board for all to see. Then I asked them to tell me which one was right and sat back and watched their brows furrow and mouths twist in a very brief moment of confusion. Of course, they all realized that none of them could be deemed “right” or even “wrong.” There were some that were more respectable, more accurate, more well crafted, but there was no right or wrong. *

This was the moment for us to finally begin talking about history because now they were ready to get the message. Writing history is exactly like drawing that picture because history is simply the interpretation of evidence made into a well-crafted and thoughtful argument of a particular point. Why are there hundreds of books just about one subject like Abraham Lincoln, or WWII or Mao? Because with each new author or piece of evidence – or even new political atmosphere – comes a new interpretation of the events of the past. Indeed, there are even multiple textbooks just for our class. They may not put forth earth-shattering interpretations of history, but each one has a slightly different point they are trying to prove. So it is with our study of history this year and so it will be expected when they write essays or have debates.

I kept all the drawings because I am anticipating having to break them out to make this point quite frequently throughout the year. Plus, you never know when that stick-figure drawing will one day belong to the next Monet.

*You can have your facts wrong, certainly, but assuming research is done well and facts are used correctly your interpretation cannot be quantified in such plain terms. Degree of accuracy is the idea I tend to use because it seems to generate more thoughtful discussion than deciding upon right or wrong.

Sincerely,
Seth Swihart
President, TNCHE