

Dear friends and colleagues,

August 2020

I hope and pray that you are healthy and safe in these complex and turbulent times. The note below and attached Word document outline a new project I will be launching in late September.

With COVID restrictions against meeting in person continuing in September, we are now preparing to do this work via Zoom, email, US Mail and other forms of communication. If ever there was a time calling for innovative educational formats, this is it. Our use of Zoom will now open the project to participants from a much wider geographic area.

Perhaps you will find this project of interest . . . or let me ask you to forward this information to friends or colleagues who might wish to participate. Please let me know any thoughts you wish to share. *Thank you!*

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In a time like the present, filled with the weight of our own life experiences and now an era of turmoil that is simultaneously personal, national, and worldwide – I have decided to re-invent (beginning in September) a project I began at an earlier point in my life and professional work.

I am writing now to invite you and others to join me in this collaborative endeavor –

***Entering History™:
Learning and Teaching US History in the 21st Century.***

With the help of the internet, telephone, and individual contacts, I am reaching out now to colleagues and friends from years ago as well as new partners whose goals, interests, or professional work might intersect with this project.

The perspective of history can be of far greater importance to us now – as we move through a worldwide health crisis, intensified struggles for racial equality in our nation, terribly divisive national politics, and the necessity of working together to build a post-crisis period of recovery and reinvention.

Please contact me if the following project interests you. Please share it with others who might find it compelling. Encourage them to contact me if they are interested or wish further details. The focus of the project is described below; details of the format and time frame are attached. *Thanks again!*

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In recent decades of contested educational priorities, the teaching of US History has, for many students, been reduced to brief lessons about Martin Luther King, Jr. hastily pulled together because Dr. King’s birthday and Black History Month come so quickly after Christmas vacation. Proactive teaching and deep learning about the larger sweep of American history – the nature of our country’s professed values, our successes, failures, crises, and ongoing struggles to live up to our democratic aspirations – often feels highly politicized and is not consistently required or tested by the end-of-year standardized exams in many states. As a result, the serious teaching of US History in elementary and middle schools is frequently minimized, trivialized, or avoided entirely.

As a teacher and then as the principal of public elementary schools in both rural and urban communities – where we have studied and learned US History integrated with “analytic writing” – one of my clearest takeaways is that our elementary and middle school students often know so little about history that they are, in fact, *fascinated* by it . . . most especially children from immigrant families.

Students at our K-5 public school in South Boston wrote and published a book, *Why Do We Celebrate Evacuation Day?* about the little-known historical events that led, in March 1776, to the peaceful departure of the British “redcoats” who had been occupying the city of Boston for eight years. When a Boston *Globe* reporter asked one student, a Somali girl, “What did you know about the American Revolution before you started writing this book?”, she answered proudly and truthfully, “I’d never heard of it.”

Every student in our Boston public school, kindergarten through grade 5, did a lot of writing throughout the school year, and our scores on the state’s MCAS English Language Arts test rose from **26%** Proficient+Advanced in 2006 to **74%** Proficient+Advanced in 2011.

Since my retirement from Boston, I have been a guest teacher in public schools ranging from a financially distressed but almost all-white district in Massachusetts to a public charter school near New York’s

LaGuardia Airport, where almost every student is from an immigrant family. Their parents have jobs loading cargo and cleaning hotel rooms at the airport; their families came to the United States from Sri Lanka and Haiti and Nigeria and Puerto Rico and Mexico. The students had never met me before we started our study of the Wampanoags, the Pilgrims, and the events leading to what we call Thanksgiving. Within a few days, these students were immersed in US History, asking ... *"Please please please!"* ... could they take home overnight the various books I had brought to their classroom? Many wanted to read the books to their parents.

I have confidence in our methods for getting students eagerly writing – not just about topics like “My Birthday Party at Six Flags” – but in response to complex questions like the following, concerning the events that have become the Thanksgiving holiday:

When two groups of people from opposite sides of the planet (who have never met before) meet each other for the first time, what determines whether they will get along and live together peacefully – or will fight and kill each other?

Why do you think we should celebrate Thanksgiving – or not?

We have, at the National Classroom, Inc., a treasure trove of children’s and adult books at different reading levels, with very different political perspectives (and some are in Spanish), about the encounter of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags. We adults and our students can, together, wrestle intellectually with such topics – and our students can create, in writing, their own responses to complex but important questions. Moreover, we have repeatedly confirmed that the full range of our students, from the most successful to the most struggling, enjoy stretching their minds around big questions for which even the adults do not have simple answers.

I have also used my writing methods with individual children who hate writing, with similar positive results. Many of these students are the sons of graduate students arriving in Boston to start the school year. These young men know they have the right sneakers to be cool, but they also have powerful “I hate to write” emotions, weak writing skills, and well-practiced avoidance strategies. I believe I know how to cure that.

Collaboratively addressing these elements will be central to our ***Learning and Teaching US History in the 21st Century*** project for educators, our students, and other interested persons. Participants will have wide options and support to integrate their own reading and writing about US History with the teaching of analytic writing to our students, to their own sons or daughters, or in other settings.

The project will also focus on the development and use of both on-line and in-person K-12 materials and lessons for the collaborative study of key elements of US history. **All aspects of the project will be integrated with building all students’ mastery of academic writing and fluent use of the conventions of Standard English.** Key areas of study to which we are committed include the following:

- I. **Thanksgiving – then and now:** the actual events of 1620-21 as Wampanoag indigenous people and Pilgrim settlers met and engaged with each other for the first time; the creation and mythology of the Thanksgiving holiday
- II. **The ideals, documents, and painful realities at the founding of the United States:** the Declaration of Independence, US Constitution, slavery, genocidal war against Native Americans, and the invention of a new nation
- III. **Slavery / Abolition / Reconstruction:** the creation of economic and political structures based on the enslavement of Black people; the political movement to abolish slavery in the 1800’s; the attempts to create racially just political and economic initiatives after the Civil War and to the present day
- IV. **FDR and the creation of the New Deal:** the development of economic and social initiatives to bring American society out of the economic collapse of the Great Depression of the 1930’s
- V. **Citizenship and immigration:** the ideals and realities of participation in American democracy; the complex history of individuals and families entering the United States and seeking full participation in its political and economic structures.

Additional topics of US History will be added based on the interest and commitment of project participants. Attached please find a flyer with further details of the dates and format for this project.

We are now living within a complex historical moment: one of the largest pandemics in the history of the world, widespread demonstrations for racial justice in the streets of our cities, and a sharply divided electorate facing a potentially cataclysmic presidential election. Let me add an insight from psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's 1975 book, *Life History and the Historical Moment*:

A historical moment is determined by the complementarity of what witnesses have considered momentous enough to remember and to record and what later reviewers consider momentous enough to review and re-record – in such a way that the factuality of the event is confirmed or corrected and the actuality is perceived and transmitted to posterity.

For recorders and reviewers alike, however, events assume a momentous character when they seem both unprecedented and yet also mysteriously familiar – that is, if analogous events come to mind that combine to suggest a plausible direction to historical recurrences.

In the COVID crisis, extensive conflict over persistent racial inequality, a profoundly divisive national election, and the shared work emerging from this context . . . we are now – individually and collectively – learning, teaching, and ***making*** history.

Let us do it together, thoughtfully and collaboratively, as a powerful expression of the values we hold – as we build a path from the past and present to the newer, better future we hope to create.

The flyer with further project details is attached on the next pages.

Let me encourage you:

- (a) to contact me to express interest, to ask any questions you might have, or to join the project, and
- (b) to duplicate and share this invitation with others who might be interested.

Thank you very much for your help!

Sincerely,

Barney J. Brawer

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(617) 905-3156

Entering History™ :

Learning and Teaching US History in the 21st Century

a 10 week **collaborative study group** and ongoing **K-12 curriculum development project**
on the history of the United States

for educators and other interested persons

Project membership is designed to support expansive teaching and deeper learning of US History for students in grades K-12, their teachers, and other interested participants.

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In addition, it will help educators and parents to teach analytic writing to students in grades K-12 and to improve our own writing skills through the study of US history.

Thursday nights (except Thanksgiving)

7:00 – 8:30 pm

Sept. 24 through Dec. 3, 2020

\$ 75. includes a copy of the central text, *A Little History of the United States* by James West Davidson, Yale University Press, 2015. *These Truths* by Jill Lepore, W.W.Norton & Co., 2018 will be recommended as a supplementary text.

The on-line discussions and curriculum development projects will be in the form of a collaborative study group. Each Thursday's session will explore the theme of that week's reading in *A Little History* (4 short chapters of 6 pages each). The theme will be expanded by the interests and responses of the participants as well as a wide range of additional optional texts (available on loan from The National Classroom) that can deepen and widen our questioning, our knowledge, and our understanding of US History. Participants will have the opportunity to focus on their own learning, their own writing about history, their students' learning and writing about history, the development of curricula, or some combination.

The National Classroom's extensive collection of history books written for elementary, middle, and high school students and for adults will be available for free, on short-term loan, to project participants. The course and curriculum development projects will be designed to support innovative and effective teaching of US History in K-12 classrooms and schools.

There will not be – in this project – pressure to agree with a simplified analysis or single point of view concerning the sweep and complexity of US history, but rather the project will be a shared attempt to explore questions of fact, interpretation, causality, identity, and the ongoing struggle for equality in our nation's development: past, present, and future.

The situation regarding coronavirus in September: The project meetings had originally been planned for 16 Beals Street, Brookline, the home of Barney Brawer, president of The National Classroom, Inc. and organizer of this course – or, if interest exceeded space in my house, at a larger meeting room in the nearby Coolidge Corner neighborhood. It now seems likely that, in September, group meetings will still be unsafe or inappropriate due to COVID, and much schooling may be on-line as well. We are establishing an easy-to-use Zoom format, so that you can participate via computer in your own home. That will open the project to participants from outside the Boston area.

An Expansive Pedagogy® Project

For further information, please contact Barney Brawer at:

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Let me add a brief chart from a well-respected literacy researcher outlining the important connections between analytic writing and the demonstrable improvement of competencies *across the full terrain of literacy skills*.

Using Writing to Improve Reading *

Timothy Shanahan

University of Illinois at Chicago

www.shanahanonliteracy.com

Why we learn from writing

1. Writing about text is effective because it encourages deeper thinking about ideas
2. Requires students to draw on their own knowledge and experience
3. Helps them to consolidate and review information
4. Inspires the reformulation of thinking
5. Requires the organization and integration of ideas
6. Fosters explicitness
7. Facilitates reflection
8. Encourages personal involvement
9. Requires translation into one's own words

* PowerPoint presentation – Nov. 1, 2018

In the ***Learning and Teaching US History*** project, we will integrate:

- the expansion of our own experience reading and writing about history, with
- the lessons and experiences we develop and implement for our students.