Are Historians of Education “Bowling Alone”? Response to Donato and Lazerson

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In Robert Putnam’s (2000) widely discussed study, he asks whether Americans are “bowling alone” and disengaged from civic life. After reading Donato and Lazerson’s essay (this issue), I was left asking a similar question regarding educational historians. The recurring theme of isolation in our profession deserves closer attention, since it is not simply an occupational hazard of academics in general, but a symptom of the diminished health of our subfield in particular. My response seeks to diagnose at least three different types of solitary activity before outlining several conference participants’ suggested remedies.

1. The work culture of educational historians emphasizes independent research conducted in isolation from other colleagues. Donato and Lazerson write that “Most historians remain ‘solos’ in an environment where research is increasingly team-based.” To be fair, some notable works have arisen through collaborative ventures, such as Tyack and Hansot (1990); Kantor and Lowe (1995); Kaestle, Damon-Moore, Stedman, Tinsley, and Trollinger (1991); and Angus and Mirel (1999). But these works stand out precisely because they are exceptions to the norm. Jim Leloudis, one of the few participants at our conference with significant experience in collaborative research, lamented that “Historians of education, like historians in general, are loners. We seldom undertake collaborative projects or partner ourselves actively with colleagues in related disciplines,” such as educational psychology, ethnography, and policy analysis. A quick survey of the AERA 2000 Annual Meeting Program confirms this claim. Of all the papers sponsored by Division F (History), only 3 out of 71 were co-authored (4%), in contrast to an average of 35% for the entire association. Not only is individualist scholarship lonely, but Cohen and Barnes (1999, p. 37) argue that it also reduces “collective understanding and knowledge cumulation” in educational research.

2. Topical areas within educational history are isolated from one another, and the subfield is isolated from history in general. Donato and Lazerson point out that despite a tremendous growth in the educational history of communities of color, there is “almost no synthesis or intersection across the communities; much of the history has been written in isolation, with Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans and others writing from or about only their particular communities.” Regarding the history of higher education, the authors note that it has “typically been treated as separate from and marginal to the broader field of educational history.” Overall, the distance between our subfield and the discipline of history appears to be growing. Although educational history reestablished itself as an exciting area of historical study in the late 1960s and early 1970s, breaking into mainstream publications such as the American Historical Review and the Journal of American History, Ellen Lagemann (2000, p. 176) observes that our subfield has fallen out of favor since the 1980s.

3. Educational history is isolated from the real world of policy and practice. In contrast to the recent growth of research directly related to school improvement, such as Robert Slavin’s “Success For All,” historians lament our “marginal impact on educational policy” (Donato & Lazerson). This was not the case 30 years ago. At the Spencer conference, nostalgia was quite strong for the so-called “Golden Age” largely due to the influence that revisionist educational history had on contemporary movements toward school change. Looking back on this era, Donato and Lazerson make their most provocative claim. Although “Golden Age” revisionism significantly transformed the subfield and engaged it with policy debates, it did not necessarily produce the most scholarly histories of our time. Instead, this praise is reserved for the subsequent generation of post-revisionists, whose portrayals of schooling as a “contested terrain” have prevailed in the academy over their predecessors’ narratives of monolithic class imposition. But with greater sophistication in historical interpretation, we paid a price; our links to the public and policy debates were severely diminished (Donato & Lazerson).

How can we reduce isolation and reconnect educational history while maintaining scholarly integrity? Several strategies arose at the Spencer conference which deserve closer attention.

Work within existing institutions to encourage networking and collaborative research on generative themes. If we could agree on the topics, the History of Education Society or AERA Division F could focus our attention by sponsoring strands of related conference sessions, or thematic publications in the History of Education Quarterly or interactive discussions on the H-Education network, a moderated listserv for educational historians on the H-Net system. Collaborations outside of the subfield could be pursued along related channels.

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Take advantage of funding opportunities for collaborative research. The Spencer Foundation, a major source of funding for historical research in education, has developed several new categories in recent years. Traditional categories such as the NAE/Spencer post-doctoral fellowship emphasized individualized competition, but new categories, such as Conference Grants and Advanced Post-Doctoral Research Training Grants, invite collaborative efforts. Indeed, constraints exist in academic culture, as tenure review boards favor single-authored publications as signs of independent scholarship. But this does not prevent educational historians from producing single-authored works within a collaborative environment; in fact, perhaps we can best write synthetic works on broad topics by working alongside one another.

Rethink how we design and teach about research. Educational histories of communities of color are isolated from one another, in part because of how scholars frame our questions around individual racial groups. One way to advance our scholarship may be to follow the path taken by Neil Foley (1997) in his prize-winning book, The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture, which breaks conventions by broadening categorization. Similarly, as teachers of educational history, we need to continually rethink how best to incorporate and synthesize new monographs into our classrooms. For instance, imagine a course which blends three different readings—James Anderson’s The Education of Blacks in the South (1988), Vito Perrone’s (1998) work on Leonard Covello and Italian immigrants, and David Adams’s Educated for Extinction (1995) on Native Americans—to compare how and why schooling encouraged segregation, assimilation, or cultural annihilation.

Connect with the public on research and writing. Some educational historians have fought isolationism by consciously writing to reach broader audiences in the popular press, such as Jonathon Zimmerman’s recent essays in Education Week (2000). Others have engaged with the public in the course of conducting research, such as Vanessa Siddle Walker’s community study in Their Highest Potential (1996). Still others have chosen to write histories for public policy audiences, the most notable example being Maris Vinovskis’s (1999) work on federal education policy.

A concluding word of caution: Connections with the American public will always be more readily available to scholars who, like myself, study policy-related topics in recent U.S. educational history. The bridges we must cross are relatively short. Yet, as historians, we must ensure that our subfield maintains a central place for scholarship on the education of people in distant times and faraway places. To neglect this role would transform us all into culturally deprived presentists, trapped inside our current-day context, unable to view the past through any lens other than the one at the given moment. Of all the types of isolation mentioned above, perhaps presentism is the one we should fear most. And if historians do not attempt to rescue us from it, who will?

Notes


2 On collaboration, see John Rury, “RE:QU: Why Do Educational Historians Work Alone?” posting to H-Education listserver [http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~educ/], 24 August 2000. The AERA 2000 Annual Meeting Program includes papers and roundtable sessions only. The overall average is based on four randomly selected pages.

References


Zimmerman, J. (2000, August 2). Harry Potter and his censors. Education Week, p. 44.

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