Doing National History Day With Your Students

Gail Ingram

My most memorable experience as a teacher who uses the National History Day (NHD) program in her courses occurred in June 2009 at the national contest, held annually at the University of Maryland in College Park. One of my students, a freshman named Joshua Campbell, had advanced to the run-offs in the senior individual performance category (Figure 1). The 2009 NHD theme was “The Individual in History: Actions and Legacies,” and Campbell created a ten-minute dramatic monologue of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old Chicago teenager who was murdered in Mississippi in the summer of 1955. (See Joshua’s article in this issue.) During his performance in the Stamp Student Union Atrium, audible sobs could be heard in the audience, and even though I knew what he was going to say, I have to admit I shed more than a few tears. The same age as Till, Campbell was able to bring that young man back to life thanks to his extensive primary source research, his careful analysis and interpretation, and his moving script. After the performance, his mother and I received many handshakes and hugs from appreciative teachers, parents, and students, and we were deeply touched by everyone’s comments and reactions.

As Joshua Campbell’s experience suggests, the value of NHD goes beyond moving performances and appreciative audiences. NHD develops your students’ interests in history, helps them make exciting discoveries about the past, and teaches them to use and learn from primary sources. It links their broader interests by using interdisciplinary approaches to historical topics, nurtures their intellectual development, and allows them to use their understanding of history to become engaged, informed citizens. If you teach at the secondary level and have not tried NHD with your students, these reasons are among the many that may prompt consideration of integrating the NHD program into your curriculum.

While starting a new program can be daunting, there is no need to “reinvent the wheel.” There is so much available information and support to show you how to use this superb history education program based on scholarship and creativity in your own classroom. Such support may begin with some practical suggestions for novice NHD teachers (see sidebar). As a result of their participation in NHD, your students will learn to conduct quality research. They will also learn to analyze and interpret their evidence, and to demonstrate the historical significance of their topics. If my ninth graders can learn to do this and compete against upperclassmen in the senior division, then your own students can do the same.

Do not look at the program as just a student competition because it is more of a campaign to change the way history is being taught in our country.

Going Beyond the Classroom

Since 1980, I have been a history teacher at Cheraw High School in Cheraw, South Carolina, a small town (population of six thousand) located in a semi-rural part of the state. Cheraw is the birthplace of jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie, who has been the topic of many NHD projects, including a senior individual exhibit by freshman McMenn Bennett called “Discord in Harmony: Bop—Revolution and Reaction in Jazz” which won first place at the national contest in 2002 (Figure 2). My own introduction to the NHD program came through the middle school when one of the teachers, Debbie Ballard, asked me to serve as a judge in their local contest. Dannie Blair, the principal, was a strong NHD supporter who required all eighth graders to participate in NHD. Judging the projects was beneficial because it afforded me an opportunity...
to have a preview of students who would be in my upcoming classes. After serving as a judge, I realized the NHD program was something I should be doing in my own classes. I became an NHD parent for the first time the following year when my daughter worked on a junior group exhibit about Sherman's March, which gave me the chance to observe this unique teaching program from another perspective. As a result of my involvement as a judge and as a parent, in 1997, I decided NHD would be a course requirement in my ninth-grade world history classes. Nothing else I have encountered has been as transformative in improving my skills as a history teacher and increasing my enjoyment of my chosen profession.

Definitely more than just "a day" and certainly not a "science fair" for history students, NHD is a year-long curriculum enhancement program for students in grades six through eight (junior division) and grades nine through twelve (senior division). As individuals or in groups of two to five, students select a topic that is related to an annual theme and they conduct primary and secondary research in libraries, archives, museums, and through interviews with historians and other people, famous and not-so-famous, who are directly connected to their topic. After analyzing and interpreting their research, and drawing conclusions about the significance of their topic in history, students create individual or group projects in one of the following categories: documentaries, exhibits, performances, and websites. The historical paper category is for individuals only. In addition to creating the project, students must also write a five hundred-word process paper that explains how they conducted their research and how they created and developed their project. (The process paper is not required for historical papers.) The process paper concludes with an explanation of how the topic is related to the annual theme. An annotated bibliography divided into primary and secondary sources is also required.

All projects have the same evaluation criteria: historical quality (60 percent), relation to the theme (20 percent), and clarity of presentation (20 percent). Students enter their projects in a series of competitions at the local/school, district/region, and state levels. The NHD competition season culminates with the national contest held at the University of Maryland in June. An "academic Olympics," the national contest provides gold, silver, and bronze cash awards in each junior and senior individual and group category, in addition to a multitude of special awards in a variety of research-specific subjects such as American labor, baseball, and the Civil War. Outstanding state entry awards are given to the highest placing students in each state who did not receive an award. Teachers and NHD coordinators are also eligible for special educator awards.

As history teachers, we always strive to go beyond the confines of the classroom and textbook, engaging our students in innovative learning experiences. When students make those important connections across time and place, between cultures, they understand cause and effect more readily. We also want to provide opportunities for our students to learn and practice the basics of historical research. Teaching with the NHD program allows me to do all of this in addition to meeting state and national standards. A recent study by Rockman et al (2010) found that students who participate in NHD develop a range of college- and career-ready skills and outperform their peers on state standardized tests in multiple subjects, including reading, math, and social studies. I can provide firsthand testimony about the study because my own high school and school district participated in this national evaluation to explore the impact of NHD. The body of anecdotal evidence about the impact of NHD on students and teachers has always been extensive, but now there is statistical data to prove the effectiveness of NHD's innovative, immersive approach to history education.

When it comes to deciding whether or not to participate in the NHD program, consider the truism, "if I can do it, so can you," because it certainly applies to my own teaching situation in an academically and economically challenged state. Vince Lombardi once said, "A school without football is in danger of deteriorating into a medieval study hall." I would go so far as to say that a school without a challenging program like NHD is in danger of deteriorating into a mediocre testing mill. According to the 2010-2011 School Report Card for all South Carolina schools and districts, my high school's on-time graduation rate of 75.1 percent mirrors the state's less than impressive rate of 75.2 percent. South Carolina still ranks forty-ninth out of fifty states for the public school graduation rate. Over the years, I have listened to the ongoing commentary about the low performance of public schools in my state. I have grown weary of hearing that South Carolina is not graduating enough high school students, that it is not sending enough students to college, and that it is not graduating enough students from college.

To be sure, the NHD program is not a panacea for all the problems that plague public education, but it can assist teachers like me in raising the bar for students. NHD allows me to engage and encourage even the struggling students in my class, and I am not alone in my
Nuts and Bolts

Before my students begin their work in the NHD program, I send a letter home to parents to help them understand how valuable this experience will be in the future academic success of their children.Forging a partnership with parents is crucial because their children are too young to drive themselves to out-of-town libraries, archives, and battlefield sites. My students have been recognized for their strong use of primary sources in South Carolina historical repositories by the many awards they have won over the years at the state contest. This would not have been possible without parents driving their children all over the state to such places as Charleston, Columbia, and Greenville. I also depend on parents to come through with the extra expenses involved in creating competition-quality exhibits, props, costumes, and anything else needed for the specific entry categories, including providing pizza and Chinese food for late-night work sessions. NHD has become a rite of passage at my high school with many parents having more than one child participate in the program. Their interest and support allows me to help their children excel in school.

Making their NHD participation a course requirement is how I motivate my students, and I offer incentives (e.g., extra points) when they revise their entries for each competition level. One of the hallmarks of NHD is that students take ownership of their topic, becoming “experts” as a result of their research which can be a powerful motivator. As another motivating factor, participating in the NHD program provides my ninth graders with one of the few opportunities to earn academic accolades for their grade level. After the region and state contests, my award-winning students will go to school wearing medals around their necks just like successful athletes after their own competitions (Figure 3).

I doubt I would have many students to participate in NHD if I offered it as an extracurricular activity. However, I have had students work with me after their freshman year because they often want another opportunity to go to the national contest. Meagan Linton went to the national contest twice with a group exhibit and returned a third time as a junior. She won a third-place award for her senior individual exhibit in 2004 on Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats. Many of her primary sources were interviews she conducted with Senator Thurmond’s contemporaries.

Lasting Lessons

NHD also allows my students to learn and practice skills that benefit them long after they leave my classroom. McKenna Buck, who went to the national contest in 2010 with a historical paper called “The Kodak Camera: The Innovative ‘Snap’ That Impacted and Changed History,” said, “I am no longer overwhelmed with my assignments because of the strategies that I learned through NHD.” Bryan Blair, a four-year veteran of the national contests, won second place in the senior individual exhibit category as a freshman in 2000. He also won a partial scholarship to Chaminade University in Hawaii as a junior in 2002 at the national contests and he displayed his exhibits on Jackie Robinson and the Orangeburg Massacre at the National Archives and the Smithsonian’s Museum of American History. He admitted, “Time management was not my strength, so meeting deadlines was something I had to work on because this issue could not be compromised with Mrs. Ingram.” A five-time competitor at the national contests from 1996-2000 and a winner of the senior Outstanding State Entry award in 1999, Crystal Esaw mentioned the many skills she used to prepare her entries that will stay with her through her future ventures: “I learned responsibility and how to do things on time. While competing, I was counting on my hard work and determination. I put everything into getting something done and I believe these skills will help me in my college life.” The lessons students learn from participating in NHD will stay with them long after the competitions are over. Just as National History Day is more than “a day,” it is more than just a contest.

NHD is “a gift that keeps on giving” because the life of a student entry can go beyond any contest. Most students do not win any awards at the state or national contests, but their historical research can end up having a greater impact after the competition season ends. Matt Butler’s individual performance of a young man from a nearby town who did not return home from the Bataan Death March (his high school class ring was found in the Philippines) led to an invitation to be a guest presenter at a Bataan-Corregidor survivors’ reunion in 1998. Crystal Esaw presented her individual performance about the Holmesburg Prison experiments at an annual gathering in 1999 of former inmates in Philadelphia. My son, Mark Ingram, participated as well in 2000 with a historical paper about the March 1945 firebombing of Tokyo that
History Day Tips for Teachers

Starting a National History Day program can be both exciting and daunting. Using the right resources is necessary for your students to succeed in meeting the many new challenges and opportunities. Below are tips and resources to help you develop your program.

Become familiar with the NHD website. Everything you need to know about the program is here, a "one-stop shopping center." The useful guidebooks will help your students develop their entries, and you can also purchase exhibit boards for your school/district contests.

Read what is on your state NHD website (and other states too). Besides South Carolina, one of my favorite NHD states is Minnesota, the home of "Mooser History," the character created by NHD state coordinator Tim Hoogland (a.k.a. "Mr. History"). The state NHD coordinators provide helpful and practical information.

Study the NHD rules book and the annual theme book. Explain to your students the basic format of NHD, the contest categories, the annual theme, the research process, and how they will be evaluated. Help them select a topic and begin their research.

Find an NHD mentor. My main mentor was Debbie Ballard, the middle school teacher who not only introduced the program to me, but also shared her "trade secrets." Another mentor who "trained" me is South Carolina high school teacher Jim McNeil, who spent one year as our state NHD coordinator. McNeil boiled down the three essential questions every NHD entry has to address: (1) What's the point? (2) Where's the proof? (3) What are the results?

Volunteer as a judge in a school, district/region, or state NHD contest. Not only will you learn about the judging process, you will have the opportunity to see many entries in a variety of NHD categories. If you understand how entries are judged, then you can expertly guide your students.

Organize your school year around the NHD competition schedule. The school contest is in February, regional in March, state in April, and national in June. The schedules in other states may vary, but you do have time for students to revise their projects before another level of competition. If your students are selected to represent your state at the national contest, you have the month of May to raise money for your travel expenses.

Create a set of deadlines for the research, writing, and creation of entries. The final NHD entry may look intimidating to students, but they will lose their fear if you break everything down into manageable tasks with deadlines.

Make your students revise their work frequently. Have other teachers and interested individuals look at their projects. Revision is essential for the creation of a strong project and it helps if other people look at your students' work.

Join forces with the English teachers at your school. You may be able to collaborate with an English teacher in teaching with the NHD program. At the very least, they can teach your students the MLA or Turabian citation styles and how to write a strong thesis statement and conclusion.

"Tag-team" with another social studies/history teacher. I have always attributed my students' NHD success to the fact that they were first exposed to the program in the eighth grade, and I enjoyed working closely with another NHD teacher. If you are a high school teacher, consider working with a middle school colleague or another teacher at your own school.

led him to interview his Japanese grandmother who survived. She lost her mother and two sisters in one of the worst attacks on civilians in history. My son's paper became a valuable family document, and he ended up spending a year in Japan as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program. He visited with his grandmother the Buddhist temple in Tokyo that holds the ashes of family members and thousands of others. Kath- eren Grishas Clark, a well-known South Carolina painter and ceramics artist (her portrait of Governor James F. Byrnes hangs in the State House in Columbia), was a World War II refugee from Latvia who survived the fall of Berlin in 1945. Mrs. Clark was the subject of a 2009 group exhibit created by her great-grandson, Garrett Pickrel, and his two partners, Joel and Zach Keefe. To celebrate her legacy, the students collected all of Mrs. Clark's paintings and ceramics and sponsored an exhibit of her work in the community art gallery in Cheraw.

Last year, a group of former students stopped by when I was on lunch duty to thank me for teaching them how to conduct research. They were working on a project for their sophomore English teacher and they told me how all of the students who had participated in NHD were "head-and-shoulders" above everyone else in their classes. Not a single one of these students had advanced to the district or state contests, but they were all winners to me. I would be less honest to say that I did not enjoy the competition aspect of NHD, but I have had more lean-and-mean years than award-winning ones. As a NHD teacher, I have the opportunity to teach my students how to become historians and to experience the excitement of history, especially through their own interviews of Bob Dole, Guion Bluford, Chuck Yeager, Ed Dwight, Rachel Robinson, Willie Mays, Marian Wright Edelman, Bataan and Corregidor survivors, World War II and Vietnam veterans, GI Bill recipients, and other people who participated in the great events of our time. Because of my students' participation in NHD, they have skills and knowledge that follow them wherever they go in life. Now, that is a lasting gift. Your own students can become better writers, researchers, collaborators, time managers, and citizens. Before another school year begins, why not give the National History Day program a closer look?

Conclusion

During the 2008-2009 school year, Joshua Campbell's mother was concerned about her son dealing with the horrific details of Emmett Till's lynching that he would encounter in his research. In hindsight, she did not have to worry too much about this mature young man who would go on to place eighth in the nation in his NHD category and win the senior division's African American History Prize in 2009. Campbell will enter Harvard University this fall, and I give a great deal of credit for his admission to his outstanding four-year participation in the NHD program. He reached nationals three times and spent one year as a Normandy Scholar in NHD's first Albert H. Small Student/Teacher Institute, "Normandy: Sacrifice for Freedom," in 2011. In a teaching career of over three decades, I may end up counting Campbell as my first and only student to go to Harvard. However, he has not been the only one to experience success at the national contest. Campbell is only one of hundreds who have experienced what it means to be a student historian, thanks to National History Day.

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