Rethinking America’s Past: How Debate and Controversy Make History Education Stronger

ROBERT COHEN AND SONIA MURROW

No introductory work of American history has had more influence over the past forty years than Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States, which since its publication in 1980 has sold more than three million copies. Rethinking America’s Past is the first work to use archival and classroom evidence to assess the impact that Zinn’s classic work has had on historical teaching and learning and on American culture. This evidence refutes attacks, most recently wielded by those aiming to censor history curriculum in K-12 schools, that exposing students to critical historical narrative indoctrinates them. Rather than indoctrinating students, Zinn’s book has been used by teachers to have students debate and rethink conventional versions of American history.

In this 90 minute session, Sonia Murrow and Robert Cohen will engage participants in exploring how providing competing historical narratives supports in students the development of content knowledge and skills necessary for historical thinking and intelligent and civil debate. The session will include a short film depicting high school students sharing letters they wrote to Zinn after reading chapters from A People’s History alongside a standard textbook. The session will close with a discussion of how debate and controversy make history education stronger, and in the case of teaching with Zinn, didn’t make students hate America—and nor does Critical Race Theory or the 1619 Project.

We extend a special welcome to HIST 3470 and SEED 3402 students.