

Using “Master Narratives” to Teach History: The Case of the Civil Rights Movement

Jennifer Frost

University of Auckland

“HISTORY,” argues historian Tom Holt, “is fundamentally and inescapably narrative in its basic structure.” He argues that history is narrative in its use of time, plot, and causation. “Time is one of the essential dimensions” of history, and historians convey change or continuity over time through narrative. History, like narrative, also “has a plot,” with “a beginning, a middle, and an end.” Finally, to explain causation, “to answer the question of how or why some event, development, or process happened,” historians develop a narrative of causes and consequences.¹ As such, narratives encompass ways of thinking historically and several skills of the historian, and Holt believes it is imperative that we teach—and our students learn—how to construct historical narratives. Understanding and constructing history as narratives opens up the historical project for students. Moreover, demonstrating how differences in historical interpretation are contests over “competing historical narratives” allows students to participate in history as “an ongoing conversation and debate.”²

The history of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement is a case in point. Recent revisionist histories have strongly criticized the “master narrative” of the Civil Rights Movement that permeates “American popular and academic culture.” Beginning with Julian Bond and Charles Payne, scholars have rejected “the naive, top-down, normative perspective on movement

history”—codified as a master narrative—for simplifying, truncating, and mischaracterizing key aspects of the movement.³ Yet, as I discovered when I first began teaching civil rights history, students still bring this perspective into my classroom. Given this, I decided to place the Civil Rights Movement master narrative and criticisms of it at the center of my course design. I also developed two linked short assignments focused on students constructing and revising their own narratives of the Civil Rights Movement. I found that using narrative in this way furthered my aims of teaching both historical content and skills in my classroom, and confirmed Tom Holt’s arguments and findings.

African-American Freedom Struggles and the “Master Narrative”

My students’ familiarity with the master narrative fundamentally determined the contours and content of “African-American Freedom Struggles.” I decided that each week, as we advanced chronologically through the history of African-American activism in the 20th century, we would highlight a different theme related to the master narrative to explore and question, although information related to other themes also was conveyed. Each week’s lecture, discussion, reading, and assessment were aimed at students learning about the history of African-American freedom struggles and debating the utility of the master narrative for conveying this history. Other teachers of the Civil Rights Movement have also used the master narrative as a teaching tool in their classrooms. Most similarly, Derrick P. Alridge argues for a “liberatory pedagogy” to encourage “students to look for patterns in historical narratives,” particularly about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the movement. But neither he nor others apparently structure their entire course around the master narrative and its critiques as I have done.⁴

To give students a concise, if exaggerated for effect, statement of the master narrative, I assigned for their very first reading Charles Payne’s “The View from the Trenches,” which quotes Julian Bond’s version of the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.

Traditionally, relationships between the races in the South were oppressive. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided this was wrong. Inspired by the court, courageous Americans, Black and white, took protest to the street, in form of sit-ins, bus boycotts, and freedom rides. The protest movement, led by the brilliant and eloquent Dr. Martin Luther King, aided by a sympathetic federal government, most notably the Kennedy brothers and a born-again Lyndon Johnson, was able to make America understand racial discrimination as a moral issue. Once Americans understood that discrimination was wrong, they quickly moved to remove racial prejudice and discrimination

from American life, as evidenced by the Civil Rights Acts 1964 and 1965. Dr. King was tragically slain in 1968. Fortunately, by that time the country had been changed, changed for the better in some fundamental ways. The movement was a remarkable victory for all Americans. By the 1970s, southern states where blacks could not have voted ten years earlier were sending African Americans to Congress. Inexplicably, just as the civil rights victories were piling up, many African Americans, under the banner of Black Power, turned their backs on American society.⁵

With this statement as a framework, my students and I examined African-American freedom struggles in the 20th century, challenging key aspects of the master narrative, including the two I discuss in detail here: the chronology and the “top-down” perspective.

Questioning Chronology

The master narrative presents the chronology of the Civil Rights Movement as spanning the years 1954 or 1955—using either *Brown v. Board of Education* or the Montgomery bus boycott as the starting point—to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, or as Charles Payne states it, “the Montgomery to Memphis framework.”⁶ In contrast, I started my course with the revisionist concept of the “long” Civil Rights Movement. Although historians debate the beginning of the Movement, naming World War II, the 1930s, or the 1890s, I followed the lead of Steven Hahn and others and trace freedom struggles back to “slave politics” in the nineteenth century.⁷ Even so, I focused most on black activism during the 1890s, when the promise of Reconstruction ended in tragedy with segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching, and continued economic exploitation, and the witnessing generation, such as Ida B. Wells, fought back through court cases, organization-building, and activism. The course also took African-American freedom struggles through the 2008 election of Barack Obama, expanding the chronology beyond 1968 to include the so-called post-civil rights era and recent events such as the disenfranchisement of African Americans in Florida during the 2000 election and the social disaster initiated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This longer chronology expanded that of the master narrative and fit with the work of revisionist civil rights historians.

The focus on the chronology of the Civil Rights Movement confirms Tom Holt’s emphasis on history as narrative in its use of time and plot. In expanding the years for the Movement, revisionist historians bring to light earlier freedom struggles and show how the Civil Rights Movement built on those struggles, as well as developments with regard to civil rights in subsequent decades. Even so, the “classic era” of the 1950s

and 1960s is often seen as distinctive from the activism that preceded and succeeded it in terms of a mass movement that captured the attention of, and forced social change from, white America. The longer, historical perspective needed to properly understand the Civil Rights Movement, then, conveys change and continuity over time. Moreover, this “temporal sequence,” as Holt puts it, indicates elements of plot—specifically, beginnings and endings. Expanding the chronology of the Civil Rights Movement highlights the point that where historians begin and end their histories is a choice, and this fundamentally affects the stories they tell. By beginning in the mid-1950s, the master narrative’s “short” Movement “underplays the salience of earlier periods of struggle,” as Payne argues.⁸ In turn, by ending in 1968, the master narrative makes the assassination of Dr. King determine the chronology of the Civil Rights Movement and truncates our understanding of the limits and achievements of social change in the 1960s. A focus on the short-term prevents an assessment not only of lasting accomplishments, but also of how “revolutions may go backwards,” in the words of abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higgins following the Civil War.⁹

Questioning “Top-Down” Causation

The master narrative also offers a “top-down” perspective on the Civil Rights Movement, contending that the momentum for, and successful organizing of, the Movement came from the top and moved down: through national leaders, organizations, and the federal government. In Julian Bond’s statement of the master narrative quoted above, the Movement was “inspired” by *Brown v. Board of Education* and “led” by King, the Kennedy brothers, and Lyndon Johnson. The revisionist literature of John Dittmer, Charles Payne, and many others criticize this top-down perspective and stress the people organizing at the grassroots, in their local communities, working “on the ground” for civil rights. They argue for the significance of the leadership, fundraising, and networks emerging from the “bottom up” in explaining the development and successes of the Movement. Similarly, I presented this bottom-up perspective when discussing the question of what sparked and sustained a mass movement for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in examining the role and leadership of Martin Luther King. Placing King into the longer chronology and local contexts of African-American activism revealed what long-time activist Ella Baker contended, “Martin didn’t make the movement, the movement made Martin.”¹⁰ Even so, revisionist historians agree that making room for bottom-up factors in explaining the causes of the Civil Rights Movement does not mean neglecting top-down ones either.

Critiquing and complicating the master narrative’s top-down explanation for the Civil Rights Movement relates to Holt’s view of history as narrative in its use of causation. Assessing historical causation requires examining a combination of factors, distinguishing the relevant ones, and integrating them into a convincing narrative.¹¹ By focusing on how local movements and lesser-known leaders and activists contributed to the Civil Rights Movement, revisionist historians broaden our view of how and why historical change occurs. Moreover, as Payne argues, this intellectual development is not only important for historical understanding, but also for social movement strategy—whether one looks to charismatic leaders like King to inspire and build movements or to people organizing one-by-one, as Ella Baker argued, fostering commitment and changing consciousness so that people recognize their own power to achieve social change and act on it.¹² In addition to showing the importance and interactions of top-down and bottom-up forces in shaping the development of the Movement, revisionist historians have contextualized and complicated the roles played by national leaders like King. King’s leadership was remarkable—“a leader who stood out in a forest of tall trees,” in historian Clayborne Carson’s words—and requires careful historical analysis, rather than the simplified, mythic portrait presented by the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.¹³

(Re)Writing Student Narratives

To reinforce my use and the revisionist critique of the master narrative, I gave students two linked short assignments that prompted them to generate their own narratives of the Civil Rights Movement: one at the very beginning of the course and one at the end. The first assignment gave students the following task: “Write a brief overview of the African-American Civil Rights Movement: when it happened (beginning and end), why it emerged, who participated, and what was achieved.” With this assignment, students conveyed their understanding of the Civil Rights Movement before they were introduced to the concept of the master narrative or any course content. The second assignment at the end of the semester required students to revisit and revise their original narratives in light of their new historical knowledge. The assignment stated: “In your overview of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, you commented on when it happened (beginning and end), why it emerged, who participated, and what was achieved. Do you still agree with your overview? How would you change or modify it in light of what you’ve learned this semester? You are **not** rewriting your overview, but rather reflecting and analyzing on what you originally wrote.” Rather than

measuring student learning at only one moment in time, these two linked assignments measured “the extent of individuals’ development from their earlier starting points” and “how well the student has performed compared with their own previous efforts.”¹⁴

This assessment served several functions. The first assignment provided a picture, albeit a partial one, of what students knew about the subject matter coming into my course, and engaged students and myself in “consciously identifying and using this current state of understanding as the basis for development.”¹⁵ Together, the two assignments yielded information about what knowledge students gained, of the “value added” over the length of the course. After all, “Without a pretest measure,” as T. Dary Erwin argues, “one cannot attribute how much learning existed prior to the beginning” of the course.¹⁶ Moreover, the second assignment was a form of self-assessment, as students were responsible for “assessing one’s own progress and achievements.”¹⁷ Self-assessment transfers the responsibility for measuring and monitoring learning from the teacher to the student, “moving from a teacher-centered toward a learner-centered approach to teaching.”¹⁸ This aspect of the assessment advanced students’ “metacognition, defined as the learner’s awareness, understanding, and control of his or her own learning process.”¹⁹

What did these assignments reveal?²⁰ Students’ initial understanding of the Civil Rights Movement owed much to the master narrative, and most frequently, they presented the Movement as a “short” Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For example, the majority of students who provided actual dates for the Civil Rights Movement used the typical chronology of the 1950s and 1960s (57% of total students). Other aspects of student narratives confirmed this short chronology: of the 72% of students who mentioned *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), 65% labeled it the Movement’s “first victory.” And of 84% of students who discussed whether or not the Movement had ended, 66% said it had. The majority of students (65%) also described the Movement as a “success.” In addition to seeing the Civil Rights Movement as operating in a discrete moment in time, the majority of students only mentioned King as a leader of the Movement. Of the 73% of students who mentioned a participant or a leader, 66% named only King, revealing the prominence of King in student understandings of the Movement.

When students went back to their original narratives after nearly fourteen weeks, they were eager to correct or expand their initial understandings, particularly with regard to chronology. “I had previously studied the civil rights movement at high school history,” wrote one student. “My first assignment reflects the knowledge I had gained at high school on this topic. It shows a fair understanding of when and what happened

during the classic era of the civil rights movement. However, it lacks any real depth of knowledge or close analysis of what happened before and after the classic era.” “My perception of the Civil Rights Movement has radically changed since the start of the course,” noted another student. “Initially, I conceived the Civil Rights Movement to have taken part exclusively in the 1950s and 1960s. Also, I had never considered that the Movement or struggle could still be continuing to the present day.” As with these two comments, what most students stressed in their last tutorial assignments was that they had grasped the concept of the “long” Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, 87% of students mentioned this aspect of their transformed understanding. As part of conveying their understanding of the Movement’s expanded chronology, a majority (54%) also pointed out that the Movement still had not ended.

Another large majority (72%) of students also addressed the prominence of King in their original narratives and expanded their list of Movement participants beyond King. “In light of a semester of more in-depth study on this particular subject I would definitely modify my overview by including other individual figures such as Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Ella Baker instead of just King alone,” argued a student. Students also demonstrated their understanding of the significant contribution of “bottom-up organizing:” those activists in local communities who crucially built the Movement at the grassroots. “On reflection,” contended another student, “I would put more emphasis on lesser-known figures, also of ‘bottom up’ leadership, and the input and activism by African Americans as a whole, rather than selecting a few well-known people and groups.” Another 22% of students specifically mentioned women—a key group visible with attention to bottom-up organizing—as important to include among participants. “The characters in the movement, as I understood it then, were all male,” noted a student. “This patriarchal view, espoused by the master narrative, silenced and made invisible the vast contributions of women.”

Fewer students addressed aspects of their narratives beyond expanding the chronology of and participants in the Civil Rights Movement. Compared to the high percentages noted above, only a quarter or less of students mentioned other concepts or themes in our course. Why did this happen? Why did my students respond in this way in their assessment? What students emphasized in measuring their own learning across my course was how the knowledge they gained during the semester challenged and corrected what they *thought they knew* coming into it. Although students learned much else as well, what made the most impact on them and what they were most conscious of was the learning that built on their earlier knowledge. This conclusion confirms the cognitive, constructivist

approach to teaching and learning, or what educational theorist John Biggs calls the “qualitative tradition,” whereby “students are assumed to learn cumulatively, interpreting and incorporating new material with what they already know, their understanding progressively changing as they learn.”²¹

Teaching and Learning Outcomes

The outcomes of using the master narrative to structure my course and including these two linked assignments as part of the assessment confirmed their benefits for both my students and myself. Firstly, I gathered concrete data about what students learned in my courses about the history of African-American freedom struggles, demonstrating the fulfillment of my teaching objective of expanding student knowledge of the subject matter. This data also allowed me to see where in the courses this occurred and what stimulated students’ “leap[s] in insight,” and to build upon these moments in my future teaching.²² Secondly, the self-assessment component not only helped students “to close the gap between the present state of understanding and the learning goal,” but also advanced their metacognition, or “knowledge of one’s own knowledge” and “ability to consciously and deliberately monitor and regulate one’s knowledge.”²³ Student responses on this assignment revealed their satisfaction and even excitement as they realized what they had learned and how differently they were thinking about the Civil Rights Movement at the end of the semester. As one student put it, “This topic is rich in information and always left me feeling like I needed to learn more in order to give justice to those who had fought for it.”

Most importantly, by generating and then revising their original narratives, students engaged in the construction of historical narrative, a “cognitive achievement” according to Tom Holt.²⁴ In this way, he argues, “it is hoped, [students] will be prepared to be active rather than passive readers of historical narratives, thinking about what is not in the historians’ texts and how what is there got there. In the end, perhaps they will be not only better students of history, but better, more critical thinkers and citizens.”²⁵ A number of my students demonstrated Holt’s ideal outcome. As one wrote, the course “reminded me how important it is not to accept conventional wisdom—or the master narrative—as the definitive account of a period in history. By challenging these preconceptions we may have about an event, not only is our understanding of what happened in the past greatly enhanced, but also our understanding of the challenges that still remain in the present and future.”

Notes

1. Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1990), 10-11.
2. *Ibid.*, 13.
3. Julian Bond, as quoted in Charles Payne, “The View from the Trenches,” in Steven F. Lawson and Charles M. Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 108-109.
4. Derrick P. Alridge, “Teaching Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement in High School History Courses: Rethinking Content and Pedagogy,” in *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom’s Bittersweet Song*, ed. Julie Buckner Armstrong, Susan Hult Edwards, Houston Bryan Roberson, and Rhonda Y. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2002), 8. See also M. Bahati Kuumba, “Dismantling the Master’s Narrative: Teaching Gender, Race, and Class in the Civil Rights Movement,” in the same volume.
5. Julian Bond, as quoted in Charles Payne, “The View from the Trenches,” 108-109.
6. Payne, “The View from the Trenches,” 110.
7. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
8. Payne, “The View from the Trenches,” 110.
9. Thomas Wentworth Higgins, as quoted in Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), xiv.
10. Ella Baker, as quoted by her biographer Barbara Ransby in “Reflections on King, Candidates, and Movements,” *The Progressive* (April 3, 2008), <http://www.progressive.org/mp_ransby040308>.
11. Peter N. Stearns, “Getting Specific about Training in Historical Analysis: A Case Study in World History,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 429.
12. Charles Payne, “Ella Baker and Models of Social Change,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 885-899.
13. Clayborne Carson, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle,” *Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (September 1987): 452.
14. Sally Brown, Phil Race, and Brenda Smith, *500 Tips on Assessment* (London, U.K.: Kogan Page, 1996), 19; Richard Freeman and Roger Lewis, *Planning and Implementing Assessment* (London, U.K.: Kogan Page, 1998), 21.
15. Judith W. George, “Classical Curriculum Design,” *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 8, no. 2 (June 2009): 171; David Pace, “The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 4 (October 2004): 1176.
16. T. Dary Erwin, “Assessment and Evaluation: A Systems Approach for their Utilization,” in *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches*, ed. Sally Brown and Angela Glasner (Buckingham, U.K.: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1999), 35.
17. Nancy Falchikov, *Improving Assessment Through Student Involvement: Practical Solutions for Aiding Learning in Higher and Further Education* (London, U.K. and New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005), 73.

18. Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, second ed. (San Francisco, CA: JosseyBass, 1993), 51.
19. *Ibid.*, 373.
20. History 208/308 students quoted anonymously by permission and with University of Auckland ethical approval, reference 2007/455.
21. John B. Biggs, as quoted in Allen H. Miller, Bradford W. Imrie, and Kevin Cox, *Student Assessment in Higher Education: A Handbook for Assessing Performance* (London, U.K.: Kogan Page, 1998), 228.
22. George, "Classical Curriculum Design," 171.
23. Oliver Knight, "'Create something interesting to show that you have learned something': Building and Assessing Learner Autonomy within the Key Stage 3 History Classroom," *Teaching History* 131 (June 2008): 20.
24. Tom Holt, as quoted in Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 51.
25. Holt, *Thinking Historically*, 29.