

Motivating Students by Active Learning in the History Classroom

By Peter J. Frederick (Perspectives, October 1993).

The highest challenge we face as classroom teachers is to motivate our students to love history as we do, and to be joyously involved with the texts, themes, issues, and questions of history that interest and excite us. Although our students may seem less well motivated or prepared these days, ultimately the responsibility for their motivation rests with us. The purpose of this article is to suggest several practical strategies for involving students more actively in our history classrooms as a way of instilling in them more responsibility for their own learning, and, therefore, a greater love of history.

Every study of effective educational practices in recent years cites active and small-group cooperative learning, high expectations combined with frequent feedback, “hands-on” experiences practising the skills of the discipline, and caring teachers as key elements in motivating students to learn. Students are engaged and more responsible for their own learning when teachers find ways of connecting significant course concepts and ideas with the personal concerns, issues, and prior experiences of students’ lives. Moreover, it has become imperative to find ways of supporting and affirming the collaborative and contextualized learning styles of women and students of colour. (See especially, to cite only two titles, *Teaching for Diversity*, ed. Laura B. Border and Nancy Van Note Chism, in *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 49 [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, spring 1992]; and Mary Belenky B. Clinchy, N. Goldberger, and J. Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self Voice and Mind* [New York: Basic Books, 1986].)

Whether in lecture auditoriums with two hundred to three hundred students in fixed seats or in smaller rooms with movable chairs and fifteen to fifty students, there are many ways of involving students more actively in history courses. The teaching strategies that follow are divided into seven sections: brainstorming, visual representations, student questions, small groups in large classes, in-class practice in thinking historically, debates and role-playing, and the use of music, slides, and emotions.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an effective way of accomplishing several teaching/learning goals at the same time, especially on the first day of a new term or at the beginning of a new unit. Students bring to most courses both a degree of familiarity and considerable misinformation. To honour their prior knowledge (and discover their misconceptions), walk into class the first day and write the title of the course on the board: American History to 1877; The African American Experience; Women in the Middle Ages; Cultural Life in Ancient Athens; Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in America; or whatever. Take each key word in the title and invite students to free associate, saying whatever comes into their minds about that word. Write on the board (or on transparencies) what they say exactly as they say it.

If needed, I will prompt a group by suggesting that they respond in “words, images, or feelings” or in “political, social, economic, and cultural categories,” or by challenging them “to double the list.” Only occasionally will I offer a word or two of my own. The point is that hearing ideas, concepts, and words generates others. When the board (or a transparency) has been filled, I then sit among the students facing their list and ask: “What patters, themes, or groupings do you see?” Rudimentary analysis follows. Themes, categories, and even metaphors or catchy phrases emerge which can create student ownership by becoming the operative organizing concepts of the course.

The only rules for brainstorming are that “anything goes” and that the teacher should acknowledge every comment by transcribing it, honouring student wording. To change the language or to ask students to explain what they mean interrupts the brainstorming, kills the energy, and intimidates. Only sparingly do I ask for clarification or permission to change the way a student said something.

Within five to ten minutes at the start of the course, then, brainstorming provides the teacher with a sense of what a new class of students knows (and doesn’t know) about the topic. It is a kind of pretest; numerous students get to speak, and a tone of involvement and mutual responsibility has been set. Students share ownership for the course right at the start. To underline that I do indeed value their ideas, I save the list (using transparencies avoids having to copy the board) and bring it back from time to time during the term to remind students of the overarching course themes as well as to acknowledge again their part in setting the agenda - and even the language - for the course.

Brainstorming is also useful when beginning a new topic. Ask students to call out “everything you know or think you know about World War I” (or Darwinism, Japan, slavery, the Renaissance, the Constitutional Convention, or whatever). As recorded on an overhead transparency or chalkboard, a list will unfold of a mixture of specific names, dates, events, feelings, prejudices, and implicit interpretive judgments. To ask students to call out what they know about slavery, for example, elicits many images about the politics of the Civil War and the physical horrors of slavery but very little about slave culture and community. That tells us something. Another use of brainstorming that provides a quick profile of a group is to invite students to suggest words, images, and emotions they associate with terms such as romanticism, liberalism, feminism, imperialism, or multiculturalism.

Another way to introduce a new topic - or to get feedback on how well they are learning - is to ask students to make statements they believe to be true about an issue. “It is true about the Vietnam War that...”, “We have agreed that it is true about the New Deal that...”, “We know it to be true about the Middle Ages that...”, “It is true about Latin American politics that...”, and so on. Generate a list and analyze each claim, with some students presenting their truth statements and other raising questions about them. By examining each truth statement interactively, the class models a collaborative process of analytic thinking. This is especially useful for dealing with emotional or romanticized topics, such as race, gender, or Native Americans, where supportive demythologizing may be necessary. This strategy reveals the complexity of knowledge and generates questions and issues requiring further study, perhaps in a paper or examination question.

Visual Representations

Brainstorming is effective not only because lists are mutually generated and affirm students, but also because it is visual. Invite students to call out one concrete visual image that stands out from a particular reading, event, biography, or period of time. “From your reading about Columbus (or Frederick Douglass, the Pullman Strike, the 1920s, or women’s lives during the French Revolution, etc.), what one specific scene, event, or moment stands out in your mind? What do you see?” The recall of concrete scenes prompts further recollections, and a flood of images flows from the students. Listing the images on the chalkboard provides a visual backdrop to the lecture or discussion that follows. I do not usually ask individual students to explain their choices. First, the class, as a group, creates a collage of images; then, together, we analyze the list by looking for patterns and themes.

Students are motivated by visual reinforcements of their learning not only because as visual learners they can more easily understand and remember a concept if they see it, but also because of the emotions of visualization. Consider the evocative power of slides and other visual media as a way of involving students actively in the interpretation of a single visual image. For example, show an emotionally powerful slide (or transparency) of a Thomas Nast or Herblock cartoon, a photograph of a family or famous scene (Pearl Harbor, Kent State, or Tiananmen Square), a presidential campaign poster, or a painting (Hogarth for English social history or an American genre painting). Ask students first to “describe what you see” and then to analyze what it means, perhaps even to suggest a title or caption. In this approach, facts precede analysis, and the learning moves from lower order “what do you see” questions to higher order “why” and “what do you think about it” questions (making sure to differentiate between “think” and “feel” questions and answers). Working with concrete visual imagery at the beginning of a class (or in the middle of a lecture) activates student energy and enhances the vividness of the content for the day. Imagery is both fun and motivating.

My favorite cartoon is John Gast’s “Westward-Ho” (also known as “American Progress,” 1872), which shows a classically dressed Miss Liberty, carrying a schoolbook and stringing telegraph wire as she brings light and “civilization” to the “savage” West, represented by dark mountains and fleeing Indians, buffalo, and other wild animals. Floating high above the Great Plains, she leads miners, farmers, ranchers, stagecoaches, wagon trains, and railroads across the country. There are many details to describe. The analysis includes noting the various stages of westward “development” as well as a lively debate over whose perspective with which to title the painting. This one painting also leads to a discussion of the male use of female imagery to support aggressive expansionism.

Students can create their own visual representations as well as interpret well-known ones. Imagery can be used to represent complex concepts. In a historiography course I recently asked students, in small groups, to draw an image or logo (either literal or symbolic) to represent the ideas of historians such as Van Ranke, Macaulay, Marx, Michelet, and Carlyle. The task forced students into the text (Fritz Stern’s *Varieties of History*) to find important (and evocative) passages that suggested an appropriate visual representation. There is, I believe, no historical concept, idea, person, or event which does not lend itself to this strategy.

Student Questions

James Baldwin observed, while teaching at the University of Massachusetts, that “a young person doesn’t really want you to answer his question, he wants you to hear it, then he or she can deal with it....If you hear it, the question is real.” How, then, do we show students that we take their questions seriously in order to empower them and motivate their learning? There are many ways of generating student questions. Ask the students ahead of time to prepare questions about their reading or a topic and bring them to class. In small classes I appoint a student to read all the questions aloud first, and I invite all of us to listen for reiterated themes and patterns. With larger groups I collect and collate the questions before spending time discussing responses with the class.

One way to put the assignment to the student is as follows: “A question I still have about the immigrant experience (or feudalism, Puritanism, the sexuality of slavery, or whatever), but have been afraid to ask is...” Another variation is to ask students, as they enter the classroom, to call out questions about the text or topic they hope will be answered that day. At some point half-way through a period, divide the students into pairs or small groups and ask them to “take five minutes and agree on one question you would like to explore further.” This will sort out fewer, more thoughtful questions, and will

lead to some peer teaching and learning as one member of a group answers another’s query in the course of the search for a consensus question.

At the end of the session ask students to note one or two still-unresolved questions they want explored during the next class. If combined with asking them also to state the one or two most significant things they learned that day, this becomes the highly successful strategy described by Pat Cross as the “one-minute paper.” (See Richard J. Light, *The Harvard Assessment Seminars: First Report*, 1990, pp. 36-37.) Hearing students’ questions is an excellent way for an instructor to get feedback on how well the students are learning. The quality and substance of their questions indicate their strengths (that is, what is working) as well as gaps in understanding.

Small Groups in Large Classes

No matter how large, a class can always be divided into groups of two, five, or eight, thus serving four primary purposes. The first is to provide energy shifts from lecturing, and the second to allow students to practice their understanding of key course concepts. The third is to empower more students (especially many women, students of colour, and reticent white males, many of whom tend to do better in collaborative settings) to test how well they are learning by writing and talking about their ideas in a safe context. The fourth purpose is to give teachers an opportunity to assess learning as well as to establish personal contact with students as teachers move around listening to a sampling of the small group discussions.

There are three crucial points to consider in helping small groups work efficiently. First, the instructions should be clear, simple, and task oriented. For example: “What do you think was the crucial turning point in Malcolm X’s life?” “Suggest three possible symbolic meanings of the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock.” “Which character in *The Iliad* best represents the qualities of a Greek hero?” “Which example of imperialism defines it best, and why?” “What opinions did slaves have to seek their freedom or assert their self-worth?” “Identify three positive and three negative features of Lyndon Johnson’s administration.” “Generate a list of restrictions on women’s freedoms in the 1850s.” “If you were Lincoln, what would you have done about Fort Sumter?”

The second necessity in providing instructions is to give the groups a sense of how much time they have to do their work. “Take ten minutes to define your group’s position or decision.” And third, it is crucial to make time for public reporting (debriefing) before class time is over (either orally or by writing each group’s conclusions on the chalkboard or a transparency). Not only are groups understandably interested in what other groups have decided, but student learning is enhanced by hearing the range of similar and different arguments.

Teachers can energize even large auditorium lecture classes by separating them into small groups, first by asking students to write for a couple of minutes on a question and then by having them talk with two or three neighbours. “What’s the most important point I’ve been making for the past ten minutes?” “Which explanation of the causes of the Thirty Years’ War makes the most sense to you?” “How would you, as a woman, have asserted your autonomy in a Victorian marriage?” “Which aspect of Puritan theology bothers you the most, and why?” After as little as four or five minutes, invite volunteers to call out their conclusions and concerns. One needs only to hear a sampling of the trios to get a sense of the class, which then informs one what to do next. This active learning strategy not only provides feedback but also reenergizes (i.e., motivates) the group for, say, the lecture of assignment that follows.

In-Class Practice in Thinking Historically

Students can begin to learn how to think historically (by which I mean, for starters, decoding and interpreting a document or event) by being confronted with the dissonance of a powerfully evocative visual. “American Progress” is one, but also consider the photograph of five generations of a Lakota family in the 1890s dressed in traditional clothing as well as pants fashioned out of an American flag. Interpretive historical thinking is stimulated by a compelling unfinished human story. “What will happen to the confident Athenians in Sicily?” “What brought Captain Parker’s men to Lexington Green that cold April morning?” “What will Lincoln do, and why?” “Will the freedmen on the Hammond plantation achieve their goals in those chaotic months of 1865?” “What will happen to this young immigrant woman as she arrives in New York?” As these examples suggest, it is best to tell a story that focuses clearly on a human decision or fate and ask, “Which outcome to this story makes the most sense to you?” The answer, no doubt a complex one involving both historical narrative and some flights of fancy, unfolds during the class hour in a mixture of interactive brainstorming, reasoning, and lecture. Differing causal interpretations are inevitable.

Perhaps the most important historical skill our students need is the ability to read. We can use an old-fashioned but woefully ignored technique, *explication du texte*, even in large lecture classes, to teach our students how to read and interpret texts. Depending on the level and size of the class, the instructor might demonstrate how to read a passage, with students following along on handouts or an overhead. And then it is their turn to practice thinking like historians. There are many ways to select appropriate passages and to structure such a class. Invite students, either ahead of time (preferably) or at start of class, to “find one or two quotations from the text you found particularly significant and be prepared to justify your choice.” Or, “find one quotation you especially liked and one you disliked.” Or, “identify the passage which you think best illustrates the major thesis of the chapter or book, and explain why.” (For more on interpreting texts, see Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., “Demystifying Historical Authority: Critical Textual Analysis in the Classroom” in *History Anew: Innovations in the Teaching of History Today*, edited by Robert Blackey [Long Beach, CA: The University Press, California State University, Long Beach, 1993].)

Students are then ready to read these passages aloud and discuss them. Be sure to give them enough time to find the right spot in their book. Lively interaction is likely because not all students select the same quotations, nor do they all interpret them the same way. Upon reaching an especially ambiguous passage, small groups of three to four students could be asked to struggle with the meaning. “Three of you sitting next to each other, put your heads together and in your own words state what you think is the main point of the passage. What’s happening here?” Invite a few groups to report their reflections, giving both you and the students an opportunity to react to the differing interpretations.

This process of modeling how to read analytically in large lectures can be done for other than just verbal texts. We can use class time as “history labs,” training students how to do quantitative analysis of graphs, charts, and tables, how to interpret census data, and how to read maps. Many of us distribute short historical documents in class - a tax record, a household inventory, a diary entry, a folktale, a will, a ship’s manifest, and old tool, a family photograph - and ask, “What do you see? What does the document say?” After teasing out the content of the document, then ask higher-order questions of significance: “What does it mean or tell us? What implications do you draw from the document on how people lived?” In summary, make sure students have a copy of the document or source in front of them (or have visual access), and then follow three steps: modeling by the teacher, practice by the students, and feedback between and among teacher and students.

Debates and Role-Playing

Although debates are an energizing way to motivate students, we must be sensitive to the aversion of some students (many women, for example) to confrontational learning, and that neither one of two polar sides of an issue obviously contains the whole truth. Nevertheless, it is sometimes pedagogically desirable to force students to choose one or the other side of a dichotomous question and to defend their choice. Consider, even in a large lecture setting, a debate on such questions as the following: “Was Burke or Paine more right about the French Revolution?” “Was Nat Turner’s revolt justified?” “If you were a black sharecropper in 1905, would Booker T. Washington or W.E.B. Du Bois have the better plan for your progress?” “Should the United States have annexed the Philippines or not in 1898?” “The United States: ‘Melting Pot,’ ‘Salad,’ or ‘Quilt’?”

By taking advantage of the central aisle dividing large lecture halls in half the logistics for structuring debates are quite simple. Students can either support the side of an issue assigned to the half of the hall where they happen to be sitting, or, as prearranged in conjunction with the stimulation of a film or reading assignment, they can come to class prepared to take a seat on one side or another. In an auditorium with two doors, post signs over the doors directing students to the two sides: “Burke” or “Paine.” Once students have physically, as it were, put their bodies on the line, they are receptive to answering a simple question: “Why have you chosen to sit where you are?” That is usually enough to spark a rather lively debate.

In large classes, more structure is necessary: “From the right side of the room let’s hear five statements on behalf of the ‘Hawk’ side of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, after which we will hear five statements from the left on the ‘Dove’ side.” The process can be repeated, including rebuttals, before concluding by asking for two or three volunteers to make summary arguments for each side, and perhaps taking a final vote. But most important questions do not divide into halves. Our students would never settle for forced dichotomous choices. When some students (quite rightly) refuse to choose one side or the other, create a middle ground (and literal space). Some lecture halls have two central aisles, which makes legitimizing a third position both intellectually defensible and logically possible. “Those who repudiate both sides, sit in the middle.” Now three groups are invited to state their positions, and the complexities of learning increase. Students in the middle, for example, might learn how difficult it is to try to remain neutral on heated emotional issues; those on the sides might hear the value of complexity.

Role-playing is another highly motivating active-learning strategy. One form is for the teacher to enter the class in the role of a historical figure (including dress and props) to give a speech or sermon and then to invite questions. Another is to give several students (or groups) time to research several well-known historical figures and to bring them together for a panel, press conference, debate, or dinner party. But the strategy can also be used to illuminate the experiences and difficult choices of ordinary people and social groups.

The process is not as complicated as one might think. First, a miniature establishes the context and setting for the role-playing. Second, the class is divided into a number of small groups, each assigned a clearly delineated social role. Third, each group is given a specific, concrete task - usually to propose a position and course of action. The proposals emanating from different groups will inevitably conflict with each other in some way - racially, regionally, ideologically, tactically, or over scarce funds, land, jobs, power, or resources. Given these conflicts, closure is as difficult to achieve in a role-play as in history itself. The following examples will suggest others. Create a New England town meeting in 1779 in which a variety of groups (landed elite, yeoman farmers, Tory loyalists, militiamen and soldiers of the Continental Army, lawyers, ministers,

and tradesmen, etc.) are charged with drafting instructions for delegates to a state constitutional convention. Or, challenge several groups in the summer of 1865 - defeated Confederates, victorious northern Republicans, freedmen, moderate northerners, and southern unionists - to develop lists of their goals and the strategies for accomplishing them.

A variation is to put a whole class into the same situation, that of, say, emancipated slaves on a Texas plantation in 1865; unskilled and skilled immigrant steelworkers facing a lockout in Pennsylvania in 1892; female abolitionists in the 1830s; or civil rights activists in the 1960s, and ask the students to decide what to do to achieve their freedom. A political history variation is to make yourself a national leader facing a serious crisis, say, Napoleon in 1799, Lincoln in 1861, or Kennedy in 1961, and create "brain trust" groups on different issues to advise you. The role-playing process can be extended by structuring a meeting or convention to consider different group proposals. Students could prepare speeches and caucus to develop strategies, coalitions, and tactics for achieving their goals and to see the deliberations through to some conclusion. Neat, simple, clear closures are not easy (short of the class-ending buzzer), but this variation for large lecture classes has tremendous potential for experiential learning based on energy and interaction.

In a role-playing activity, the teacher plays an active role as moderator of the meetings or as chief executive, organizing and carefully monitoring the interactions. Because role-playing in conflicting groups can get heated and potentially out of control, it is necessary to wield a vigorous gavel and forcefully direct the process. This in itself models another point about leadership in history. Order can be restored by shifting to the discussion of what was learned. The cardinal rule of role-playing, on order to insure cognitive reinforcement of an emotional experience, is that even more time should be spent debriefing than was taken in the exercise itself. Given careful planning, clear directions, assertive leadership, thoughtful debriefing, and a lot of luck, role-playing is an effective strategy involving enormous energy and learning.

Music, Slides, Emotions - and Multiculturalism

No account of motivating students through active learning is complete without acknowledging the power of the use of media. Much has been written on historical films and videos, but here I focus only on the role of slides and music in evoking students' emotional learning about multicultural issues. Emotions have surely played an enormous role in history; therefore, they belong in the history classroom. Emotions arouse and focus attention, raise questions, and stimulate rethinking; in short, emotional experience leads to cognitive understanding and insight.

Here are a few examples. I often use a piece of music and a collage of visual images appropriate to the topic or text for the day as a way of setting the tone at the beginning of class. Imagine, for example, viewing images of slavery while listening to spirituals, or of scenes from the civil rights movement while hearing songs of the period. Or, imagine the dissonance of walking into the first day of a survey class in United States history listening to Dvorak's "New World Symphony" while looking at a collage of images of pre-Columbian life among various Indian cultures.

Or use the "music" of speech. To show the shift in the mood of the black liberation struggle in the mid-1960s, compare (with visuals) Malcolm X's "Message to the Grass Roots" of November 1963 with Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech of three months earlier. For an even more powerful effect, put slides together synchronized with the visual images suggested during the last five

minutes of Dr. King's Memphis speech of April 3, 1968, "I See the Promised Land...I've Been to the Mountain-top," concluding with images of King's assassination and funeral. Next, ask students to write ("words, feelings, images:") for a few moments, then to talk together in pairs or threes, before debriefing as a whole class the feelings, thoughts, and questions the experience evoked.

Whether experiencing the affective power of music, voice, and image; brainstorming; interpreting visuals and other "texts", or doing debates, the presence of emotions engages students in an appreciation of the human drama of history. The problem, of course, is that these active-learning strategies take time, at the cost of "covering" the material. So what to do? There is no tougher teaching/learning question.

A couple of thoughts: it is inherent in being a historian to make content and interpretive selections in looking at the past, choices based on what we think are the essential questions and irreducibly significant facts and concepts of our field. Likewise, we make pedagogical choices; these depend on our goals, on who our students are and to an extent, on our interpretive content goals as well. Just as I choose to emphasize a social and cultural view of American history or to spend more time on the dilemmas of the abolitionists than on Jacksonian economic policy, I also choose to incorporate the participatory strategies described here in my classes. Only rarely do I give an old-fashioned lecture, though it must be understood that a well-crafted oral presentation, with visuals, can be an "active learning" experience for students.

Active learning is therefore not necessarily incompatible with coverage. For example, one day I decided that my students needed to learn how to read a textbook chapter by looking in depth at the opening two to three pages. When the hour was over I realized that in the process of explicating a few paragraphs in depth, which involved a highly interactive and even heated discussion of significant issues, in this case the principles of revolutionary republicanism, we had in fact dealt with the major factual and conceptual issues of the entire chapter.

The choices I make as a teacher assume that motivation is enhanced to the extent that students' confidence and self-esteem are bolstered through successes. It is crucial that students have a sense that they are in fact acquiring historical facts, concepts, and skills and that they value the habits of mind and heart involved in the study of history. In addition, students need to be able to claim ownership and responsibility for their own learning as a result of having been actively involved in it. As an early advocate of active learning, Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote in his journal that a wise person "must feel and teach that the best wisdom cannot be communicated [but] must be acquired by every soul for itself."

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The Social Science Federation of Canada (SSFC) will be producing again this year a **Thematic Programme** for the 1994 Learned Societies conference at the University of Calgary. The Programme will list sessions of SSFC member-associations falling under several chosen themes, including, among others, Violence, the Environment, Aboriginal Issues, and Women's Studies and Gender Relations.

This year's listings will include dates, times, rooms, titles, and participants in each of the sessions.

The **Thematic Programme** will be available in a preliminary format by 15 April. Those interested in receiving a copy of the preliminary Programme should contact the SSFC at the co-ordinates listed below:

Telephone: (613) 238-6112
Fax: (613) 238-6114
Email: ssfc@acadvml.uottawa.ca

The Social Science Federation of Canada is also pleased to announce the following special event during the 1994 Learned:

**Violence: A Collective Responsibility
A National Symposium
Monday 13 June 1994
9:00 am - 12:30 pm
Room 162
Professional Faculties Building
University of Calgary**

For information, contact Suzanne Dagenais at the SSFC secretariat.

La Fédération canadienne des sciences sociales (FCSS) publiera encore une fois cette année un **Programme thématique** pour le Congrès des sociétés savantes qui se déroulera à l'Université de Calgary. Le programme dressera la liste des séances organisées par les associations membres de la FCSS selon plusieurs thèmes tels la violence, l'environnement, les questions autochtones, et les études féministes.

Cette année, le Programme fournira la date, l'heure, la pièce, le titre ainsi que les noms des participants et participantes de chacune des séances.

Le **Programme thématique** sera disponible dans sa forme provisoire le 15 avril. Ceux et celles qui souhaitent recevoir un exemplaire du programme provisoire sont priés de contacter la FCSS par les moyens suivants:

Téléphone: (613) 238-6112
Télécopieur: (613) 238-6114
Courrier électronique: ssfc@acadvml.uottawa.ca

La Fédération canadienne des sciences sociales est aussi heureuse d'annoncer l'événement suivant qui se tiendra dans le cadre du Congrès:

**La violence: une responsabilité collective
Un symposium national
Le lundi 13 juin 1994
9 h 00 à 12 h 30
Salle 162
Édifice Professional Faculties
Université de Calgary**

Pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez contacter Suzanne Dagenais au secrétariat de la FCSS.