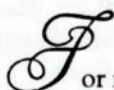


Thinking Historically: Critical Engagement with the Past



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For more than a decade now there has been intense debate about the teaching of history in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. This debate, however, has focused almost exclusively on what students should learn, not on the equally important question of how they should learn it. Critics have tried to demonstrate that today's students lack basic knowledge of American and world history and evince minimal interest in these subject. In 1987, for example, Finn & Ravitch's *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know*, Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, and Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, all lamented a supposed decline in student's knowledge of the humanities and sounded a clarion call for reforms designed to inculcate specific cultural and historical content. The demand for reform was answered in 1994 by the passage of *Goals 2000* and by the publication of National Standards in history, although the critics professed themselves dissatisfied with the results for a variety of reasons.

In all of these public discussions, however, history was conceived as a finished product to be consumed by students, rather than as an intellectual process in which they could engage actively and critically. In this traditional view, the student's role has always been passive. Students would dutifully memorize the facts, names, dates and places prescribed for them in pre-packaged, non-negotiable versions of the past. Selection of evidence, analysis, and interpretation had all been done for them: their job was to absorb a list of received truths. This, by definition, ruled out any possibility of critical thinking on their part. Naturally, students were both bored and alienated because what they were compelled to learn had no discernible relevance to concerns of their own lives.

In this issue we will suggest some ways to demystify history and to open up paths for critical engagement with historical materials themselves. Our goal is to show students that they can be participants in the process rather than spectators watching the grand parade go by from a respectful distance. By this we mean that students should be encouraged to **think historically**: to read historical narratives imaginatively and critically, to select evidence for themselves, to conduct their own analyses, and to construct their own narratives. Engaging students in historical thinking like this can bring alive a subject they have long perceived as irrelevant or dead. Our ultimate goal is to overcome the alienation most students feel when confronted by the past, by bridging the gap between personal experience and historical experience. To do this we must, as teachers, demonstrate that history, far from being remote and irrelevant, is the work of real people like themselves, in real situations, confronted with the need to make real choices.

What then are the historical thinking skills that students can develop in order to engage the past in a meaningful way? The National Standards for History¹ devoted an entire chapter to this topic, the work of an unprecedented collaboration between K-12 social studies teachers, curriculum experts, and college-level historians nationwide. Since these historical thinking standards represent the first national effort to define historical thinking systematically for K-12 education, I will use them for our model.

¹ National Standards For History, Basic Edition. University of California, Los Angeles. 1996

The National Standards delineated the following 5 types of historical thinking:

1. Chronological Thinking
2. Historical Comprehension
3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation
4. Historical Research Capabilities
5. Historical Issues Analysis and Decision-Making

Although these skills are presented in five separate standards, they are nonetheless interactive and mutually supportive. Teachers will need to draw upon all of these Thinking Standards, as needed, to develop their lesson plans.

1. Chronological Thinking

OVERVIEW - CHRONOLOGICAL THINKING

- A. Distinguish between past, present and future time.
- B. Identify in historical narratives the temporal structure of a historical narrative.
- C. Establish temporal order in construction narratives of their own.
- D. Measure and calculate calendar time.
- F. Reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration.
- G. Compare alternative models of periodization.

Chronological thinking is at the heart of historical reasoning. Without a strong sense of chronology - of when events occurred and in what temporal order - it is impossible for students to see the relationship between those events or to explain historical causation. For very young children the ability to distinguish past, present and future time, or the ability to identify the beginning, middle and end to an historical account would be an important step in their development of chronological thinking. Upper elementary and middle school students should be able to establish temporal order in their own narratives, and to measure calendar time by days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries and millennia. High school students should ultimately be able to periodize historical eras, and explain historical continuity and change. They should also be able to compare alternative models of periodization and identify the organizing principles on which they are based.

2. Historical Comprehension

OVERVIEW - HISTORICAL COMPREHENSION

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- B. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
- C. Read historical narratives imaginatively.
- D. Evidence historical perspectives.
- E. Draw upon data in historical maps.
- F. Utilize visual and mathematical data presented in charts, tables, graphs, flow charts and other graphic organizers.
- G. Draw upon visual, literary and musical sources.

Historical comprehension includes the ability to read historical narratives with imagination and understanding. Younger and older students alike should be able to identify the basic elements of the narrative structure including its characters, situations, sequence, causes and outcomes. Older students should learn to assess the strength of the evidence presented and to analyze the assumptions - both stated and unstated - upon which the narrative is based. Students should be able to describe the past through the use of literature, art, architecture, music, artifacts and documentary evidence. Here the use of primary source materials is fundamental if students are to grasp the complexity of historical processes. Using these materials students can learn how to construct their own historical narratives, and see how professional historians go about their task.

3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation

OVERVIEW

- A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
- C. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.

- D. Consider multiple perspectives.
- E. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas, and the role of chance.
- F. Challenge arguments of historical inevitability.
- G. Compare competing historical narratives.
- H. Hold interpretations of history as tentative.
- I. Evaluate major debates among historians.
- J. Hypothesize the influence of the past on the present.

Through careful analysis of more than one source, students will understand that historians differ on the facts they incorporate into their narratives and on how those facts are to be interpreted. Not only should students be able to distinguish between facts and interpretations, but they should also be able to compare competing historical narratives. Students should understand that most historical events stem from multiple causes and that history does not unfold as a simple, linear progression. These analytical tools will help students understand that history is complex and that the task of the historian reconstructing it is equally complex.

4. Historical Research Capabilities

OVERVIEW - HISTORICAL RESEARCH CAPABILITIES

- A. Formulate historical questions.
- B. Obtain historical data.
- C. Interrogate historical data.
- D. Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place, and construct a sound historical interpretation.

Historical research capabilities include the ability to formulate questions based on a wide variety of sources such as documents, artifacts, quantitative data, photos, visits to sites, and eyewitness accounts, all understood in their context. Although a textbook narrative will usually provide the starting-point for their research, students should be encouraged to conduct their own inquiries in order to imbue the narrative with deeper meaning. Hence, again, the importance of using primary source documents or other records

beyond the materials in the textbook to open up new perspectives and to include those whose voices did not appear in the textbook accounts.

5. Historical Issues - Analysis and Decision-Making

OVERVIEW

- A. Identify issues and problems of the past.
- B. Marshall evidence of antecedent circumstances.
- C. Identify relevant historical antecedents.
- D. Evaluate alternative courses of action.
- E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.
- F. Evaluate the implementation of a decision.

Traditionally, history and the social studies have been taught to promote citizenship. At this point, however, we must ask which type of citizenship do we wish to foster. Do we want passive citizens who accept ready-made solutions to manufactured problems or citizens who are equipped to assess each issue on its own merit? Issues-centered analysis and decision-making activities will help students assess current dilemmas by placing them at the center of historical dilemmas. By confronting the issues or problems of the past, analyzing the alternative choices available to those on the scene, and by evaluating the consequences of past decisions students will appreciate the complexity of the social, economic and political processes which shape the world in which they live.

Long ago Thomas Jefferson prescribed the study of history for all who would take part in self-government because it would enable them to prepare for things to come. It is our job, as teachers of history, to put Jefferson's prescription into practice.



Linda Symcox previously served as Associate Director of the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. Currently, she is completing her doctoral work at UCLA in the area of history education.