

New Tidings for History Education, or Lessons We Should Have Learned by Now*

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HOW DO WE GET the historical profession to engage more fully with history in the schools? To recognize the commonality of the task of the college or university instructor with that of the high school or middle school social studies teacher? To make the AHA, for example, a bigger player in elementary and secondary educational circles? That is the challenge the Teaching Division has made a priority during the past three years. While being vice-president of that body I have gained new respect for those preceding me in this field. The Teaching Division has focused much of its attention upon creating new forums of collaborative interaction, or points of direct contact, among K-16 practitioners. Such efforts should be encouraged a great deal more. But there is another way as well that might even more effectively unite diverse professional audiences. I am thinking here of the common intellectual puzzles we confront in approaching our students. First, how do we define for ourselves the essential skills or ways of thinking *basic* to the historian's craft? And second, how do we best package such gifts for our students? Such

* This paper was given to the meeting of the Organization of History Teachers at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association on January 5, 2001. Upon that occasion he stated that, "I am particularly pleased to address the Organization of History Teachers, one of the standard-bearers in the struggle for a more capacious professional identity among historians and a stalwart bridge-builder between the world of historical research and the K-12 history classroom."

questions are no more the province of the academy than the school, and they ought to be part of the core curriculum in both social studies teacher education programs as well as history doctoral training.

A new resource for stimulating just such a discussion among this wider circle is now available in the anthology, *Knowing, Teaching & Learning History: National and International Perspectives* edited by Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000, and published in conjunction with the AHA). Just as Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988) offered an invaluable framework for understanding how we write the past, so *Knowing, Teaching & Learning* (hereafter *KT&L*) may serve as a base for how we might best teach the past. While Novick sought to make us aware of the epistemological and ideological assumptions we bring to our research, *KT&L* asks us to bring a similar conceptual clarity to bear on historical pedagogy. Many of its arguments will not sound new but rather like lessons we should have learned by now. Yet, as a package the book provides the latest, most up-to-date tidings we have on historical education.

To be sure, *KT&L* (unlike Novick's masterful synthesis but like most anthologies) is diffuse and covers a variety of agendas. Only a loose organizational schema could possibly connect Diane Ravitch's critique of the underpreparation of social studies teachers, Bodo von Borries' report on European pedagogical tendencies, Peter Stearns' application of educational psychology to a world history course, and Gaea Leinhardt's case study of the progress of a single student in United States Advanced Placement history. If there is a single, dominant theme to the collection it is support for the "new enterprise known as research on history teaching and learning" (p. 5) or simply "the scholarship of history teaching" (p. 10). At the heart of this project is the contention that with the "cognitive revolution" in learning and teaching, we can no longer tolerate the traditional separate spheres of "content" and "pedagogy"—the former the classic domain of the disciplinary scholar, the latter the province of schools of education (for K-12 instructors) or of common sense or seat-of-the-pants experience (for university instructors). In contrast, the guiding assumption of the new work is that form and content are inextricably intertwined, that teaching history is "an epistemological and cultural act that conveys deep and sometimes unintended messages about what it means to be historical in modern society" (p. 3) The cognitive revolution, note the editors in their introduction, "has problematized the 'copy model' of mind in which learning was thought to be an unquestioned reflex of teaching" (p. 4). Whereas the war over "history standards" in the mid-1990s focused chiefly on *what* students should learn, the question

here is to figure out *how* students learn and consequently how we *should teach*.

In drawing here upon *KT&L*, I mean less to review it as a volume than to extract from it three useful and provocative leads—themes that will hopefully set the stage for continuing discussion among a diverse professional audience. First, what are the most valuable lessons to be learned in a history classroom?

Developing Historical Thinking Skills

Generally speaking the *KT&L* authors emphasize specific thinking skills over narrative coverage of “content.” The widely-read British author, David Lowenthal, notes the paradox that while “amateur” in its approach and appeal (i.e., society believes anyone can and should learn history), “history may be harder to learn than is commonly thought.” Both Lowenthal and Canadian historian Desmond Morton distinguish between the disciplinary practice of “history” with its critical apparatus of causation and sequence and the all-too-easy, self-serving apologetics of what he calls “heritage” or group celebration. Crucial for Lowenthal, in this distinction, is the need to recognize the “foreignness of the past”(p. 63). All too often, he suggests, historical sites, textbooks, and the media alike encourage a view of historical time as merely “an aberrant present—sometimes superior, usually inferior to today in aesthetics, behavior, and beliefs”(p. 66). Ignorance of historical context and the demands of contemporary identity can lead, notes Lowenthal, to a kind of cannibalism of the past: “Because we want our ancestors to mirror ourselves, we feel the need to clean up their act. Hence the spate of official apologies—in Rome for the torture of Galileo, in America for slavery, in Britain for the Irish famine” (p. 71).

Keeping the past “accessible” while conveying its “ineffable strangeness,” says Lowenthal, is our hardest task as history teachers (p. 75). Among his favorite texts to challenge students with “fruitful encounters with alien pasts,” Lowenthal includes *Montailou*, Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s classic story of religious conflict in a medieval French village; *Akenfield*, Ronald Blythe’s oral history of his native Suffolk village, and *Surviving the Holocaust*, Avraham Tory’s diary of life in Lithuania’s Kovno ghetto. I find it noteworthy that each of these instructive works offers a “micro-history” or a close look at event, character, and place rather than the generalizations about time and space that we often impose on students in textbook histories. Understanding, Lowenthal implies (without directly saying so), can best come by close association—by illustrative example rather than distant prescription.

Canadian educator Peter Seixas subtly modifies Lowenthal's two-tier contrast between "heritage" and "history" by focusing on "three ways of dealing with...conflicting interpretation of the past" (p. 20). The first way is what Seixas calls the "best story" approach. Like "heritage," the best story carries the potential for "identity, cohesion and social purpose," but it leaves its student audience in an entirely passive position: "historical knowledge appears as something fixed by authority rather than subject to investigation, debate, and its own system of warrants" (p. 23). Like Lowenthal and Morton, Seixas prefers a "disciplinary" approach (what Lowenthal simply called "history") where, instead of being told what to believe, students learn disciplinary criteria for what makes a good historical account. Yet, Seixas introduces a third perspective of historical thinking skills that he calls the "postmodern" approach: "the task for students in the third orientation is not so much to arrive at a "best" or most valid position on the basis of historical evidence as to understand how different groups organize the past into histories and how their rhetorical and narratological strategies serve present day purposes" (p. 20-21). Seixas is quite aware of the destabilizing impact of postmodernism on disciplinary authority. "Postmodernism undercuts the historians' Archimedean stance, calling into question their implicit claim to stand outside the flow of history and their abilities to be impartial observers of the past: all historical accounts are fundamentally positioned and politicized" (p. 29). In relation to the three orientations to history education—best story, disciplinary, and post-modern—Seixas concludes with an open-ended question: "Understanding their interplay, can we find ways to introduce their various insights at different levels of schooling, while mitigating their weaknesses by being alert to their dangers and flaws?" (p. 32).

Limits to Thinking Skills

While historical thinking skills (whether associated with disciplinary or postmodernist approaches) generally trump best story or heritage instruction for the authors of *KT&L*, some contributors also acknowledge limitations in adapting them to real-life classroom situations. For example, the K-12 curricular specialist Shelly Weintraub points to teacher fatigue with new standards and the cynical response to curricular reform by many in the trenches, or, as she heard from one colleague, "What's this new crap, what's wrong with the old crap?" (p. 178). Michigan State collaborators G. Williamson McDiarmid and Peter Vinten-Johansen likewise had to retread their skill-rich methods course for undergraduate education majors to take fuller account of the future teachers "overriding

concern: "What do I do on Monday?" (p. 163). With standards and tests so driving the curriculum and teacher anxieties, McDiarmid and Vinten-Johansen ultimately moderated their push for critical, inquiry-based lesson plans: "We counsel our students, during their first year, to rely on their textbooks and to consider teaching one or at most two intensive curriculum units per semester" (p. 173).

A different challenge to disciplinary skills is raised by the research of Leeds university educator Denis Shemilt. On the positive side, high-school aged students in Britain, according to Shemilt, are more fully exposed to history "as a form of knowledge"—e.g. analyzing evidence, causation, and narrative logic—than their United States counterparts. Teachers there feel less pressure "to engineer social responsibility or to redefine national or group consciousness" via heritage instruction. On the other hand, there seems to be a hothouse quality to such historical thinking skills:

The logical and methodological apparatus of historical enquiry can be applied to fragments and episodes [i.e. classroom exercises] in the past, but not to the past as a whole. This remains shadowy, mysterious, and, in its broadest aspects, given. It is as if odd scenes of a play could be variously interpreted and even, with benefit of scholarship, new lines substituted here and there, but the plot as a whole remains both unknown and immutable. (p.85)

How to weave critical thinking pedagogy into coherent narrative frameworks that link past to present, Shemilt suggests, remains a challenge even for the most advanced of school curricula. In short, school bureaucracy and the machinery of credentialing are not the only stones in the path of history learning. Rather, educators are themselves at odds over just what it is that we should be contributing to students' lives.

Connecting to Students

Of course, the task of history education would be easier if teachers could tap an already-developed curiosity about the subject in their students. And, in a section on research in history teaching and learning, *KT&L* may help us to do so. Educational psychologist Sam Wineburg first urges us to be skeptical of the official refrain—regularly repeated in national assessment tests since 1917—that "kids don't know history." There is an important difference, he insists, "between the statement that they don't know what we want them to know and the conclusion that they don't know anything at all" (307-308). Only self-righteous and largely "arid discussions of pedagogy" will follow from continuing concentra-

tion on students' historical deficits. Rather, he suggests, we need to learn how students think about the past. His own experiment with fifteen adolescents in Seattle (perhaps the film version will be called "Clio-less in Seattle") points to the power of family "memory" and popular culture as most powerful points of historical learning; indeed in one case study, repeated family showings of *Forrest Gump* served as the student's most resonant point of contact with the 1960s. Wineburg urges us not to dismiss such evidence as mere "pollution" of the learning process. "Rather than pretending that we can do away with popular culture—confiscate videos, banish grunge rock and rap music, magnetize Nintendo games, and unplug MTV and the Movie Channel—we might well try to understand how these forces shape historical consciousness and how they might be used...to advance students' historical understanding" (p. 323).

Drawing on his joint work with David Thelen on popular uses of history, historian Roy Rosenzweig offers implicit support for Wineburg's main theme. Contrary to academic-centered anxiety about "historical indifference and ignorance" among the American people, the Thelen-Rosenzweig survey "documents the widespread nature of American engagement with the past" (263-64). That engagement, however, is experienced less in relation to schools or other formal instruction than "on holidays, at family gatherings, and in museums." (p. 264). Such findings, argues Rosenzweig,

run counter to the neoconservative narrative of declension that says Americans are disengaged from history because cultural radicals have captured the schools (and museums) and are teaching gloomy stories about our nation—stories about McCarthyism rather than America's triumph in the Cold War, about Harriet Tubman rather than the Founding Fathers, about destroying Indians rather than taming the West.... The people we interviewed said that they are already quite involved with the past.... They like history in museums and didn't like history in the schools—not because Harriet Tubman has been added but because the schools require recitation of facts instead of inspiring direct engagement with the "real" stuff of the past and its self-evident relationship to the present.(pp. 276-77)

Like Wineburg, Rosenzweig urges us to draw on the bases of already-existing engagement with the past to capture the interest of high school students: "The most powerful meanings of the past come out of the dialogue between the past and the present, out the ways the past can be used to answer pressing current questions about relationships, identity, mortality, and agency" (p. 280). Adding a personal, familial, perhaps even a popular cultural dimension to our pedagogical repertoire, such work suggests, may be just the right elixir to bring historical thinking skills alive in today's classrooms.

Yet, while reaching for relevancy and engagement with their students, instructors of history may confront a challenge bigger than selection of teaching method or curricular topic. Education scholar James W. Wertsch introduces the tension between “mastery” and “appropriation” of knowledge in such a fashion. Drawing on research in late-Cold War Estonia, Wertsch found that students “mastered” a top-down curriculum prepared by Soviet authorities while believing none of it. Rather, they “appropriated” for themselves an unofficial history passed through family and popular counter-narratives. While less closed (and hopefully less despised) than their Soviet counterparts, do American teachers expect “mastery” of material which likewise runs counter to deeper messages being “appropriated” elsewhere in the culture? Not as commisars, but as historian-pedagogues, are we not in some basic sense in tension (if not at permanent odds) with those very wellsprings of engagement—i.e. holidays, family gatherings, and possibly museums—which tend to offer reassurance of already-established beliefs and feelings? Some teachers might, in fact, argue that their job is to challenge, rather than cultivate, the inherited identities and casually cultivated assumptions of their students.

But there is a way of reconciling these two positions, i.e. of mixing everyday understandings with the tincture of formal disciplinary learning. My favorite history lesson in *KT&L* comes from David Lowenthal’s reference to first-person historical interpreters at their best:

In Plimouth Plantation’s replica 1627 village, I watched “William Bradford” thus engage a midwestern booster of individualism and free enterprise. Like many Americans, this visitor grew up in the faith that the Pilgrim Fathers were true begetters of his own values. Now he was finding *this* prototype Father’s views diametrically opposed to his own: Bradford was a Calvinist predestinarian, a believer in community to whom secular capitalist enterprise was blasphemous, selfish individualism anathema. Seething with indignation, the visitor could not just dismiss pious Bradford as a crank or a Communist. He would normally have spurned or even struck him—but you do not commit mayhem on historic sites. The venue demands tolerant colloquy, facing up to discomfiting, even unnerving difference. For the first time in his life, this visitor confronted a world view fundamentally at odds with his own and had to engage with it as an idea. Analogous engagements might be multiplied in museums, at memorials, in foreign travel, even at home. (p. 75)

Perhaps when we can regularly create “analogous” William Bradford moments in our own classes, we can congratulate ourselves on truly advancing towards a higher order of teaching. At that point we will have happily resolved current tensions between critical skills and larger narrative understandings as well as between intimate or popular affinities and

the high culture of historical scholarship. In the meantime, we would do well to test our common-sense assumptions within a larger disciplinary conversation that should surely include the stimulating essays in this book.