

Historical Thinking Is an Unnatural



I was surprised at a recent conversation with two noted curators/historians at my organization who told me they weren't familiar with the term "historical thinking." Of course they use the skills associated with historical research every day. As a museum educator, I have been using the term for a number of years and particularly embraced Sam Wineburg's 2001 book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Dr. Wineburg gave the keynote address at the 2015 American Association for State and Local History annual meeting in Louisville, (see pages 13-16) and I took the opportunity to lead a conversation afterward about the intersection between historical thinking and public history. Wineburg's book focuses on formal learning, but what about the informal learning arena? What is our responsibility or obligation when it comes to teaching historical thinking? I believe history organizations have fallen short in this area. This article attempts to summarize my session and the ensuing lively discussion.

I began the session with two very different quotes:

- "History is real simple. You know what history is? It's what happened."
- "History teaches us a way to make choices, to balance opinions, to tell stories, and to become uneasy—when necessary—about the stories we tell."

The first is by Rush Limbaugh, the second, by Sam Wineburg. Obviously the second one gets at the complexity of what we do, while the first implies that history is just the facts. In *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, historian Eric Foner compares the basic differences between a historian's understanding of his work and the broader public's. "Historians view the constant search for new perspectives as the lifeblood of historical understanding. Outside the academy, however, the act of reinterpretation is often viewed with suspicion, and 'revisionist' is invoked as a term of abuse." He adds, "History always has been and always will be regularly rewritten, in response to new questions, new information, new methodologies, and new polit-

ical, social, and cultural imperatives....But the most difficult truth for those outside of professional historians to accept is that there often exists more than one legitimate way of recounting past events."¹

You haven't worked in the history field long before you encounter people who insist that history doesn't change. This frustrates every historian. But what are we practitioners doing to help change that mindset?

Any discussion of historical thinking needs to begin with a common definition. Here are five key elements:

1. **Multiple perspectives.** There are always several ways to look at a story.
2. **Analysis of primary sources.** Thinking critically about their validity.
3. **Sourcing.** The why's related to a source; considering a source's origins to make sense of it.
4. **Context.** What else happened at the time to impact the story?
5. **Claim/Evidence Connection.** Historical arguments are based on evidence.

Sam Wineburg writes: "Historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think, one of the reasons why it is much easier to learn names, dates, and stories than it is to change the basic mental structures we use to grasp the meaning of the past. The odds of achieving mature historical understanding are stacked against us in a world in which Disney and MTV call the shots."²

The debate between historical thinking and "just the facts" history is not new. During our session, participants spent time discussing the arguments for and against these approaches. Those focused on facts put forth several arguments: it's easier to grasp; the public lacks basic historical facts, which necessitates focus on facts; "why" is not measurable, but "who, where, what, when" are. Teachers are evaluated on the facts.

Advocates for historical thinking recognize history's value beyond the facts. They understand that if you teach the strategy of historical analysis, the result is students who can analyze any content thrown their way. They also believe that anyone has the potential to practice historical thinking. Someone offered the example of two national history contests for students. The National History Bee and Bowl focuses on rote memorization of facts; National History Day

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promotes original research, critical thinking, and drawing conclusions. Which of these approaches teaches a skill set that will prepare students for the complexities of life?

The History Relevance Campaign, a three-year-old initiative to raise the profile of history in society, recently published its impact statement. “People value history for its relevance to modern life, and use historical thinking skills to actively engage with and address contemporary issues.”³

Why did the group’s steering committee, of which I’m a member, decide to directly refer to historical thinking? The committee held many discussions about the value of history and the skills that the research process teaches. It grappled with the intersection of history relevance and citizenship. Ultimately, it recognized the importance of history in teaching critical thinking and the potential for this leading to better informed citizens. Historical thinking is vital to teaching history and needed to be at the core of the impact statement.

Historical thinking and current issues demonstrate history relevance. One audience member shared that in Rockville, Maryland, there’s a debate over the presence of a Confederate statue and whether it evokes a racist ideology or not. So on his community blog, he evaluated it as a primary source—asking about the meaning of the symbology, language, and sculpture of the memorial and what it says about the Confederacy or the Civil War. And in context—what was going on locally and nationally when it was installed, what were the perspectives of the time? He noted he’s continually trying to get people to think more deeply about issues and how they started and evolved over time.

But what about teaching in informal learning environments, museums, and historic sites? Most acknowledged we should have an active role in teaching historical thinking. It is our responsibility to teach historical thinking within exhibitions, programs, and tours. And more often than not, we haven’t done such a great job. Do we use photos and objects primarily as illustration, but not as evidence? Far too many historic house tours can be given in the parking lot because they don’t use the house and its furnishings in any meaningful manner.

Imagine a scenario where every visitor leaves a site understanding that history is complex and that interpretations change over time. Think of how many people we would be educating about the historical process. What if every visitor also understood that all events have multiple perspectives and that often those perspectives conflict? History can be uncomfortable, it can be controversial, it can

and should change over time. Why do historic sites start talking about history stories they haven’t discussed in the past? Why did Mount Vernon construct a slave cabin to tell a new story? Why did Montpelier take the radical approach of returning Madison’s house back to its original state? Why did the developers of the national Lewis and Clark bicentennial exhibition look at the expedition’s journey through the cultural landscape, instead of the natural landscape? Why have controversies erupted over the telling of history? In part because people don’t understand historical thinking. The controversy surrounding the proposed *Enola Gay* exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum in the mid-1990s showed that even U.S. senators and others at the highest levels of power don’t always understand that history is about differing interpretations of historical evidence.

But how do we teach historical thinking? Too often we present the amazing research of historians, perhaps telling inspiring stories and featuring stunning artifacts, but with a passive approach to learning. We present conclusions our historians have drawn from the evidence they’ve pored over. Ultimately, most of us are in the field because we like digging into source materials, learning multiple perspectives, making comparisons, evaluating sources. We satiate our curiosity in the process. But we don’t do a good job of showing how we arrived at our conclusions and asking tough questions that challenge assumptions. I propose that we teach historical thinking by inviting visitors to roll their sleeves up and dig into the sources and compare evidence.

As a young historian, I was privileged to manage the Hands-On History Room, an activity-based learning center and international model of museum education at the National Museum of American History. It featured thirty-five hands-on activities for all ages that allowed visitors to do rudimentary detective work and sort through sources. One activity was titled, “You be the historian.” Visitors loved it. Quite often they would write in the comment book, “I never knew history could be so fun!” I propose that the key was the active learning experience. The room’s developers packed the activities with all manners of primary sources and guided visitors through exploring them.

Chances are what drew you into the history profession was asking questions and digging into historical evidence. Why don’t we offer the public more of an opportunity to do the same? Encourage others to stoke their curiosity may just lead to new generations of history lovers.



Shake table interactive, America by Air exhibition, National Air and Space Museum.

In the years since I worked in the Hands-On History Room, I've had the opportunity to develop a variety of large, highly visited museum exhibitions. Granted, some content experts continue to write a book on the wall, but gradually there have been converts to making exhibitions more active.

One part of the active learning approach is inquiry. This topic resonated. Historical thinking is based on questions. Should our institutions be posing more questions to visitors? A lively discussion ensued as members of the audience disagreed. Some said our visitors want and expect to be told content. Others said visitors want to think. Yet others said the problem is us. Maybe we are too quick to assume visitors don't want to think critically or aren't willing to keep an open mind when confronted with new interpretations. But maybe visitors don't know how to ask questions, to challenge what they see.

Most agreed that critical thinking should start with children, teaching the process at a young age. People are naturally curious. "Aren't museums where you can go to ask questions?" asked one person. Someone mentioned the Right Question Institute (rightquestion.org), which was started with low-income parents who do not know how to teach their kids how to ask questions. Its mission now is to teach people how to ask better questions. But on the other side, someone acknowledged museums are considered an authority, and wondered if we should teach them to question that. Another person asked if we shouldn't ask questions and leave them unanswered. To do this, we need to provide primary sources with answers.

Based on many curriculum materials I've seen while interacting with teachers, I've noticed that many teachers don't know how to write deeper questions about primary source materials. They will ask the who, what, where, and when questions. But they are not as quick to ask the "why" questions, such as "Why is the sender writing this, and what do you think his underlying message is?"

The crux of historical thinking is asking questions. Our institutions should be about questions, should they not? We should incorporate inquiry into all exhibitions. But do all exhibitions need to end with a neat conclusion? One session participant gave an example about an exhibition in Michigan where staff could not agree on the conclusions and gave up on "museum voice" and presented several different perspectives.

Should we go so far as asking our visitors to question us, to challenge our conclusions? Many content experts might find this threatening. But what happens if we give visitors the evidence and encourage them to draw their own conclusions? My colleagues and I on the national Lewis and Clark bicentennial exhibition team acknowledged the scant evidence that exists about the Indian woman Sacagawea, and Clark's slave York. We gathered evidence and challenged visitors to draw their own conclusions about these two people's lives. In many cases the evidence challenges common

assumptions about these popular historic figures about whom much has been written. The exhibition's historian provided her conclusion, and visitors could compare their conclusions with the historian's.

Do we challenge assumptions on a regular basis? One attendee told of working on a program about women's suffrage with students. The kids were shocked to hear that there were women who did not want suffrage. Another told of students being surprised to hear of black slaveowners. Yet another working at a historic River Road plantation in Louisiana told about a video they produced that looks at evidence for and against trying to escape slavery and poses the question "Would you run?" The evidence offers a more nuanced perspective on assumptions.

And historical thinking is, in part, about challenging assumptions with evidence. This is precisely what connects

history with the present and why it is relevant. In the context of multiple perspectives, Wineberg talks about why the study of history is so crucial to our present day. "Coming to know others, whether they live on the other side of the tracks or the other side of the millennium, requires the education of our sensibilities. This is what history, when taught well, gives us practice doing."⁴

Helping the public to think like historians may not be easy, but it may pay off in the end with new generations who see the value of history and have learned to think more critically about their world.

We need to share our experiences with teaching historical thinking and how visitors are responding to it.

So what does it look like to incorporate historical thinking into our work? I shared a few examples from exhibitions I've worked on. An exhibition about the history of commercial aviation included a travel agent's office environment from the 1930s and posed two scenarios. Flying was new for most people in this period. People traveling long distances either took the train or a ship. We asked visitors to imagine traveling from Chicago to Southern California. They are used to taking the train, but friends have encouraged them to try flying. We presented a wall of advertisements promoting train travel versus air travel to California and asked which mode of transport is faster, cheaper, and safer? Obviously airlines were playing up the safety factor since at this time the public questioned the safety of flying. (Hollywood star contracts, for example, often included a clause prohibiting them from flying during filming.) Which mode of travel would the visitors choose? Another scenario imagined a trip from New York City to Bermuda: ocean liner or airplane? Again, a comparison of competing ads held information to help the person make an informed decision. This exercise is no different than visitors do today with travel decisions.

In another example from the same exhibition, what developers built a shake table that simulated the bumpy ride on a Ford Tri-Motor, the first airplane to popularize commercial air travel in the 1930s. Of course, surrounding quotes and photos offered a feel for the experience. But the shake table, attempting in a small way to recreate a feeling, added to the experience. A photo showed happy Tri-Motor passengers seated with full meal service in front of them on a white

tablecloth. The label stated museum experts thought the photo was staged and asked why? Visitors pressed a button, the floor vibrated, and a coffee cup rattled on a saucer nearby. The answer was obvious and memorable. It also questioned a piece of photographic evidence by getting at the intent behind the photograph.

These two examples just begin to scratch the surface of historical thinking. Ultimately, to teach historical thinking means to ask questions and to admit to visitors that we don't have all of the answers. This may be a huge step for many organizations. Sure we are an authority, but historical thinking teaches us there should always be room for other interpretations. A whole range of questions uncover the historical process. Offer examples of the questions that historians asked when studying your content. Ask visitors what they would do in a situation. Have visitors make conclusions about the result of a situation. Give them options based on the sources. All of these scenarios promote active learning.

After a lively conversation, our collective resolve was to be more proactive about incorporating historical thinking into our work. Ultimately, if we are serious about history education, we can't afford to just teach content. We must work to teach the historical process. If we believe one of the values of studying history is the skills the research process teaches, then we must demonstrate those skills in practice. We must share why we know what we know, how we reached our conclusions, and how we weighed the evidence.

Our colleagues in the science fields have perhaps been more ready to demonstrate process, but they also recognize

they must do more to help their audiences think critically about science information in the news every day. History is no different. If we agree that the public needs to be more adept at thinking critically about the present and how it connects to the past, we need to do our part to teach those skills. We can't rely on formal education. In the end, incorporating historical thinking not only teaches skills but provides for a richer visit, because it automatically promotes active learning. As any educator knows, an active learner is more likely to remember the experience and to build on it in the future.

Helping the public to think like historians may not be easy, but it may pay off in the end with new generations who see the value of history and have learned to think more critically about their world. We need to share our experiences with teaching historical thinking and how visitors are responding to it. We can learn from each other along the way. ●



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¹ Eric Foner, *Who Owns the Past? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), xvi-xvii.

² Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 7.

³ See www.historyrelevance.com.

⁴ Wineburg, 23-24.

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