

Engaging Students in Learning History.

John Fielding

Queen's University (Retired, 2002)

[Return to Articles](#)

Abstract

There are two distinct sections to this article. In the first part, the author's relates, in a personal way, his conviction that the teaching of history is about the engagement and development of the "historical imagination". In the second part Fielding presents not only many strategies for teaching history but also his analysis of these various activities in terms of how effectively they engage students' "historical imagination."

The context

It is easier to comment on how not to teach history than it is on how to teach it. I only have to recall the hundreds of negative reactions from adults when I told them I am a history teacher. "Oh! That was my worse subject." "I hated history." "History was boring." "Names and dates, that's all it was." and "I can't remember any of it!"

To my question, why didn't they like history, their response was one of the following: memory work, recall, list of names and dates, not relevant, didn't interest them, teacher talked all the time, and we didn't do anything.

On the other hand, one can also learn how history was taught effectively from the 1 or 2 people out of 10 who loved history in school. Their teachers took them on field trips, they recreated history through drama, the teacher was a great storyteller, they had great discussions - the teachers made it interesting. These people often described their history learning with the word engaging.

Here is the reason I studied history and why I became a History teacher. In grade four an austere woman teacher, who slapped with a ruler any unsuspecting child who looked sideways, one day did a very unusual thing. She told us to get out of our seats and go to the huge windows at the side of the classroom. There we were instructed to observe the Grand River. Paris Central School sat on a hill overlooking the Grand, which flowed through the little town of Paris, Ontario. She said, "Try to imagine Father Marquette and his partner in

exploration Louis Joliet in their birch bark canoes paddling down our river through the forested wilderness past our school."

"Of course our school would not have been there," she exclaimed!

After a few minutes of scene setting, dreamy gazing for some, but rather intense imaging for me, (probably a first, since I was a very weak student in my early school years, I even failed grade 2) we were smartly whisked back to our desks. Here the rest of the story with dates and details continued. From that moment on, however, I was fascinated with these explorers. I had imagined that I actually saw them. My historical imagination had been engaged and it has never been turned off. History came alive for me that day! Later in grade 12 and 13 when I was confronted with deciding what to do for the rest of my life I couldn't get that moment with history out of my head. That unusual day, the teacher did 4 important things. She made history active - we moved out of our desks. She asked us to use our imaginations. She told the story of Marquette and Joliet's travel and explorations. And she made it real and relevant - we looked at the river in our own community.

I think that the first priority in how to teach history effectively is to develop learning strategies that arouse and engage the historical imaginations of our students. How we do that is by providing them with opportunities to do and to talk about history. We need to encourage students to take on the role of the historian in a creative and critical way. It is not by filling them with a narrative of names and dates for recall and test purposes. They will learn lots of solid history, including names and dates, just as I have, but they will learn it through involvement. Ever since I read the results of a memory study conducted by Danielle Lapp of the University of Texas which revealed that "we remember only 10% of what we read, 20 % of what we hear, 30% of what we see, 50% of what we see and hear, and 90 percent of what we do and say", I could no longer lecture or present history in "the old way".

What I have also learned by talking with students who enjoyed History was that they continue to study and learn history throughout their lives. They continue, in most cases, not by studying history in the academic sense but more likely by how they choose to use their leisure time. They will read history for pleasure, take it up as a hobby by researching their family's genealogy, collecting stamps or antiques, telling stories of the past, or traveling and visiting museums and historic sites. What we do know is that they will have richer more interesting lives as a result of their interest and enjoyment of history. The challenge for teachers of history is to get them curious, interested, and engaged. It is almost a case of, "do no harm". Then they will want to learn history and enjoy it.

Interesting but not effective strategies

I like most history teachers have searched for a variety of strategies to make my lessons interesting. I also used some of these strategies before I understood the difference and importance of making my lessons not just interesting but engaging and effective. Here is my list of interesting but not effective strategies:

- **Cross word puzzles, word searches, and fill in the blanks:** Sure they can keep students busy and for some students they may coincidentally reinforce a few dates or terms. But they don't learn any historical context, it doesn't involve an imaginative recreation of an era or event and it doesn't involve any of the skills or critical thinking of the historian. In fact I don't think it does much at all for the learning of history.
- **Trivia pursuit:** With the popularity of various forms of trivia pursuit games and the

annual Dominion Institute survey report about how little Canadians know about their history there has been a push to get young people to know more history facts. History trivia pursuit games can serve a purpose for review purposes and maybe concluding a lesson with some "what facts do you know now". For too many students it just reveals how weak they are at memory work. I don't think it reveals any real understanding of history.

- **Posters:** I have noticed a lot of teachers, desperate to break up the same old routines, resort to asking students to create posters. Their favourites are posters encouraging immigration to Canada at the beginning of the 20th century or recruitment for World War 1. If History class were Art class it would be a good assignment. Students who like to draw or paint think it is fun and different. But too often it involves little or no research, turns into a copying exercise and involves no critical thinking about the use of propaganda and why certain images appealed to people at that time in history. Without these latter dimensions it is really a waste of time in a History class.

Interesting and sometimes effective strategies

All of these activities have wonderful potential to engage students and are certainly excellent to create variety, develop skills, including critical thinking and decision-making. What they lack, however, is that component of engagement of the historical imagination.

- **Watching films, videos or DVD's:** Videos can help students to visualize an era or event. Too often, however, they are used as a passive process without any analysis of what is being presented, why it is being presented and how it is being presented. They may stimulate an interest but unless students engage in some questioning of the experience we have to ask ourselves what the students are learning and if this is really an effective way of learning history.
- **Field trips:** How can anyone be critical of a good old field trip? Students love them. They provide a change of scenery, some free time, and are entertaining. I suggest, without totally ruining the fun, we need to engage students in some learning of the context of the place we are visiting. We need to challenge our students to think about what they are experiencing, why a site is important, maybe why it was designated a national site, even who was involved in the designation. Pre and post field trip research and exercises can make the difference between an entertaining outing and a significant learning experience.
- **Debates:** They are also a favourite of some teachers who like the idea of controversy and competition. I have steered clear of them since I learned about **Edward DeBono's PMI**. **P** stands for plus or positive, **M** for minus or negative, and **I** for interesting or I wonder if. The concept is that groups of students brainstorm an issue and record the plus, minus and interesting aspect of an issue. The problem with debates is students are more interested in winning their argument than creatively researching or looking at an issue, decision or event in history. Debates produce convergent rather than divergent thinking. PMI's can lead to great discussions, excellent critical thinking and thoughtful reflection on the past.
- Another alternative to the debate is the "**U-shape**" forum. Many teachers are replacing this adversarial, closed-minded format with more open-ended discussions where students are encouraged to see the merits of all sides and to accept positions along a

continuum. To facilitate this approach, class discussions may be configured in a "U-shape." Students with polar views (either strongly agreeing or strongly disagreeing with the proposition) seat themselves at either tip of the "U;" students with mixed opinions sit at appropriate spots along the rounded part. At varying stages in the discussion, students are encouraged to move along the spectrum as their intellectual positions on the issue change. In this way, less dogmatic attitudes are encouraged: the implicit messages of the traditional debate – black or white, fixed opinions with the objective of winning the argument – are supplanted by different messages of the "U-shaped" discussion – provisionally held positions as one tries to figure out the most defensible personal stance from a continuum of options.

- **Mind Map:** The sounds of moaning, when we ask students to write, can be painful. For quite a few of them writing a report or essay is their worst nightmare. Yet when you do show them a video or ask them to read a book or essay you want them to show what they understood from the exercise. This is when I have found that for many students a mind map assignment works best.

A mind map is a visual representation of the student's thoughts and thought process. It can show how they connect ideas and reveal an understanding of cause and effect relationships. I have also discovered that students, using their mind maps, can explain their ideas and what they have learned quite effectively. In fact better than when they attempt to simply read what they have written. Mind maps have shown me that some students who floundered badly when I asked for a written report could not only think but could also talk.

- **Events graph:** I use to dread starting a new topic such as the French Revolution or World War 2. How can students understand what was happening without having some knowledge of the sequence of events? But I certainly didn't want to give a lecture unless I wanted them to sleep for 40 minutes. Finally I got an idea - give them a timeline of key events and ask them to evaluate the significance of the events according to a set of criteria established by the class. For example, how many people were affected by the event? Did it cause subsequent changes? Did it cost lives or save lives? Was the impact of the event short or long term? Students have to do some reading and research to learn more about the events. I usually did this as a group assignment so that the students could divide up the research, pool their knowledge and talk about their ranking of the events. Finally, they made a bar graph ranking each event between 0 and 10, with ten being most important. Then the students presented their findings using their graphs. The presentations led to many a lively discussion, as the students' interpretations of events were never the same. Once we understood the timeline then we could move on to study many other issues and concepts. Is there a pattern to revolution? How significant is the role of any one person? What was the role of women in this revolution or war? Do we have enough solid information to reconstruct what really happened? How is our present day view of the world affected by this event?

Interesting, imaginative, and effective strategies

I do believe teachers can effectively engage students in learning history through teaching strategies that employ a whole range of learning styles. The most important element for a strategy to be effective is, however, that it must activate the historical imagination of the student. Some strategies that are not just interesting but actively engage students in an

effective and creative manner are described here. One word of caution, however, there are no guarantees - these activities can go wrong. Good research habits are needed to avoid blatantly inaccurate false history. Differences in interpretation are, of course, encouraged but factual errors and imposing present day thinking and values on the past are not.

- **Role-playing, re-enactments, tableaux and simulations:** I made sure my students participated in at least one of these a semester. Why? Because year after year, for over 20 years, when I asked my students to rate their favourite lesson, most said the re-enactment or simulation. Simulations, such as re-enacting the Quebec City Conference of 1865, or playing the part of immigrants with passports and immigration officials armed with the rules of entry for a specific year, put students into decision-making situations. [Most of the components of the learning resource *We Are Canadians* involve some form of role-playing.] Students learn not only about the event, rules, dates, and people but they learn even more about process. In the case of a Confederation conference, students learn how to negotiate, compromise, and even make a good impression. In the case of the immigration simulation students not only learn about the process of immigrating by going through some aspects of it but they also feel some of the emotions that are a big part of the whole debate about immigrants, immigration, immigration rules and restrictions.
- **Tableau:** A tableau is a striking scene or picture created by people posing, often in costume. A series of tableaux can be used effectively to recreate an event, especially when a narrator is used to describe the various scenes and/or progression of events. Another variation on role-playing, tableaux can be less intimidating because not everyone needs to speak but everybody can participate.

Not the most important fun but the most important aspect of this activity is the debriefing. What was portrayed, why was it important, is it a reasonably accurate recreation of the event, what aspects do we need to learn more about, are there other interpretations of what happened, and, of course, what have we learned from this activity?

- **Stepping into the picture** (a combination of role-playing and tableau): This is a concept I developed after participating in a History Alive! workshop presented by Bert Bower from the California Teachers Institute. Basically it involves students role-playing people in a picture. Some of my favourite photographs for this strategy are famous ones, such as; "The Last Spike" or "Fathers of Confederation at the Charlottetown Conference". The idea is to assign roles based on the people in the picture, students research their person, and then they create a conversation about the issue that is the subject or reason for the photograph. For example, in the two photos I mentioned, the issues are obviously, the building of the transcontinental railway and Confederation. This exercise is excellent for stirring up the historical imagination, researching, discussing issues, and identifying people and places. It can, with thoughtful help from the teacher, involve some excellent critical thinking. The teacher will need to encourage students to ask some penetrating questions in order to recreate a realistic or accurate historical context. Students do tend to want to impose the present on the past. There are opportunities for some imaginative but not authentic dialogue - that is neither good history nor good history teaching. A complete, ready-to-use "Stepping into History" lesson with the "Last Spike" photograph is available on the [histori.ca](http://www.histori.ca/teachers/lessonPlan.do?ID=10086&sl=e) website: www.histori.ca/teachers/lessonPlan.do?ID=10086&sl=e

I have not made a clear distinction between role-playing and a simulation although some people do. They see simulations as remaking not re-enacting or trying to recreate history. I think of a simulation as a more formalized or structured and involved role-playing. I am interested in historical accuracy not remaking history.

- **Postcards from the Past:** Students get bored and frustrated with writing essays and reports. Here is an interesting alternative. When you are studying a unit of time or about an event, whether it is the Loyalists, Confederation or Settling the West, ask the students to create postcards from the perspective of that time period. The postcard should be as historically accurate as possible - we may have to suspend some historical accuracy for the Loyalists since they were far too busy and disoriented to be writing postcards even if they had them back in the 1780's. The postcards should, of course, be written in the first person and have proper postcard format, including a representative picture on the front. I think this is a much more useful exercise than simply writing a letter or drawing a picture. This will involve the student in doing some research, which too often is not what they do if you ask them to simply draw a picture or create a poster. I found that to motivate my students to do the research I made it clear that I expected accuracy in factual information as well as to their character's opinions about what was happening. I required that some answers to the 5 W questions, what, where, who, when and why and some aspects of how had to be included in the postcard narrative.

This exercise includes all my criteria for an effective lesson: it calls on the imagination, requires research, appeals to different learning styles and is creative, active learning.

- **Heritage or history minutes:** This is a strategy that developed very naturally out of the popular television advertisements called "Heritage Minutes" produced originally by The CRB Foundation Heritage Project and more recently by Historica (www.histori.ca). The length is just right for a student project. Organize the class into small production teams and ask them to write a storyboard for a history minute. You don't actually have to do a video although the students usually want to and it does teach them other skills in a real, worthwhile way. It is great for learning across the curriculum or integration of skills. It is especially effective if you are studying an era, such as the 1920's or even the 1960's or an event such as Confederation. You can allow the students to choose to do a person, event, even a popular product of the time and do the research necessary to tell the story. It is active, creative learning at its best, especially when you can show an actual Heritage Minute and critically analyze it before using it as a model. Information about this type of lesson plus background information about the real Heritage Minutes can be easily found on the Historica website: www.histori.ca/teachers/lessonPlan.do.

- **Historical fiction:** Most people enjoy reading historical fiction. In fact the sales of historical fiction novels have never been greater. So why not introduce your students to the genre and let them be creative while they still learn some real history. You can also encourage the use of primary documents as the source of the information for the students' fictional creations. I am encouraged in my thinking that it is okay to let young students of history write historical fiction by an article in the *The Archivist*, No.121, 2003, page 14. The author Dale Simmons writes,

*Aspiring writers are often cautioned to write only about
"what they know." But if writers followed this advice, there*

would be no fantasy or science fiction writing, and not much historical fiction either. Far better advice would be "know what you" write. The question is... how do you get to know about events in the past? The answer can be summed up in one word: research.

What we want is for students to get engaged in story telling but to be as accurate as possible. Good research, application of the imagination, and writing a story about an historical event or person - it sounds like an excellent strategy to me and there are lots of examples that you can use to provide the students with models.

- **Obituary or Eulogy:** I have lots of friends who read the obituaries every day - of course I am older and so are my friends. An obituary is a wonderful summary and interpretation of a person's life. There are excellent models in most newspapers, especially the "Lives Lived" column in the Globe and Mail. I like the idea of finding primary documents on famous people, such as Winston Churchill, Sir John A. Macdonald or Billy Bishop and asking the students to write the obituary from them rather than secondary sources where most of the work is already done. Of course, this suggestion will depend on the age and ability level of the students. Even writing an obituary or eulogy from secondary sources takes research, creativity, storytelling ability and writing skills. The students can practice their public speaking skills by presenting their eulogy. This is not a skill most of us want to use very often but even our students will some day get old – imagine that.

When it comes right down to it students want variety with a dependable structure. They want to be challenged yet not to be overwhelmed. They want to be able to think, talk, and do history. They also need to be given the opportunity to make some decisions, walk in another person's shoes for a while, and use their imaginations.

Footnotes:

Most of these strategies or activities are described and used in textbooks, teacher's guides, learning resources and online lessons and activities that I have produced over the past 14 years. Here are some references that might be of practical value:

1. ***Canada, Our Century, Our Story***, Nelson Thomson Learning, 2001. Their website is www.nelson.com. The teaching guide to this text I think is particularly useful with some of the best examples of these strategies.
2. ***Canada: The Story of Our Heritage*** and ***Canada: The Story of a Developing Nation***, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 2000. Their website is www.mcgrawhill.ca. Again I would recommend reviewing the Teacher's Resource Binder for many examples of how to implement these strategies.
3. I have also produced many learning resources/activities that are posted on Historica's website - www.historica.ca; and The Library and Archives of Canada - <http://sources.collectionscanada.ca>.

John Fielding is an Adjunct Professor of Education at Queen's University (Retired, 2002). He can be reached by email at john.fielding3@sympatico.ca.

[Return to Articles](#)