

SCHOOL HISTORY VERSUS THE HISTORIANS

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This article is largely my reflections on one particular aspect of history and social studies education, reflections that are very much those of an outsider. Nationally, I am not an American, but a Canadian, and professionally I have been, until recently, a historian rather than a history educator. And the differences, as I have discovered, are profound. This article is not concerned with the differences between American and Canadian history education; those differences deserve more attention than they can receive here. Instead, it focuses on the gulf that presently divides historians and history educators throughout North America. The history teachers that I have met in Canada and the United States over the past three years differ from each other in many ways, varying in their teaching practices, and their beliefs about what to teach and for what purposes. Yet, as a group they tend to overwhelmingly share a particular belief about what history, in essence, *is*: History is a story about people, events and trends that constitutes a strong and linear nationalist narrative of progress from the past to the present and future.¹ For most educators, history is the most accurate story. This view stands in noted contrast to the tendency of Euro-American professional historians who, for the last half-century or so, have come to understand history as a process of critical enquiry concerning evidence left over from the past; evidence that historians interpret through complex, varied and contested narratives.² Thus, for historians, history is someone's coherent narrative interpretation of evidence.

I will begin here by describing in more detail the contrast between North American "school history" and what most Euro-American historians have been practicing over the past half century, using my own experience creating an educational Web site to explore the dissonance between the history of historians and that of educators. I will explore why the outmoded, positivist beliefs about history long abandoned by historians present political and pedagogical problems for the educators and citizens who continue to rely on these beliefs. I will suggest that these problems are manifesting themselves most particularly in the limited ability of social studies and history courses to teach critical enquiry. The article concludes with a discussion of some of the advantages that twentieth-century historical practice and ideology might have over those of the nineteenth century—at least as far as twenty-first-century students living in participatory democracies are concerned.

Historians have changed a lot over the past fifty years.³ Since the defeat of fascism and the triumph of American modernity, Euro-American historians have increasingly rejected the positivist notion of a single, unified narrative of history in favor of histories that are more complex, varied and contested. As a group, historians have broadened their interest beyond the study of one class, gender or ethnically defined group, and beyond their earlier, exclusive interest in public life and formal political systems. As a result, historians' research and writing have become much more interdisciplinary, and much less the single and uncontested narrative of "the winners." In other words, historians as a group have made a move away from an epic form of narrative, with a single plot line and clearly defined "heroic" heroes and evil villains. They have made a move towards the kind of complicated characters, plots, and narratives that characterize the modern novel.⁴

In spite of the fears of some critics, this move away from the epic form has not meant that historians have abandoned the use of narrative as the device that gives coherence and meaning to their representations of the past.⁵ The concern with a wider range of peoples and issues in the past, which is an important part of this shift, has encouraged some historians to take a more active role in contemporary

concerns, particularly those involving historical injustices based on gender, class or ethnicity. Some have become much more open about their concerns over relevant, contemporary issues, and the ways in which these issues have helped to shape their professional interests. And, partly as a result of their broader focus, historians have become much more cognizant, than they used to be, of the relationship between knowledge and power. Not only do they believe that history involves more than the single narrative about the winners in the past, but many historians are now aware that *portraying* history as a particular one-dimensional narrative only helps to maintain structures of power within today's society. Finally, all of these changes are part of historians' increased awareness that their research is more a process of critical enquiry, a kind of knowledge, than it is a series of authoritarian, factual statements, let alone final judgments, about the past. The past is gone, and all historians can do is try to understand some of its meanings and complexity through ongoing discussions about how best to interpret evidence from the past in a way that is significant for those in the present and the future.⁶

In a general and pervasive sort of way, therefore, historians' history has moved beyond the positivism that largely defined nineteenth-century historical writing. Historical knowledge, most historians would now agree, is not comprised of facts lying there waiting to be "discovered." It is instead created as a process of critical enquiry, a painfully meticulous process of putting together (i.e., constructing) pieces of evidence into a narrative about a meaningful past, within the context of what other historians have written about.

My first encounter with school history, as an adult, demonstrated that positivism was by no means banished from the historical landscape. This revelation came to me through an educational Web site that I created with a colleague of mine, John Lutz, at the University of Victoria. The Web site "Who Killed William Robinson?" presents a variety of primary documents about a murder in 1868 of an African American, allegedly by a member of a Canadian First Nation. Students are invited to resolve the murder. The Web site invites students to "re-solve" the murder by working through the documents pertaining to the arrest, the trial and the community as a whole.

When John and I first thought of the Web site, we planned it for use in a first-year university survey course in Canadian history. To our surprise, the Web site became widely used by secondary students across North America, and, as a result, John and I were asked to provide a little more support for teachers using the site, and so we created a teacher's guide. As part of this project, I conducted surveys of students' responses to the Web site, and it was that experience that first alerted me to the gulf which, as a number of writers have noted, separates the historical practice of historians from "school" history.⁷

Let me elaborate a little more on our decision to use a Web site to teach history. Originally we wanted to use the Web technology because we were struck by the fortunate coincidence between the pedagogical potential of such technology and twentieth-century ideas about history. Lectures and textbooks had been invented, we reasoned, as pedagogical devices that were particularly well suited to the theoretical frameworks of history extant in the nineteenth century. We noticed that the simple narrative structure of textbooks, like the authoritarian and linear structure of lectures, had been particularly well suited to nineteenth-century, positivist beliefs about the nature of history. Textbooks and lectures, in other words, were well suited to the nineteenth century positivist belief that history is "just the facts", plain and simple; a chronicle of events told in an epic format, with good guys and bad guys (and I mean guys) and a strong, simple and one dimensional plot line. Beliefs about the nature of historical knowledge worked well with these nineteenth-century pedagogical forms.⁸

The World Wide Web, by contrast, offered pedagogical opportunities that were, we felt, particularly well suited to twentieth-century ideas about history. As noted earlier, by the mid-twentieth century, history could no longer be convincingly understood as "the truth," discovered by a historian sitting alone in a dusty archive. On the contrary, as John Wertsch clarified for nonhistorians in 1998, history is not a thing, nor a fixed and coherent body of hard knowledge known as facts, or any other product; instead, it is a situated and contingent dialogue among people about how to best interpret fragments of evidence contained in primary documents from the past.⁹ It is a kind of knowledge that draws on the humanist tradition of knowledge as a construction, not a discovery.

Indeed, the World Wide Web seemed a perfect pedagogical tool for this new history. It is nonauthoritarian, for students can explore the sources for themselves, without anyone telling them the right answer. It is democratic, in that anyone who has a computer can have access to the kind of evidence that was previously only practically accessible to professional researchers; and it offers the potential of exploring multiple lines of causation, and multiple voices involved in the event being examined. Not only is it multivocal and multifocal, but, perhaps most important of all, Web technology allows students the opportunity to confront the contingency of evidence, to experience the process of selecting, weighing, and evaluating evidence as they create a historical narrative that is both meaningful and reasonable. The Web site, thus, allows students to “do” history in a way that closely resembles what historians do.

To our surprise, however, surveys revealed that students were using this late-twentieth-century technology in a very nineteenth-century way; using positivist, not postmodern, ideas about history to inform their ideas about history. It will come as no surprise to those of you familiar with school history to learn that it was precisely the idea of history as a process of critical enquiry that proved so problematic to users of the “Who Killed William Robinson?” Web site. Students repeatedly identified the site as interesting and engaging, but were at the same time frustrated and annoyed by the demands placed on them by the Web site to critically engage with the material. It was clear that many students identified—in true nineteenth-century fashion—the process of critical enquiry as something extraneous to history. Many students requested that we provide them with a timeline that identified “key events” so that they could more easily discover what “really happened” instead of forcing them to encounter a maze of evidence that many experienced as confusing. The opportunity for critical enquiry that we had carefully provided them with was, in the worst cases, seen as an unfair and unreasonable complication that we were superimposing on what many students clearly believed was an otherwise coherent and straightforward chronicle of events that they, like their nineteenth-century forebears, identified as “real history.”

It is not only this Web site that has documented the difficulty that American students experience if they are asked to bring critical enquiry to bear on the study of history. Document-based enquiry has become very popular in schools in recent years. Primary documents are not only more interesting to students than textbooks or lectures, but they also provide an opportunity for students to exercise the critical thinking skills that are, according to many educators, absent in the social studies classroom.¹⁰ Teachers, though, often lack training in how to critically evaluate primary or secondary sources. The work of Keith Barton, Bruce Van Sledright and Stella Rose Weinert has clearly demonstrated, however, that with proper instruction children as young as seven are quite able to learn the skills involved in thinking critically about history.¹¹

The problem is not simply that the skills need to be taught, but that even when students have learned how to engage with the materials, they still demonstrate a marked reluctance to do so. Researchers have found that students prefer to follow the path of least resistance in getting to the answer that the teacher wants. As Barton has noted, “rather than evaluating information from multiple sources, students move directly to search engines to find the sites they thought would give them all the necessary information to accomplish the task.”¹² Even after intensive, and successful training sessions relating to using critical thinking to examine historical documents, students are still much more likely to give an answer that a) they think that the teacher wants, or b) justify any response they give by saying “I just kinda know.”¹³

In some of his other work, Barton has traced this disjuncture—between the ability to think critically about history and the willingness to do so—to the absence of meaningful questions in history classes and to the absence of purposes that would be served by critical enquiry.¹⁴ But, I think that the problem is deeper than this. I believe that the problem is that students remain deeply attached to the belief that history is, quite simply, not about the process of interpretation, but about facts, information and absolute knowledge. While some students are able to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the “past as reconstructed in accordance with criteria” the vast majority accept either the “past as given” or “the past as inaccessible.”¹⁵ Students understanding of history, in other words, is that history is as the nineteenth-century positivists saw it—uncontested and uncontested facts that students may or may not have any access to at all. For these students, I would argue, critical enquiry really is irrelevant to the study of history.

Therefore, it is not surprising that North American students find irrelevant and meaningless the kinds of critical enquiry so relevant to twentieth-century historians. Where would North American students experience the idea that history is an open but disciplined dialogue about evidence, or indeed about critical thinking in any form? Most would not encounter that idea in secondary classrooms, where history is presented through lectures and textbooks as a series of facts, the knowledge of which is measured in standardized tests. Most would not encounter this idea of history as a process of critical enquiry at the university level, either, where historical knowledge, though perhaps in a more complex way, is still presented to undergraduates—by means of lectures and scholarly monographs—as a series of more or less self-evident facts; a product of expert knowledge rather than a process of enquiry. No wonder so many students see document-based inquiry as just more busy work added on to the course material for no apparent reason.

This set of beliefs about history raises some important issues about history education, particularly regarding its origins and its purpose. Looking at the failure of critical enquiry in the history classroom as a historian, I cannot help speculating on the reasons for the overwhelming support that positivism receives in the schools of Canada and the United States. The nationalist functions of a positivist history have been clear to many people in both countries for many years.¹⁶ As Linda Symcox's overview of the national history standards debate in the United States has demonstrated, there are powerful factions in the United States that are quite openly advocating history education for explicitly nationalistic purposes, namely to shore up Americans' belief in the naturalness, the inevitability and the "rightness" of America's position of economic, military and cultural prominence on the international stage.¹⁷

Most discussions of a nationalist history have, however, focused on the *content* of school history—what people, events and trends will be included, and which will be left out? Some people believe that as long as the content can be diverse and as long as critical enquiry is included as part of the curriculum, then the pernicious effects of history-as-indoctrination can be avoided. I am beginning to wonder, however, if this is enough.¹⁸ If students, teachers and educators are attached to a belief that history is essentially about facts, and those facts have already been laid out by the experts, and if debate about those facts is portrayed as academic obscurantism, then history education is essentially NOT about preparing students to be active participants in a pluralist democracy. Instead, school history seems to be essentially about preparing students to be unquestioning citizens in a demobilized democracy.

This leads to much broader questions about the uses of history and social studies in systems of public education. While students as national citizens may derive some benefit from learning an epic narrative that provides a coherent and stable identity for the nation state, this "quest for freedom narrative" that James Wertsch has popularized in educational circles contains a real threat to personal and collective liberty.¹⁹ For this nineteenth-century idea about what constitutes history (i.e., what history *is*) is simply too prone to being manipulated by powerful factions. History as critical enquiry, on the other hand, may give students the tools they need to have a much more complex understanding of their place in the world, and thus the power to change it.

But the ability to think clearly about evidence in the context of a wider knowledge and understanding is not something that students need only to protect them from nationalist indoctrination, or as they contemplate casting their vote in an election. On a much deeper level, students need help in clarifying the terms upon which human beings can, and indeed do, on a daily basis, build meaningful (though always contingent) knowledge about the world. They need this knowledge not only in the history classroom, when they are asked to make sense out of evidence from the past, but everywhere in their lives that requires critical evaluation and judgment in order to make sense out of the world in the present. And they need it now; at a time when traditional structures of knowledge and belief are being undermined. They need to learn alternative ways of creating legitimate, meaningful knowledge about the world and their place in it, rather than those provided by authoritarian forms of knowledge. And as the proponents of citizenship education through history have argued, the help they need can perhaps best be found in the active and dialogical processes of historical investigation, of creating historical knowledge.²⁰ It is historians, therefore, I would argue, who spend their days contemplating how we negotiate that middle

ground between complete relativism and absolute truth. How to do this is what the discipline of history is all about.

Similarly, the disconnection between what historians do and what history teachers teach their students highlights yet again the question: why teach history at all? I would argue that history does not just allow us to learn lessons from certain events in the past. This kind of critical enquiry is exactly the kind of complicated and compassionate process of understanding and kind of knowledge that we need to understand our contemporary, democratic and pluralistic world. How do we know what accounts in the media make sense in terms of evidence and interpretation? How do we evaluate the significance of a particular event in our own lives, or in the lives of others? How do we find the language to talk about the kind of world we want for humanity? The process of historical enquiry—the dialogue among people about evidence from the past—is the best way to explore who we were and are, and how we can turn that into who we as a global community want to be.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Osborne, “Teaching History in Schools: a Canadian Debate,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35, no. 5 (2003); James Wertsch, *Mind As Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

2. Sam Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (1991): 495-519; James Wertsch, *Mind As Action*; Tom Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination and Understanding* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995).

3. Linda Symcox, *Whose History: The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Kenneth Osborne, “Teaching History in Schools”; Gary B. Nash, “The ‘Convergence Paradigm’ in Studying Early American History in the Schools,” in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (New York: University Press, 2000); Peter Seixas, “Schweigen! die Kinder or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools?” in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Epic and the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

5. J. Appleby et al., *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994).

6. Jocelyn Letourneau, *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen’s University Press, 2004).

7. G. McDiarmid et al., “A Catwalk across the Great Divide: Redesigning the History Teaching Methods Course,” in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 156-77; Sam Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (1991): 495-519.

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Epic and the Novel”; James Wertsch, *Mind As Action*; Peter Seixas, “Schweigen!”.

9. Wertsch, *Mind As Action*.

10. Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, “Progression in Historical Understanding among Students Ages 7-14,” in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 199-223; Sam Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts”: 495-519; Keith Barton, “Inquiry and the Book of James,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the College and University Faculty Assembly, National Council for the Social Studies, Phoenix, Ariz., 2002); Ruth Sandwell, “Reading Beyond Bias: Using Historical Documents in the History Classroom,” *McGill Journal of Education* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 168-86.

11. Keith Barton, “‘I Just Kinda Know’: Elementary Students’ Ideas about Historical Evidence,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 25 (1997): 407-30; Bruce A. VanSledright, “Fifth Graders Investigating History in the Classroom: Results from a Researcher-Practitioner Design Experiment,” *Elementary School Journal* 102 (2002); Stella Rose Weinert, “Young Children’s Historical Understanding” (master’s thesis, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2001).

12. Barton, “Inquiry and the Book of James.”

13. Barton, “‘I Just Kinda Know’”: 407-30.

14. Barton, “Inquiry and the Book of James.”

15. Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, "Progression in Historical Understanding:" 199-223; Keith Barton, "Inquiry and the Book of James."
16. Kenneth Osborne, "Teaching History in Schools: a Canadian Debate," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35, no. 5 (2003).
17. Linda Symcox, *Whose History: The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
18. James Wertsch, *Mind As Action*; Keith Barton, "Inquiry and the Book of James."
19. James Wertsch, *Mind As Action*; Keith Barton, "Committing Acts of History: Mediated Action, Humanistic Education and Participatory Democracy," in *Critical Issues in Social Studies Research for the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Stanley (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2001): 119-48.
20. Keith Barton, "Committing Acts of History:" 119-48.