

What of History?
Historical Knowledge within a System of Standards and Accountability

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In the summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama caused a stir in intellectual and political circles when he proclaimed the arrival of “the end of history.” Though the title of his essay had an alarmingly apocalyptic ring, the thrust of Fukuyama’s argument rested on the application of Hegelian philosophy, not some doomsday millennialism.¹ We were recently reminded of Fukuyama’s exercise in philosophical history and the flurry of commentary that followed his momentous declaration in *The National Interest* quarterly. While there are no bold proclamations currently ushering in the end of history, we have been alarmed by some apparently well-intentioned proposals for history education reform that may actually signal its demise. It appears that politicians and policymakers have launched yet another attack in the perennial conflicts known as the “history wars.” Their weapons are not the universalism of Hegel or the hammer of Marx. They are armed, instead, with the rhetoric of common sense. Who, after all, would oppose “higher standards” and “accountability?”

We are referring to the May 2006 passage of House Bill 7087 by the Florida legislature and the subsequent debate surrounding Governor Jeb Bush's sweeping education bill. While the legislation included in the “A-plus-plus” plan addressed a wide range of education issues in the state of Florida, one particular passage related to history teaching and learning was at the center of the controversy: “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.”² The inconspicuous placement of this statement on page 44 of the 160-page document did not diminish the reactions of those who weighed in on the issue, from the legislators who sponsored the omnibus bill to the history educators who, it appeared, were being chastened to “teach efficiently and faithfully” the course of study outlined there. But what was at issue? Certainly, pressing educators to “meet the highest standards for professionalism and historic accuracy” could hardly signal the death knell of history.³ Or could it?

Reports from the *Tampa Bay Tribune* gave some indication of how variously positioned participants in the Florida debate were defining the issue. Republican Congressmen Mike Fasano and Richard Glorioso, who developed the language of the bill, argued that it was aimed at raising historical literacy, especially concerning the democratic principles included in the nation's *Charters of Freedom*. Said Glorioso, "I don't want you to construct anything...I want students to read the original documents." Theron Trimble, executive director of the Florida Council of the Social Studies, responded to the apparent fear of a "constructed" history by emphasizing the fundamentally interpretive nature of the discipline, noting that "history is as changeable as the law." Other politicians and educators questioned whether an emphasis on learning more "facts" could actually counter students' history knowledge deficits or even generate genuine interest in the subject. Bruce Craig, executive director of the National Coalition for History (consisting of a number of organizations for history professionals) worried that students "are going to be bored to death if history becomes [merely] a set of facts."⁴

We share this concern about a history curriculum that is fundamentally dead, for the consequences of how we conceptualize history, history education, and historical understanding reach far beyond the domain itself. The resilience of fundamentalist epistemologies and the staying power of conventional practices of teaching and learning history produce an all too familiar portrait: students numbed by a predictable litany of "other people's facts," served up by teacher-technicians on a kind of educational conveyor belt. Knowledge in such a system becomes, in the words of John Dewey, "so much lumber and debris...an obstruction to effective thinking."⁵

Perhaps, the end of history is too mighty a theme and the picture we have sketched, thus far, too bleak. However, to ask "whose history" and "what history" implies that some version will be given life via the material culture of schools (i.e., history standards, curriculum documents, and textbooks), while alternative versions will lose official sanction. Beverly M. Gordon characterizes the issue as "fundamentally one of control—that is, who will control the perspectives and interpretations given to children in American schools." Similarly, Peter Seixas explains that different sides are seeking to influence "the power of the story of the past to define who we are in

the present, our relations with others...and broad parameters for action in the future.” Examining these issues of control is important. After all, the outcomes of the history wars have a profound impact on the kind of historical knowledge that is legitimized in schools. Through the production of official knowledge, schools become agencies for legitimation, and thus, deeply implicated in the larger ideological, economic, and political context. The forces at work, though, seem to escape a rough Marxist analysis.⁶

The role of schools in the process of social and cultural reproduction is as much a product of institutional inertia as it is the result of structural inequalities and the ascendance of a dominant political ideology. As David Tyack and William Tobin argue, the persistence of certain “standardized organizational practices,” what they refer to as the “grammar of schooling,” may help to explain certain taken for granted assumptions about the form and function of schools. Consider, for example, the highly technical orientation of those institutional structures designed to organize curricular, instructional, and assessment activities. With an overly behavioral emphasis on efficiency and control, they forward an equally reductive view of knowledge, teaching, and learning. Theoretical and historical analyses of curriculum development, curriculum reform, and traditions of practice and reform in teacher education evidence this model of scientific management and social efficiency. We need only to recall the language of House Bill 7087 to be reminded that current policy initiatives primarily reflect the interests of a social-efficiency framework.⁷

Constituting Official School History

For the purposes of this essay, we are interested in exploring the structures, processes, and messages that such accountability reforms communicate about the goals and means of coming to know history. In other words, how do existing history standards and formal curricula officialize certain orientations toward historical knowledge and traditions through which that knowledge is taught? Specifically, we begin by examining the *National History Standards* and the *History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools*. By focusing our examination on what might be broadly defined as the “commodified” history curriculum, we do not

mean to diminish the significance of how actors at all levels of history education interact with formal standards and curricula. We do not ignore the “lived curriculum” in our discussion, however, we believe that the increasing demands put on states by the *No Child Left Behind* legislation require a focused content analysis of those policy instruments that are presumably created to drive the teaching and learning of history.⁸

The standards documents noted in the foregoing will be viewed through several overlapping lenses, including a typology of historical knowledge, a conceptual framework of teaching and learning history, as well as research, philosophy, and criticism related to the domain. We utilize these conceptual frameworks for their analytic, organizational, and pedagogical power, not because they represent reality in some undistorted way. The progression of our analysis, from a set of national standards to state-level standards, aims to address particular patterns of coherence *and* variability among these systems of reform. The inferences that can be drawn from a comparison of these documents and the contexts in which they were created, will call attention to examples of processes by which official school knowledge gets constituted. By examining the conceptions of history forwarded by these policy instruments, we explore the intersection of knowledge, culture, politics, and the institutional structures of school organization and practice. This inquiry into the “end of history” is more than a rhetorical move. Ultimately, we are interested in how students and teachers interpret and interact with these systems of accountability and the conceptions of history they forward. The kind of pedagogical moves teachers make and the learning experiences students are afforded as a result of (or despite) these official representations of history will go some distance, in the end, in determining the fate of history in present-day classrooms.⁹

We eventually narrow our focus even further to a specific local context, Fairfax County, Virginia, concentrating our analysis on a modern world history curriculum and related instructional materials designed to prepare students for the *Virginia Standards of Learning Assessments* in this course of study. A variety of factors contributed to this choice. Most important were the practical dilemmas that arose in the context of the first author’s experience teaching World History II (1500-Present) in the school district. He has been frustrated in his efforts to use the

domain and its disciplinary tools to cultivate in his students deep understandings of the world and themselves. He experienced similar challenges as a history teacher in a secondary private school, yet the constraints he has encountered in a public school context seem all the more daunting. His attempts to make his practice cohere with the findings of some of the recent research in history and social studies education, seem to run counter to a system which privileges “efficiency” over “innovation.”¹⁰

The essays in *Wise Social Studies Teaching in an Age of High-Stakes Testing*, a volume edited by Elizabeth Anne Yeager and Ozro Luke Davis, certainly provide evidence of the ways teachers can mediate the potential influences of content standards, curricula, and high-stakes assessments. However, as Stephanie van Hover and Walter F. Heinecke made clear in their study of secondary history teachers in Virginia, “the accountability measures associated with the standards have created a context that encourages planning, instruction, and assessment practices that conflict with history ‘wise practice,’” as described in the research literature. As teachers and researchers, we see an urgent need to develop deeper understandings of the powerful and often subtle mechanisms that help to create and preserve these educational contexts. In order for teachers to act as curriculum “gatekeepers,” they must develop the “adaptive expertise” necessary to navigate the educational landscape where the domain of history and research-based conceptions of “wise practice” meet an accountability reform movement dominated by technical interests, such as coverage and control. That this meeting necessarily takes place on fiercely contested political terrain and within an institutional context resistant to change requires the kind of professional judgment that might counter those socialization agents that reinforce the “conservatism of practice.”¹¹

Historical Knowledge and Modes of Knowing: A Conceptual Framework

Developing a workable analytic framework, which reflects the nature of historical knowledge, represents our efforts to advance a conversation about history education that is rooted in domain understandings and not simply the technical language of accountability reform. Consensus, however, is not the province of the history domain. Historians and philosophers have

participated in an ongoing debate related to issues of epistemology, method, and ultimate purposes. Although the edifice of an accepted historical method has been generally solidified as a result of the increasing professionalization of the discipline, conflicting interpretations of the past abound, as do diverse articulations concerning what it means to *know* and *do* history. These same questions help to shape the debates taking place within the history education research community, especially concerning the broader purposes teachers and students attach to domain-specific learning.¹²

Our aim here is to appropriate Seixas' framework to momentarily freeze these debates, however artificial that process may seem. As ideal types, the distinctions he makes between collective memory, disciplinary, and postmodern pursuits allow some analytic leverage on the history education landscape. These categories link up in interesting ways to different types of domain knowledge—substantive and procedural/strategic—and encompass parallel modes of knowing (narrative, scientific, and aesthetic, respectively). Taken together, these ways of *knowing, teaching, and learning* history appear to enliven and direct particular understandings about the nature of knowledge, the purposes attached to the pursuit of that knowledge, and the means of achieving those goals.¹³

Seixas characterizes the collective memory approach as a stabilizing, didactic form of teaching, where narratives are chosen and passed down by history educators as a means of imparting “the single best version of the past... as it happened” and, thus, building a consensus among learners. New stories are introduced in the context of known events, and each historical account is laden with value judgments about its subjects, or what Seixas calls a “moral trajectory.” In this sense, the collective memory approach aligns somewhat with what Jerome Bruner calls a narrative mode of thought, where stories are constructed out of associations among historical details, maxims, and time and presented to others as trustworthy. However, Bruner likely would eschew the decontextualized facts, names, and dates that collective memory sometimes represents, perhaps noting that collective memorialists inappropriately attempt to make history paradigmatic, and thus, less controversial, by inoculating their students against understanding the means through which historical narratives are developed.¹⁴

Unlike collective memory, a disciplinary approach to history makes transparent the evidence and methods that are used to construct narratives in the process of arriving at and debating informed interpretations of the past. Seixas argues that such an approach trumps collective memory in its capacity to move students toward critiquing history, considering the social, political, and economic ramifications of such critiques, and discussing those ramifications with others. In a sense, the disciplinary approach integrates tools of scientific thinking—the proposition of a question, collection of evidence around that question, and eventual rationalization of a best possible response given the evidence at hand—with a democratic purpose: cultivating common interests in building different interpretations of history, using peers' contentions as springboards for inquiry, and persuading others through reason or empathy. Of course, this is an ideal to which the disciplinary approach aspires. In the secondary history classroom, where a singular narrative often dominates, the tools of the discipline might be used as devices to push students toward a particular interpretation, rather than to promote sophisticated, informed deliberation.¹⁵

Seixas' third distinction, the postmodern approach to knowing history, plunges students more deeply into the construction of history, placing at its forefront the relationship among narratives, the power and positionalities of those who create them, and the vocabularies that they choose in doing so. Seixas notes, "The historian [judges accounts of the past] on the basis of linguistic, ideological, or moral criteria. At this level—in the construction of the narrative (as opposed to the listing of facts)—the historian is constrained, according to the postmodernists, only by language." Thus, history, through the postmodern approach, has a distinctly aesthetic function: it is engaged with attention to design and form, to elicit a sensory response and suggest a certain feeling of order in the world. But language and aesthetic value cannot be the only criteria that limit the veracity of history. Were that the case, we would have little recourse against a student who praises the form of the Nazis' ethnic expurgation program in the early and middle twentieth century. Instead, these criteria are tempered by a sense of civic responsibility, an understanding that choosing to portray history in a certain way can impact, in positive and negative ways, students' views of humanity and perceptions of the common good.¹⁶

Contested Landscapes of Purpose, Practice, and Critique in the History Domain

These three different approaches can—and, of course, do—coexist. However, as Lowenthal has made clear, their purposes nonetheless can remain antithetical. The impassioned and, sometimes, acrimonious commentary surrounding such conflicts signals different things to variously positioned participants in the history wars. To experts within the history domain (disciplinarians), critical reappraisal by a counsel of one's peers represents a hallmark of practice there. The exchange between Robert Finlay and Natalie Zemon Davis in the *American Historical Review* certainly gives testimony to the epistemological and methodological minefields historians are forced to navigate as they try to make sense of a distant and remote past. In our estimation, this kind of community policing serves as a stabilizing force. Rather than completely shaking the profession from its epistemological and methodological moorings, the rocking facilitated by these debates actually settles the disciplinary edifice, even if momentarily.¹⁷

If pressed on the matter, most historians would admit that they are more than mere conduits or couriers, whose job it is to transport the past as *it happened* to the present. It should be noted, however, that the parallels drawn between disciplinary and scientific ways of knowing are no accident. Historians are still very much working in the shadow of the ideal established by Leopold von Ranke. About the discipline of history, he remarked, "It seeks only to show what actually happened [wie es eigentlich gewesen]." Von Ranke contrasts this supposedly humble goal, with other "high offices," to which, he claims, "[history] does not presume," including "judging the past and...instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. And yet, we have seen how both professionals in the field and lay practitioners attempt to connect these kinds of purposes to the act of doing history."¹⁸

Folklorists and genealogists are notorious for fashioning feel-good accounts of a past designed for present-day purposes. In fact, there is a sense of democratic and utopian nostalgia in Henry Glassie's characterization: "History—like myth, powerful, suggestive, and inevitably fragmentary—exists to be altered, to be transformed without end, chartering social orders as yet unimagined." Establishing history as the domain of "Everyman" is not problematic in and of itself.

However, conflating history with collective memory or with exclusive heritage myths raises the ire of disciplinarians, who value universal accessibility and maintaining professional standards. And yet, a commonsensical language often pervades experts' discussions of their work, shrouding the process of historical cognition in a cloud of mystery and elevating the narratives historians produce to almost paradigmatic, mystical status.¹⁹

There are literary critics and philosophers of history, however, who utilize post-structural analyses to destabilize the narratives historians construct, to remove them from their lofty pedestals and in the words of Hayden White, expose them for what they are: "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*." Surely history demands a self-conscious stance about the active role historians play in "selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past." But it is one thing to admit the provisional nature of historical knowledge, and quite another to equate historical narratives to literary tropes.²⁰

According to Seixas, history is neither a "mass of facts" nor a "set of fictions." While we agree that the neither of these extremes aptly characterizes the discipline, it seems that many historians, or rather the field as a whole, traffics in all of Seixas' categories and employs several of the modes of knowing outlined earlier. All prove to be useful in their own way, sometimes simultaneously. Seixas, for example, seems to use a postmodern analysis to ferret out contested collective memories, all the while professing faith in the standards of the discipline. That "noble dream," von Ranke's quest for objective truth, appears to be much alive, despite (or because of) the power and appeal of collective memory and the difficulty, even uncertainty, of "nailing Jell-O to the wall" that has followed in the wake of the postmodern turn.²¹

In fact, there is a symbiotic relationship between these apparently disparate conceptual categories. In Seixas' model, disciplinary history depends on collective memory and postmodernism for its very existence. Articulating and employing professional standards without "bringing the dead to life with imaginative empathy" lacks popular, some would say human, appeal. Human beings have grown up on stories. Rich narratives unite us into "tribes with common inheritances and shared identities." If crafted well, they appeal to our aesthetic and moral sensibilities. Of course, if not directed toward the common good, they divide us into

exclusive communities that may exploit the raw power of their stories on behalf of some and against others. Collective memory can properly enliven history, but it is the shortcomings and excesses of heritage that carve out a space for disciplinary history. For its part, postmodernism demands humility from history, nudging it as if to say, “you’ll never be as much as you want to be, and you’ll always be more than you say you are.”²²

In the end, we are left with history—protean, malleable, and utterly human. It is compellingly alive and vigorously healthy because of these qualities, hardly some moribund *fait accompli*. So what becomes of teaching and learning this protean subject in schools? We apply the conceptual frameworks discussed in the foregoing to an analysis of a national and a state standards document and a school district curriculum guide. Against the backdrop of an industrious, dynamic discipline and the ideas it produces, we ask how these instructional documents and tools evidence certain orientations toward historical knowledge and traditions through which that knowledge is taught. We also explore how national and local standards operate as systems of accountability and forward particular visions of educational functioning and reform.

The National History Standards

Perhaps the most glaring case of agitation over proposed curricular and instructional standards is that of the *National Standards for History* (NSH), published by the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) after considerable revision in 1996. At face value, the document’s tenets do not seem particularly controversial: historical knowledge is requisite to intelligent deliberation on social, political, and economic issues by a citizenry, and for identifying oneself within the broader stream of past and present. Furthermore, that historical thinking (strategies for asking historical questions, selecting and analyzing evidence, and building interpretations) and historical knowing (of narratives or hi-stories and the means by which they are organized and made meaningful) should be addressed interdependently within the context of history instruction is supported by nearly three decades of research. Nonetheless, the *Standards* were central to a heated public contest over the texture and function of school history that, it

could be argued, overshadowed their intended purposes of establishing instructional rigor and equity across the nation's schools and advocating a strong place for history in the curriculum.²³

Several factors contributed to the divisiveness of the NSH. While the directors of the *Standards* project saw the document as an authoritative resource for curricular decision-making, opponents perceived its function to be more political than instructional. To the framers, the *Standards* were the product of a best-possible collaboration of K-12 educators, curriculum specialists, expert historians, and other academicians and interest groups concerned with history teaching. To critics, they were an attempt to revise and/or reduce the narratives and collective memories that were traditionally central to the history curriculum. This debate spilled from more insular academic and political communities into public discourse in 1994, when Lynne Cheney, former chair of the Standards-sponsoring National Endowment for the Humanities, vilified the original document in the *Wall Street Journal* as a politically-correct attack on historical events and figures central to American identity.²⁴

Addressing the United States History parts of the *Standards* specifically, Cheney's primary critique was that they lacked enough specific references to founding fathers and fundamental artifacts like the Constitution, instead focusing on American fallibility and unacceptable multiculturalist interpretations. George Washington was never identified as the first President of the United States, she noted, but the legacy of Senator Joseph McCarthy was detailed exhaustively. Gary Nash and Charlotte Crabtree, the standards project's co-directors, responded with a formal rebuttal and published a fact sheet that punctured Cheney's claims. For example, they argued that Cheney's critique of the frequency with which certain historical actors were mentioned was a bean-counting exercise that misrepresented the *Standards'* in-depth attention to the broader historical contexts in which those actors lived. In other words, it would be impossible to attend to the ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence or the circumstances affecting the American revolutionary movement, which the *Standards* addressed substantially, without teaching about key role players. Furthermore, in response to the notion that white males' significant historical contributions were circumvented to make room for multiculturalist interpretations of America, Nash and Crabtree cited confounding examples, noting

that the *Standards* did not prescribe an emphasis on certain groups of people over others, but simply aimed toward a more accurate, more complete history curriculum. They might as well have said a more accurate and complete collective memory.²⁵

As Cheney continued repeating sound bites about the *Standards*' sins of omission, the document increasingly was publicized and politicized. In the media, conservative radio pundit, Rush Limbaugh, derogated the *Standards* and their exclusion of folks like Washington, Paul Revere, and J. P. Morgan (his vision of the correct American heroes to be taught) and used the opportunity to define history for his audience: "History is real simple. You know what history is? It's what happened." By the time the NSH were revised and published in their current form in 1996, the United States Senate had formally condemned the first version of the *Standards*, and the Department of Education had distanced itself from the project.²⁶

Though all of this may seem like old news, our purpose here is to show the tension that can exist between the processes and products of history, as represented in an academic setting, and through the public's demand for and consumption of an acceptable collective memory. As the situation in Florida in 2006 demonstrated, such competition among and within public, political, and academic communities smolders on, frequently relegating to the background concerns about how students learn history and what teachers can do to represent honestly the craft of history and its role in a greater democratic discourse.²⁷

An examination of the glaring differences between the original *Standards* and their current form illuminates this claim. The 1996 version combines standards for American and world history instead of separating them as the 1994 document did, and its length was reduced greatly by eliminating all of the original *Standards*' instructional examples. Thus, the document was institutionalized as a streamlined set of guidelines—a chronological scope and sequence of target understandings tilted westward and ultimately leading toward a narrative of U.S. nation building—rather than a tool that articulates the connections between historical reasoning, the ideas through which that reasoning occurs, and the teacher's pedagogical decisions or moves that might best represent such reasoning in classroom practice. Although we do not believe that instructional examples in the original standards and curricula should be implemented mechanically, they did

offer common referents for understanding the convergence of substantive and procedural/strategic types of knowledge among history educators with varying degrees of expertise—some of whom may have been unfamiliar with such historical depth before reading the *Standards*. Again, political rhetoric bore much of the responsibility for the instructional examples' removal, as they were the primary repositories of the supposedly wrong narratives and unpatriotic and irrelevant historical actors that were so roundly criticized by the likes of Cheney.

How, then, are the *National Standards for History* currently structured, and what stances on historical knowledge do they privilege? In their existing form, the *Standards* are cordoned off by grade level. The middle-level and secondary *Standards* feature separate chapters for U.S. and world history, each progressing chronologically from origins to present day. Generally, this arrangement conforms to a common structure found within many school history textbooks, formal curricula, and standardized assessments; the Virginia case at the center of our forthcoming analysis is no different.

Along with content standards, the document includes “five interconnected dimensions of historical thinking: 1) chronological thinking; 2) historical comprehension; 3) historical analysis and interpretation; 4) historical research capabilities; and 5) historical issues-analysis and decision-making.” As the authors explain, these cognitive strategies manifest themselves along with substantive knowledge (or narratives)²⁸, rather than are exclusive of it. Thus, each target understanding foregrounds specific bits of historical content (i.e., “Era 6, Standard 4A: Describe the administrative system of the Spanish viceroyalties of Peru and Mexico and analyze the importance of silver production and Indian agriculture in the Spanish colonial economy”) followed by an appropriate, parenthetical historical thinking strategy (i.e., “Interrogate historical data”).²⁹

This hierarchy, in which procedural/strategic knowledge are subordinated to substantive ideas, seems to coincide with pressures to keep the *Standards* focused on “what actually happened,” or the kinds of ideas that make up collective memory.³⁰ Despite lengthy and judicious arguments about the purposes and characteristics of historical thinking and reasoning strategies at the beginning of the K-4 and 5-12 sections, the scope and sequence features specific, prominently displayed content outcomes with somewhat vague, sometimes ill-fitted thinking

strategies on their coattails. Consider, for instance, the following: “Era 7, Standard 5D: Analyze changes in Indian society and economy under British rule. [Interrogate historical data].” What might seem important, from the classroom teacher’s perspective, is that her students are able to cite examples of social and economic transformation in India. After all, that—as opposed to the process of interrogating data and drawing conclusions from or recognizing patterns within it—is what students are likely to find on standardized tests and in school history textbooks. Regardless of how students learn the content, and whether or not they know any strategies necessary to fruitfully interrogate data from the past, what is important is that they are able to recall discrete bits of a distinctively American story, or in the case of world history, a narrative about the advance Western civilization, and the heroes who made them so.³¹

This is not to generalize that history teachers, on the whole, ignore or abandon historical reasoning in favor of a purely substantive knowledge approach to the domain. However, with schools that emphasize coverage and control as means to better test scores, a lack of attention to the purposes and practices of rigorous historical inquiry in teaching, teacher education, and professional development programs, and a set of national history standards that relegate historical thinking to footnote status and fail to articulate how those cognitive strategies might be taught and learned, the message sent to teachers is that their task is to emphasize substantive ideas over teaching students to use thinking strategies. The subtext suggests the subordination of thinking to knowing and recalling. But even within knowing and recalling there is vagueness.

Looking more closely at the content of the *Standards*, it cannot be said simply that they privilege one particular conception of history or another—say, cultural literacy over disciplinary history or vice versa. Perhaps it is the abstract nature of the *Standards’* guidelines that leaves the document so open to interpretation by teachers, local curriculum developers, and others with a stake in the matter. Within the *Standards*, there seems to exist a continuum of specificity, for lack of a better descriptor; one end is broad and amorphous, while the other is more explicit, and thus, more clearly measurable.

On the amorphous end, we find *Standards* like this one: “Era 8, Standard 1A: Explain leading ideas of liberalism, social reformism, conservatism, and socialism as competing

ideologies in the early 20th-century world. [Examine the influence of ideas].” The methods, materials, stances, and arguments that teachers use to guide students toward these ends are nearly unlimited. It seems conceivable that the world history teacher would use this particular standard to justify a traditional anti-communist narrative, or push his students to question the common good and the power dynamics that lead social reforms to be portrayed in certain manners. Such a guideline delegates power to the classroom teacher to make curricular and instructional decisions, which, in turn, requires that teacher have the sense of instructional purpose and pedagogical content knowledge to reach it. Furthermore, it seems conducive to the in-depth examination suggested by the parenthetical historical thinking element, vague as it is.³²

On the more explicit end of the spectrum, we see the following: “Era 6, Standard 3C: Assess the importance of Indian textiles, spices, and other products in the network of Afro-Eurasian trade. [Formulate historical questions].” In comparison, this standard seems more closely aligned to the sorts of factual, authorless ideas that one is likely to find in a typical school history textbook or on a standardized world history test. It is difficult to believe that any teacher or student would conclude an analysis of the Indian textile and spice trade by arguing that those products played an insignificant role globally. Thus, while the teacher may go beyond the standard to contrast 18th- and 19th-century trade practices to current modes or teach about the ways in which people in certain regions were affected by such trade, the specificity of this standard seems particularly conducive to a unidirectional narrative about Western cultural diffusion and the activities of the Dutch East India Company. This is not to dichotomize the *Standards* as either ill-defined or overly prescriptive; instead, our intent is to demonstrate that the *Standards* feature target understandings that are well-aligned with existing school-based texts and curricula and the politically popular collective memory stance, while others remain more open to educators’ and policymakers own historical knowledge, instructional purposes, and positions on history.³³

We would argue that, in a conserving effort to protect a more traditional Western- and U.S.-centric collective-memory narrative, those that revised the *Standards* were only partially successful. Thinking historically and the rudiments of doing history in the classroom appear to

have been pushed into the background, relegating the strategies and ideas that make questioning how such Western-centric historical narratives are produced, on what evidence, and how to adjudicate between stronger and weaker narrative claims to minor importance. Overall, the *Standards* tilt toward knowing and being able to recall the narrative of Western growth and dominance. However, elements of the *Standards*, as we have labored to show, still point to different ways of conceptualizing the story, implying that, instead of a univocal narrative, the possibility remains for understanding the past of world history through competing collective memories, multiple narratives, and, as Dunn has pointed out, patterns of change on a world-historical level. That this mixed-message result prevailed left states to develop their own standards and privilege univocal or competing narratives as they saw fit.³⁴

Virginia Standards of Learning for World History and Geography

At first glance Virginia's choices appear sensible, even predictable. Few would argue against the centrality of citizenship education as one of the guiding purposes of learning history and social studies in a democratic society. The language in the introduction of the *History and Social Science Standards of Learning for the Virginia Public Schools (SOLs)* forwards this fundamental rationale, claiming to "prepare students for informed and responsible citizenship." The primary means to that end, according to the documents' framers, is pressing students to "know and understand our national heritage" and instilling in them a "thoughtful pride in the history of America." As Levstik noted a decade ago, "The question has never truly been whether history serves citizenship aims; rather the debate has been about *whose* conception of citizenship it serves." In Virginia, good citizenship, at least as it is officially sanctioned, turns on students' ability to commit to memory a narrative about the exceptionality and progress of the United States. The state standards for modern world history adhere to this collective memory orientation, placing a distinctively American story within the broader sweep of Western civilization, an arrangement Dunn refers to as the "Western Heritage Model." As a revitalized version of the traditional "Western Civ" course, world history becomes "the story of 'our civilization'" and "the framework that will commit young Americans to national unity and our cherished way of life."

That school history has long been considered a synonym for patriotism is not a new revelation, yet Virginia appears to be particularly committed to this practice.³⁵

The central narrative outlined in the SOLs for modern world history is detailed in greater specificity in two additional instructional tools, including a 63-page *Curriculum Framework* and an *Enhanced Scope and Sequence* guide that reaches 196 pages.³⁶ We suspect that teachers and students might detect competing narratives or collective memories within these lengthy periodization schemes and instructional examples. However, it is more likely that multicultural content exists as add-ons to a master narrative charting the progress and eventual dominance of European nation states and industrial capitalism. Consider, for example, Standard WHII.5:

The student will demonstrate knowledge of the status and impact of global trade on regional civilizations of the world after 1500 A.D. by (a) describing the location and development of the Ottoman Empire; (b) describing India, including the Mughal Empire and coastal trade; (c) describing East Asia, including China and the Japanese shogunate; (d) describing Africa and its increasing involvement in global trade; (e) describing the growth of European nations, including the Commercial revolution and mercantilism.³⁷

Even though this standard contains elements of what Dunn calls the “Different Cultures Model,” the traditional story of the “European Age of Discovery and Expansion” (addressed as such in Standard WHII.4) prevails. It is amended only slightly to include other civilizations and ethnoracial groups, their roles in regional interactions, and their unique contributions to developing global trade networks. That the task force recommending changes to the original SOLs (published in 1995) urged review committees to focus on “the experiences and contributions of men and women of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds” suggests that the 2001 revisions reflected the ascending current of multiculturalism pervading many scholarly communities and the broader popular culture. However, the document, taken as a whole, amounts to additive curriculum reform; the basic narrative structure was not altered or transformed.³⁸

Marshalling students to question the essentially unicultural and unidirectional interpretations contained in the Virginia SOLs for modern world history, to critique the evidentiary

grounds on which these narratives are constructed, and to develop alternative accounts, would require equipping them with powerful disciplinary tools. As an instructional resource, the SOLs are not up to this task. In the document, teachers will find neither a convincing rationale for leading students to use such cognitive strategies, nor a compelling explanation of how classroom practice might integrate procedural and substantive knowledge on the path to developing deeper and more nuanced historical understandings. Perhaps in a token move to “reflect current scholarship,” the Virginia standards replicate the “five interconnected dimensions of historical thinking” outlined in the national standards (though they do not specifically cite the NSH). In addition, Standard WHII.1 invites students to “improve skills in historical research by identifying, analyzing, and interpreting primary sources to make generalizations.” Beyond these brief references to the domain’s procedural knowledge elements, the SOLs officialize a rather traditional conception of global history education, that of “cover[ing] history and geography from 1500 A.D. to the present, with an emphasis on Western Europe.”³⁹

The pervasive emphasis on covering content coincides with the SOLs contention that “the study of history rests on knowledge of dates, names, places, events, and ideas.” Reminiscent of Hirsch’s list of “what every American needs to know,” the SOL *Curriculum Framework* outlines the “minimum content that all teachers should teach and all students should learn.” That this supplemental framework purportedly “assists teachers as they plan their lessons by framing essential questions, identifying essential understandings, defining essential content knowledge, and describing the intellectual skills students need to use,” suggests a more integrated view of the processes and products of history. However, with most of the interpretive work so central to the discipline already complete, the SOLs present history as a finished product ready to be delivered and consumed in predictable fashion. It was these qualities, mainly comprehensive coverage and coherent organization of modern world history’s substantive knowledge, which earned Virginia high marks in a recent review of world history standards by the Fordham Institute. It should be noted, though, that the same characteristics that distinguished the SOLs as a “model of clarity” in the eyes of the report’s author, reduce history to a set of neatly packaged facts and ideas.⁴⁰

In Virginia, the format and scope of high-stakes assessments reinforce a rather flattened view of history. Primarily, these end-of-year exams ask students to recall a broad range of names, events, and general patterns of change in a test that consists solely of 70 multiple-choice items. To ensure that teachers faithfully cover the breadth of substantive knowledge contained in the standards, each historical era (e.g., Era VI: Age of Revolutions, 1650 to 1914 A.D.) is represented as a “reporting category” and, thus, is eligible for inclusion on the SOL assessment (see Virginia Department of Education, 2001). State efforts to create an assessment program directly aligned with the Virginia standards began in earnest in 1996. The call for measurable results has intensified recently with external pressure from the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Viewing the content of the Virginia SOLs and state assessments in light of these developments may help to explain the persistence of a system of accountability that minimizes dramatically what it means to “know” history. It appears to be more feasible and efficient for school systems to administer inexpensive and, presumably, politically palatable tests that are purportedly standardized and objective.⁴¹

Even though there is not universal support in Virginia for educational reform based solely on “accountability-by-testing,” a system of school improvement based on the alignment of content standards and assessment measures is fully operational in the state. While high-stakes accountability reforms touting higher standards may imply consensus about the form and function of school improvement, research has shown that they do not necessarily reflect research-based conceptions of wise practice within the domain. As we have labored to demonstrate in the Virginia case, an accountability system designed to raise the level of academic achievement may actually reinforce conventional teaching practice by equating learning with immediate (albeit temporary) substantive knowledge gains. In our view, this is hardly a recipe for “strengthen[ing] public education.”⁴²

Fairfax County Public Schools World History & Geography II Program of Studies

As with Virginia’s Standards, Tyack and Tobin’s “grammar of schooling” is evident in the curricular materials produced and used in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), suggesting that

the pressure leveraged by the SOLs and the momentum produced by external mandates and centralized policy instruments impacts the shape and function of instructional tools even at the local level. In fact, review committees, comprised of social studies educators from around the state, were urged in 2001 to be “judicious in the scope of their revisions (to the original 1995 standards), acknowledging the burden to school divisions of aligning curriculum, instructional materials, and professional development” with the revised document. The FCPS Program of Studies (POS) for modern world history is apparently grounded in two additional documents, the NSH and the National Geography Standards: Geography for Life (1994), though it is most clearly affiliated with the state standards. Organized according to “Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators” (SBIs) that directly replicate or, at least, strongly correspond to SOL content, the local curriculum outlines the “essential knowledge...that students need to attain a complete understanding of World History and Geography from 1500 to the present.” The path to “complete understanding” points almost exclusively to learning substantive knowledge from five historical eras. Lest teachers be confused by the information crammed into the 42-page document, the curriculum writers have underlined all of the “content [which] is SOL specific...and [which] must be taught in all classrooms.” As an arm of the SOLs, the school system’s POS serves as both a method for holding teachers (and students) accountable and a mechanism for socializing them into an educational environment which equates teaching and learning history with delivering and consuming facts and details to be memorized and reproduced on standardized assessments.⁴³

In fact, Virginia’s entire system of accountability appears to be based on the premise that teachers and students simply need clear incentives to encourage (coerce?) them to commit an officially sanctioned hi-story to memory. Mirroring the mix of “Western Heritage” and “Different Cultures” models evident in the SOLs, the school system standards give minimal attention to disciplinary processes and contemporary civic competences. Where there is mention of the skills of history and geography, it is referred to as habits of mind. There is a sense that vocabulary disguises the actual confluences of disciplinary history and school history, since some of the habits of mind listed reflect an interest in the domain’s cognitive strategies. For example, the document states that “the global content [of the course of study]...serves to enhance students’

analytical skills, enabling them to consider multiple perspectives, evaluate evidence, and make sound judgments about the contemporary world...[building] their confidence as thinkers, historians, and geographers.” However, the method of achieving “a richer, more complex picture of the human experience” is learning additional content knowledge “that goes beyond the scope and sequence of the state standards.”⁴⁴

The county’s world history standards are not without some larger organizing ideas or “global themes.” In this sense the POS shares the language of the thematic strands that figure prominently in the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards and certain elements of the NSH, which reflect a global perspective on world-historical change. In addition, enduring legacies summarize each historical era and are defined as “contributions which shaped future generations” and “ideas and trends which we inherited from these periods.” [emphasis added] We presume that some students may relate to these enduring legacies because they lead to self-understanding and a connection to the past. However, the official story promoted by the curriculum may also lead to dislocation and disengagement, because it does not resonate with the vernacular histories or personal experiences of learners outside the cultural mainstream. Therefore, accountability efforts supposedly intended to raise levels of achievement among racial and ethnic minorities may actually leave these students behind. By forwarding a muted discourse on race and culture and enacting assimilationist models of educational reform, the thrust of accountability measures, like those undertaken in Virginia, may bear the stamp of “equity,” while in reality having a more conserving effect.⁴⁵

With issues related to epistemology and historical significance mostly excised from the state and county standards, history teachers in Virginia must, in the words of Robert Bain, “offer the intellectual and historical content necessary to provide meaning and coherence across discrete objectives.” Yet, when we consider the alignment of other instructional tools used in Fairfax County, including world history textbooks, test preparation booklets, and SOL practice tests, it appears difficult for history educators to interrupt the kind of institutional inertia that appears to solidify dominant narratives on the past and taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of historical knowledge. While the research of D. Cohen suggests that there is no direct or

powerful relationship between policy and practice, it is evident that the degree of interpretability that can be leveraged by teachers assessing the NSH dramatically decreases as you move down the accountability pipeline to state and local contexts.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The extent to which teaching and learning are affected by external mandates and centralized policy instruments remains a topic of debate. Yet this essay points to examples of how the officialized filtering process may reduce the flow of a vibrant domain of knowledge to a mere trickle. We would argue that directing the question, “what of history,” toward exploring the nature of historical knowledge, how students learn history, and research-based conceptions of wise practice proves to be far more valuable than asking what will be on the test. However, there is little in the documents surveyed that point in this direction. Why might that be? Of course, there are many different ways to address why. By way of a conclusion, we consider only one: The confluence of progressive-minded impulses to improve social and educational life for the masses with equally formidable desires to do so as efficiently as possible. The former has tendencies toward liberal American ideals and ideas; the latter generally points in a more conservative direction.

The impulse to use history education to socialize the identities of American youth has its own long history. A nation teeming with endless waves of other-shore and across-the-border immigrants has some obligation to “Americanize” them if they are to participate in American life. Schools, at least those public schools that were erected, staffed, and organized in periods of American history when the immigrant hordes arrived *en masse*, were logical places to do such Americanizing. That a degree of instructional coercion was involved should be of little surprise. History education no doubt has served and still serves as a powerful (sometimes coercive) force in shaping and Americanizing the identities of immigrants and other school children. To teach students a particular U.S. nation-building story repeatedly and demand that they commit national heroes and their deeds, key documents, and defining national moments to memory may be a necessary identity-shaping project. As an educational goal, it is designed to protect cherished

values, institutions, and ideals. As Wertsch has shown, being able to repeat such a story and cite some details functions as a powerful cultural tool that may permit a degree of participation in the collective American “we.”⁴⁷

This Americanizing impulse coupled with the social efficiency and scientific management reforms of the early twentieth-century Progressive Era, a period in which public schooling expanded rapidly, further rationalized and embedded that impulse in school life. What we understand as the “grammar of schooling” was born and rationalized during this period. Students needed to learn to read and write in English, count, multiply, and divide, and commit the nation-building hi-story to memory. They needed to do these things in an efficient manner for there was much to learn if they were to be fit to function as American citizens, or so the arguments go. The spirit of this era, its reform desires and efficiency strategies, appears to be alive and well in Virginia. The recent standards and accountability movement we have described there is just its most recent manifestation.⁴⁸

Because the progressive spirit to improve education is deeply coupled with a desire to show results, mechanisms become necessary to provide evidence that success obtains. One ostensible method for accomplishing this task is through testing, a practice also originating during the Progressive Era and slowly appropriated by school systems, following initial uses by the military. As many readers know, a century of results on testing students in history have been anything but salutary. Periodically, a newspaper consortium, research group, or government agency tests a sample of the nation’s youth on how well they have committed the nation-building story and its raft of details to memory, and emerge with reports demonstrating profound astonishment at how little they know. Diagnosis of this history-education ailment has typically hinged on the claim that schools and teachers apparently have not been up to the task of teaching the nation-building narrative effectively and efficiently. In keeping with the progressive reform impulse, history teachers must be told how to do it better and held accountable for the results. To provide the requisite guidance, national, state, and local standards have emerged along with testing regimes that allegedly measure them. It is in this more recent space—in which the desire to show improvement in history teaching (reform), for example, meets the impulse to

demonstrate results via testing regimes (accountability)—where efficiency frameworks typically triumph.

In the case of Virginia, we are maintaining that policymakers probably faced tough choices in their desire to improve history education for their state's students. To take a reformed history education project seriously—by defining the domain as rich, complex, malleable, and protean, and underpinning it with several decades of research showing how it could be taught wisely and in ways that engaged students and produced powerful learning outcomes—would necessitate a professional development program for history teachers bearing, for instance, many of the hallmarks of the Amherst History Project of the New Social Studies era. Furthermore, the state would need to develop a testing system that was validly aligned to a history education project so defined. Both these efforts would be expensive.⁴⁹

The development and re-education of history teachers would need to be sustained over a period of years, potentially touch all of them across the state, and possibly result in undermining elements of the “grammar of schooling” and the resiliencies of common practice. Because measuring history, now taken seriously as complex, malleable, interpretative, and ill-structured, would require equally complex assessment technologies (e.g., performance assessments such as document-based questions), the cost of administering and scoring them would be driven up proportionally, perhaps even exponentially compared to the current simple, short multiple-choice SOL tests.

Choosing between (a) an *expensive* but rich history curriculum with powerful pedagogical practices and learning outcomes and (b) a *less costly* approach of teaching the traditional nation-building collective memory, but with a long track record of poor learning outcomes, can be construed as a policymaker's Faustian nightmare. The progressive impulse to improve the quality and substance of the history education project meets the desire to do it as efficiently, and as on-the-cheap as possible. That Virginia's education leaders chose the latter bears testament to the ways in which convictions about technical and economic efficiencies tend to trump educational considerations in the contested spaces of policymaking.⁵⁰ In Virginia's case, the history of attempts to raise teaching and learning standards in history education across the

Commonwealth will likely remain largely untouched, despite increased expenditures on these standardization efforts and the testing regimes that measure them. Common practices with all-too typical results will almost certainly prevail.

So what of history? For Virginians, and denizens of other states whose standards and accountability stories show similar trajectories, history will not necessarily die for them. However, repeatedly prescribing nothing but inexpensive antihistamines to a patient suffering from life-threatening bacterial pneumonia will surely not cure the ailment. The progressive desire to obtain different results from the teaching of history by continuing to endorse and sanction fundamentally the same age-old goals and practices will only exacerbate the problem. Ditto in Florida.

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