

Thinking Like a Historian

By Sam Wineburg

Historical Thinking: Memorizing Facts and Stuff?

When I recently asked Kevin, a sixteen-year-old high school junior, what he needed to do well in history class, he had little doubt: "A good memory."

"Anything else?"

"Nope. Just memorize facts and stuff, know 'em cold, and when you get the test, give it all back to the teacher."

"What about thinking? Does that have anything to do with history?"

"Nope. It's all pretty simple. Stuff happened a long time ago. People wrote it down. Others copied it and put it in a book. History!"

I've spent nearly 20 years studying how high school students learn history. Over the years I've met many Kevins, for whom the life has been sucked out of history, leaving only a grim list of names and dates. When confronted with the term "historical thinking," many students scratch their heads in confusion, stumped by an alleged connection.

Historians as Detectives: Searching for Evidence Among Primary Sources

The funny thing is that when you ask historians what they do, a different picture emerges. They see themselves as detectives searching for evidence among primary sources to a mystery that can never be completely solved. Wouldn't this image be more enticing to a bored high school student? It would, and that's one reason why thinking like a historian deserves a place in the American classroom, the sooner the better.

To historians, history is an argument about what facts should or shouldn't mean. Even when historians are able to piece together the basic story of what happened, they rarely agree about what an event means or what caused it. Historians argue about the past's meaning and what it has to tell us in the present.

But, you may ask, if history has already happened, what's there to argue about? Plenty. Was the American Revolution a fight against tyranny or an attempt by the well bred to maintain their social status? Was the Cold War really a conflict of democracy versus communism or a struggle between two superpowers for dominance?

Divergent opinions swirl around these questions and other matters of unsettled history – opinions that get students talking, and thinking, and learning. But while everyone is entitled to an opinion, not every opinion deserves to be believed. In history, a persuasive opinion is one backed up by evidence.

What is Historical Thinking?

It would be easy to conclude that historians simply know more about American history than high school students do. But this isn't necessarily the case. Beyond highly specialized areas of concentrations, even doctoral level historians don't possess factual knowledge about every topic. What historians do have is a "historical approach" to primary sources that is often taken for granted by those practiced in it. However, this approach unlocks a world closed to untutored readers.

For example, before approaching a document, historians come prepared with a list of questions—about author, context, time period—that form a merital framework for the details to follow. Most important of all, these questions transform the act of reading from passive reception to an engaged and passionate interrogation. If we want students to remember historical facts, this approach, not memorization, is the key.

Teaching Students to Think Historically

How can teachers help their students to begin thinking like historians? Teaching a way of thinking requires making thinking visible. We need to show students not only what historians think, but *how* they think, and then guide students as they learn to engage in this process.

Source: http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/quarterly/historical_thinking/article.html

- Compare related historical developments and processes across place, time, and or different societies or within one society
 - Explain and evaluate multiple and differing perspectives on a given historical phenomenon
5. *Contextualization*: involves the ability to connect historical events and processes to specific circumstances of time and place and to broader regional, national, or global processes.

You should be able to...

- Explain and evaluate ways in which specific historical phenomena, events, or processes connect to broader regional, national, or global processes occurring at the same time
 - Explain and evaluate ways in which a phenomenon, event, or process connects to other, similar historical phenomena across time and place
6. *Historical Argumentation*: involves the ability to define and frame a question about the past and to address that question through the construction of an argument. A plausible and persuasive argument requires a clear, comprehensive, and analytical thesis, supported by relevant historical evidence-not simply evidence that supports a preferred or preconceived position. In addition, argumentation involves the capacity to describe, analyze, and evaluate the arguments of others in light of available evidence.

You should be able to...

- *Analyze commonly accepted historical arguments and explain how an argument has been constructed from historical evidence.*
 - *Construct convincing interpretations through analysis of disparate, relevant historical evidence*
 - *Evaluate and synthesize conflicting historical evidence to construct persuasive historical arguments.*
7. *Appropriate use of relevant historical evidence*: involves the ability to describe and evaluate evidence about the past from diverse sources (documents, art, artifacts, oral traditions, and other primary sources) and requires students to pay attention to the content, authorship, purpose, format, and audience of such sources. It involves the capacity to extract useful information, make supportable inferences, and draw appropriate conclusions from historical evidence while also noting the context in which the evidence was produced and used, recognizing its limitations, and assessing the points of view it reflects.

You should be able to...

- *Analyze features of historical evidence such as audience, purpose, point of view, format, argument, limitations, and context germane to the evidence considered*