

THE HISTORICAL METHOD

BUILDING STUDENT UNDERSTANDING OF
THE PAST



AN INTRODUCTION

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THE THEORY BEHIND THE HISTORICAL METHOD

THE FOUNDATIONS OF BUILDING HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

According to historian Richard Hofstadter,

“...what animates the most feverishly committed historians is that our continual rediscovery of the complexity of the social interests, the variety of roles and the motives of political leaders, the unintended consequences of political actions ... may give us ... a keener sense of the structural complexity of our society in the past ...”

This statement by the late Dr. Hofstadter sums up what most history education professionals believe to be true about the power of history. History is a vibrant and passionate discipline that provides us with a unique lens to view how we as a nation and as a people achieved our current position in the world. In order to understand our present it is imperative that we have a solid understanding of our past. Historian Benedetto Croce perhaps said it best when he stated that “... all good history is contemporary history.”ⁱⁱⁱ The fruits of the present are indelibly rooted in our ability to understand the past. How many times have you learned new content, gotten excited by it and brought it into your classroom, taught it in a rigorous and relevant manner, and had students not demonstrate mastery on the test or other assessment? Unfortunately this happens all too often as teachers move through Teaching American History projects and other forms of content-based professional development.

In the history classroom, and within the school as a whole, there is a decided love-hate relationship with history. On one hand you have the Social Studies Department who loves the subject and sees it as the lifeblood of the classical liberal curriculum. On the other hand you have subjects such as math and science that deride history as some nostalgic affinity for the long-dead past. These same sentiments are present in our classrooms as well. There are always those few students who love history and are really motivated to learn as much as possible. Then there are those students who are very intelligent, but simply do not like history or have the desire and mental schema learn any more than what is on the test. As history educators this presents us with a distinct problem, how do we meet the needs of those students who are interested in history AND those students who don't have the desire or skills to learn complex historical material?

In TAH projects across the country teachers are learning an incredible amount of history content. Professors, history education specialists, and other experts are helping teachers of all levels increase their knowledge and skill in American history. As lifelong learners teachers naturally take this new material and incorporate it into their lessons. The problem is that

there is often a disconnect between teacher learning and student learning. Teachers are part of TAH programs because they have a deep interest in history and a desire to learn. These teachers have the curiosity and mental schema to understand and internalize new material on a very high level. When they take this material back to the classroom it doesn't always transfer to students the same way that it was transferred to them. The new-found content knowledge by itself can have a minimal impact on student learning which is extremely disheartening.

One experience of my own really brought this home to me. One of my passions is the American Civil War and I love to teach it in some detail. In our TAH projects in Cleveland County, NC I have been fortunate enough to work with outstanding Civil War historians, and walk the major battlefields with experts like Dennis Frye, Greg Mertz, and Scott Hartwig, and have numerous discussions with teachers and experts about the war. In class I was as thorough and detailed as possible, using maps, pictures, primary sources, video, and collaborative activities. In my mind I had done an outstanding job of providing my students an in-depth panoramic view of the Civil War. Then there was the big unit test. The results were so poor that I was shocked, angry, and disillusioned. Come to find out my students had those same reactions.

The history course that you teach could be the last one where a student comes into formal contact with history. However this is not the last time that students will be exposed to history, nor is it the first time they have been exposed to history. The school is not the sole place where students will learn history. Students come into contact with the past from their parents and family, from TV, from movies, from historical sites, and even from museums. This means that students come into our classrooms with at least a personal sense of history, though it is more than likely very scattered and flawed.ⁱⁱⁱ Once they leave the classroom students will be bombarded with history at every turn. They will live it, they will hear it in the media, they will see it and experience it in the same places and ways that they did when they were students. The personal sense of history combined with what they are taught in class form the basis for their beliefs about history for the rest of their lives.

The search for an answer and a viable solution led me to a discipline that usually has very little to do with history, and that is math. I have always chided the Math Department at my school that all they did was “monkey see, monkey do.” They taught a particular skill and the students practiced it until it had been mastered; then they moved on to another skill and repeated the sequence. While history is not something that we could necessarily teach by building a number of skills and “stacking” them on top of each other, there was great merit in utilizing a series of formal skills that would help those students who did not have the mental schema to learn history at the highest level. Historian Gordon S. Wood sums up this position quite well when he stated “*We Americans have such a thin and meager sense of history that we cannot get too much of it. What we need more than anything is a deeper and fuller sense of the historical process, a sense of where we have come from and how we became what we are.*”^{iv}

Thinking historically and developing a deep and fuller sense of the historical process requires the ability to mentally jump between periods of time as well as developing an elusive but important historical consciousness. This means understanding that the past, present, and future are separate and distinct entities rather than a common present or a distant past. Developing a historical consciousness also means understanding that there is interdependence between the past and the present. Lastly developing a historical consciousness requires the willingness to study the past through the memories and recollections of others.^v In addition to historical consciousness, the historical process also means understanding that causation, sequence, and relationships are key components to historical understanding. Without sequence, context, linkages, and examination of evidence, the past becomes episodic, romanticized, and meaningless.^{vi}

According to historian David Lowenthal, “*to fathom history demands sustained effort, and to teach it calls for experience and judgment.*”^{vii} Lowenthal is absolutely correct, which leads to the bigger question of what types of demands are essential to understanding history and to the history classroom? Lowenthal himself describes five areas; recognition of a consensually shared past, absorbing and critiquing evidence from many and conflicting sources, understanding bias and point of view, appreciation of historical authority, and the understanding that interpretation of the past can change.^{viii} Canadian historian Desmond Morton says that there are three core propositions; causation, sequence, and relationships.^{ix} The National History Standards list five areas of essential historical thought; chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research capabilities, and historical issues-analysis and decision making.^x Shelley Weintraub and a group of history teachers from Oakland, California took the historical thinking standards and modified them for use in the classroom. Their five skills are; chronological and spatial thinking, using evidence, use of multiple perspectives and diversity, interpretation of the past, and significance of the past.^{xi} While there is merit in each of these sets of skills and concepts, by themselves they are relatively incomplete for use in the history classroom and only address part of the problem.

So where does this leave us? On one hand we have seen (and experienced) that there are two major problems in history education. One is that many students are not interested in history and most of them do not have the mental schema necessary to properly learn history. The second is that teacher knowledge and learning and student learning are disconnected in many ways. On the other hand we propose a comprehensive solution to help alleviate these issues. One component is to create a system or set of history skills that build upon each other. The other part of the solution is to develop a system or method that uses these skills as part of everyday classroom instruction. The end result of this solution is to take history away from a vast wasteland of facts, dates, and disconnected events and transform it into a vibrant, rigorous, and evolving discipline. This methodical process will help teachers create a bridge over the gap between academic history and student learning.

THE HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS

A SCAFFOLDED APPROACH

The historical thinking skills are a set of twelve separate and discrete skills that have been designed to help students acquire, analyze, and contextualize complex historical material. The skills are broken down into organic component parts that help develop the skills as an academic process. The skills are divided into three logical steps, or tiers, that are centered on an overarching historical process. Each tier provides a foundation for those that follow and “build” from the broadest skills to the most specific skills. This scaffolded approach allows teachers to tailor the skills and associated activities to match the readiness level of the students while maintaining appropriate academic rigor.

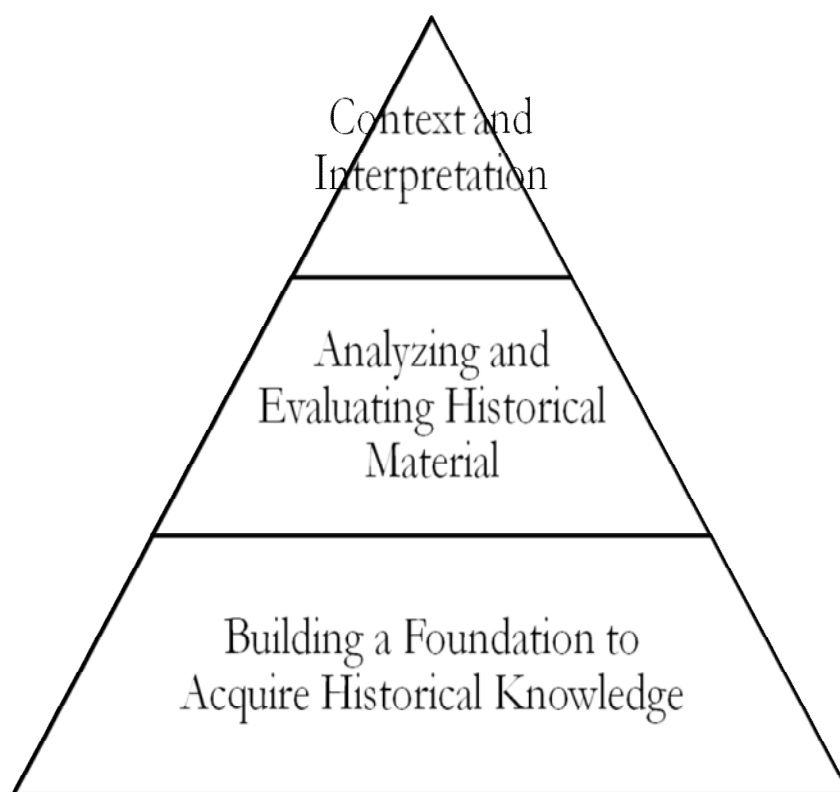


Figure 1: The Three Tiers of Historical Thinking

TIER ONE

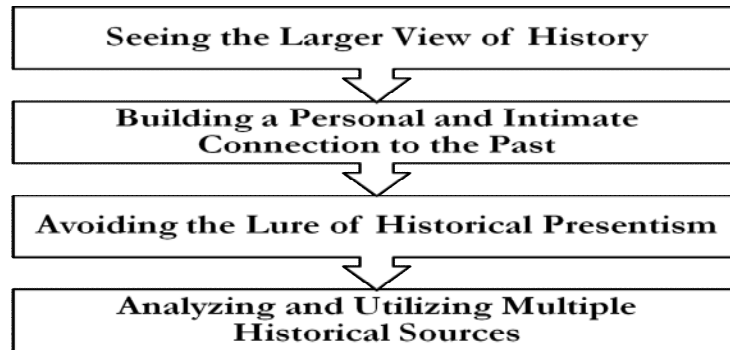


Figure 2: Tier One Skills

- Seeing the Larger View of History
 - Determining the main idea of a document, image, or work of history
 - Establishing time, scope, and sequence in which the events of an era take place
 - Eliminating things that are not essential to focus on essential understandings
- Building a Personal and Intimate Connection to the Past
 - Seeking personal or local connections to history whenever possible
 - Seeing history as the story of people and their voice rather than dry and disconnected events
- Avoiding the lure of Historical Presentism
 - Establishing the values and beliefs of the time as a lens to analyze the past
 - Using the values of the time to analyze historical meaning rather than those from the 21st century
 - Compare and contrast the values of the past with those of the present
- Analyzing and Utilizing Multiple Historical Sources
 - Analysis of primary sources to study history “in the raw”
 - Determination of bias and unique point of view of historical sources
 - Establishing and assessing the reliability of historical sources
 - Utilizing primary and secondary sources as companion material to the textbook

TIER TWO

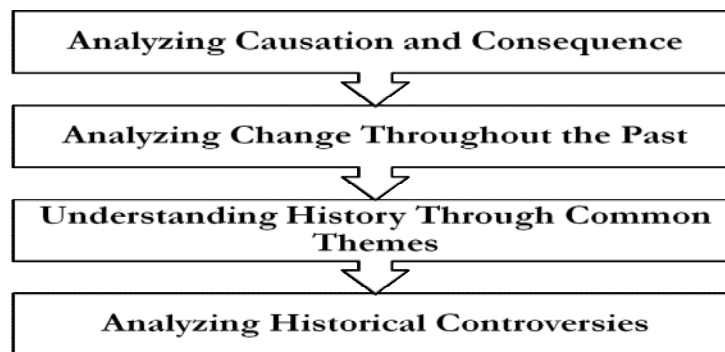


Figure 3: Tier Two Skills

- Analyzing Causation and Consequence
 - Studying the differences between single-causation and multi-causation of the events of the past
 - Impact of the consequences of events and decisions of the past, including those that were desired, and those that were unintended
- Analyzing Change Throughout the Past
 - Determination of different types of change that took place in the past, including political, economic, and social
 - Analysis of the impact of the different types of change on the history of America
- Understanding History Through Common Themes and Ideas
 - Establishment of the essential themes of history and determination of their presence
 - *Foundations of Freedom*
 - *Creation of an American Culture*
 - *Conflict and Compromise*
 - *Political and Social Movements*
 - *America on the World Stage*
 - Analysis of the essential themes in different periods of history and across history
- Analyzing Historical Controversies and their Impact on the past
 - Identification of the key controversies and the elements that made them volatile
 - Analyzing the impact that key controversies have had on the direction of the nation
 - Tracing the impact of key controversies to their modern conclusion(s)

TIER THREE

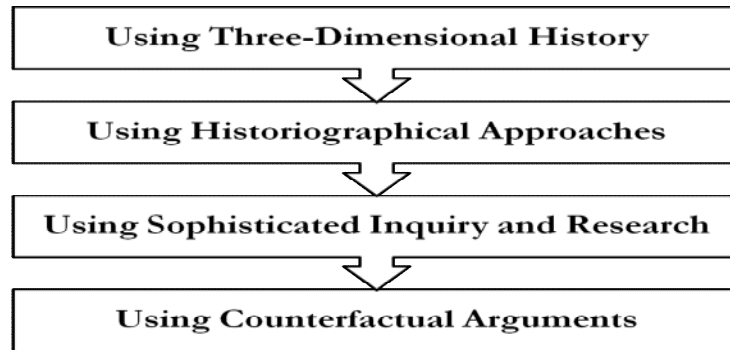


Figure 4: Tier Three Skills

- Using Three-Dimensional History to gain a more complete view of the Past
 - Determining the impact of geography on historical events and trends
 - Avoiding the limited and inaccurate view of the printed page
- Using Historiographical Approaches to Interpret the Past
 - Analyzing the differing interpretations of historical events that have been developed in the past
 - Evaluating the accuracy of current and previous schools of historical interpretation to develop a personal philosophy of the past
- Using Sophisticated Inquiry and Research to Guide Learning
 - Developing core questions that are essential for student learning of history or a historical era.
 - Using core questions to guide student discovery and learning.
- Using Counterfactual Arguments
 - Utilizing counterfactual arguments to deepen student understanding of specific episodes of history
 - Developing carefully constructed series of “what if?” questions to guide students through alternate historical outcomes

DIRECT INSTRUCTION EXAMPLES USING TIER ONE SKILLS

The first tier of skills is designed to help students build a broad foundation for acquiring historical knowledge. Rather than focusing on in-depth analysis of complex material, activities involving Tier One skills should focus on exposition and application. In the sports world you often hear the phrase “practice makes permanent”, it is also true with the foundation skills, practice them enough and they will become academic tools that students can use forever. Below you will find very short, direct instruction, skill-based activities that will help students learn and apply the Tier One skills.

SEEING THE GREATER VIEW OF HISTORY

Determining the main idea of a selection or work of history.
Establishing time, scope, and sequence in which the events of an era take place.
Eliminating things that are not essential to focus on the essential understandings.

In essence this skill asks the student to determine what the big picture is. All too often the texts and other materials that we give students to read are informational and contain a tremendous amount of detail. The students often get caught up in those details rather than understanding what the big picture or main idea of the passage is. Another key portion of this skill is to determine the timeframe, scope, and sequence in which historical events take place. It is extremely important that students are able to understand where an event falls in the larger picture of history. Determining and knowing where an event “fits” into an era of history provides students with a skill that will help them build their historical knowledge.

- Login your account at www.cicerohistory.com
- Select Unit 4: Birth of Liberty. Then click on “Primary Sources”. Then select “The Olive Branch Petition”.

This is a document that is filled with higher-level language, philosophies, and historical details. As such it can be very hard for students to simply read and understand the essence of the document without guidance.

1. Have students read the document and take brief notes on what the document says.
 2. In a whole-class format, go through each paragraph, and tease out what the main idea contained in each.
 3. Then in the same whole-class format, use the main ideas of each paragraph to construct the big picture contained in the document.
 4. Draw a rough timeline on the board from starting at 1763 and ending at 1776. Have students name important events that took place between those dates and mark on the timeline. Lastly have students determine where the document should be placed on the timeline.
- The same type of exercise can be conducted on a macro level with larger events and movements.

AVOIDING THE LURE OF HISTORICAL PRESENTISM

Establishing the values and beliefs of the time as a lens to analyze the past
Using the values of the time to analyze historical meaning rather than using the values of the 21st century
Compare and contrast the values of the past with those of the present

This particular skill is designed to get students to look at the events, personalities, and understandings of the past from the point of view of the historical actors. Attempting to apply the values and beliefs of the 21st century, to the past is an exercise in logical fallacy. Just like George Washington would not have been able to fathom a modern aircraft while wintering at Valley Forge, we cannot begin to understand all of the thought processes of the men at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. What we can do however is attempt to look at history using the values of the time (as much as we know about those values anyway). Only through the lens of the past can we begin to form an accurate interpretation of the events.

- Login your account at www.cicerohistory.com
- Select Unit 4: Birth of Liberty. Then click on "Primary Sources". Then select "Declaration of Independence".
- Go to <http://www.princeton.edu/~tipapers/declaration/declaration.html> and print copies of Jefferson's rough draft of the Declaration.

The wording of the Declaration of Independence has incited many cries of Thomas Jefferson being a hypocrite with him owning many slaves yet having the temerity to write "... all men are created equal..." Using the adopted version of the Declaration and contrasting it with the rough draft that Congress modified can be a good exercise in avoiding a knee-jerk reaction of presentism in studying Jefferson.

1. In a whole-class format, ask the question "Is slavery a moral sin? Why?" Post and discuss the answers.
 2. Have the students read the Declaration of Independence. The teacher should read the "...all men are created equal..." portion aloud.
 3. Ask the class the following questions, post and discuss the answers:
 - a. What does the phrase "all men are created equal" mean to us today?
 - b. What did the phrase mean to people in 1776?
 - c. Why might there be a difference between the earlier and modern interpretations of this phrase?
 - d. Does the fact that Jefferson owned slaves, yet wrote about rights and equality make him a hypocrite?
 4. Hand out copies of Jefferson's rough draft. Point students to the section dealing with slavery and have them read that portion.
 5. Ask the class the following questions and discuss their answers:
 - a. Do Jefferson's writings about slavery in this rough draft make him a visionary for his time? Why or why not?
 - b. How did other men in a similar position react to the section on slavery in this rough draft?
- The same type of exercise can be used with any historically contentious issues that conflicts with modern values and beliefs.

BUILDING A PERSONAL AND INTIMATE CONNECTION TO THE PAST

Seeking and using personal or local connections to history whenever possible
 Seeing history as the story of people and their voice rather than dry and disconnected events

This is one of the easier skills to teach and apply with students, but is a skill that is very important in terms of history having a voice. By building a connection to the past, either through an ancestor or local individual, or through the story of peoples' lives, it gives the past an authenticity that many textbooks leave out. A momentous event such as the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* can be seen as merely a decision where the high court ruled a crude law unconstitutional. On the other hand, the case can also become the story of a young girl who was denied her civil rights under the 14th amendment to the US Constitution, and the acrimonious struggle to ensure that she was able to exercise those rights. The incredible story of Linda Brown provides the “face” and the “voice” to what could possibly be just another in a long line of court cases that students have to memorize.

- Login your account at www.cicerohistory.com
- Select Unit 4: Birth of Liberty. Then click on “Primary Sources”. Then select “Joseph Plumb Martin”.
- Then click on “Activities” and under elementary select “Sybil Ludington”, and “William Franklin”

Far too often students read about people in their history texts who were adults during the period of study. It can be hard for young people to identify with adults, especially older ones, and their experiences in the major events of the past. In this exercise you will use the stories of three young people during the American Revolution.

1. Have the class read the section titled “Hardships Sufficient to Kill Half a Dozen Horses” in Joseph Martin’s account of his experiences in the Continental Army. Then ask the following questions:
 - a. Where was Joseph stationed?
 - b. What were the hardships he encountered?
 - c. If the service was so bad, what induced him to re-enlist after 1776?
 2. Have the class read the brief narrative of Sybil Ludington. Ask the following questions:
 - a. What risks did Sybil run by warning the Minutemen that the Regulars were coming?
 - b. What types of weather did Sybil have to brave to reach her goal?
 - c. Was Sybil’s action normal for other young girls?
 3. Finally have the class read about the life of William Franklin. Ask the following questions:
 - a. What was William’s relationship with his father like?
 - b. What caused William’s relationship with his father to turn cold?
 4. Tie all of these documents together by discussing how the people in each document were similar to the students in the class and how history is made up of the actions of people just like those in the documents and not just a bunch of old white-haired men.
- The same type of exercise can be used with any period or event of history and can be easily incorporated into normal classroom activities.

ANALYZING AND UTILIZING MULTIPLE HISTORICAL SOURCES

Analysis of primary sources to study history “in the raw”.
Determination of bias and unique point of view of historical sources.
Establishing and assessing the reliability of historical sources.
Utilizing primary and secondary sources as companion material to the textbook.

The culminating skill in Tier One is absolutely essential for students if they are going to be able to effectively acquire historical knowledge (as opposed to simply historical information). Students need to become adept at using primary sources and interpreting them if they are to truly gain a deeper understanding of history. As we have seen with the previous Jefferson exercise, there are times when some modern interpretations can give students a twisted and colored version of the past. Going to the source(s) is the only way to take students’ knowledge and skill to the next level where they can begin to successfully acquire historical knowledge for themselves. Students also must be able to assess the reliability of a document or passage in order to understand how much or how little credence to give the information that the author provides. Unfortunately there is a lot of false information that students are being taught that is masquerading as fact. The ability to discern the reliable from the spurious is invaluable for students in their sojourn to gain a better understanding of the past. Lastly, students must understand that almost every actor (and author) in history has had their own unique point of view when they crafted a document that is being studied in the 21st century, and as such one must view it through that particular lens. This skill and its subsets are complex and filled with potential potholes for students and teachers alike. However if students and teachers continually model and practice this skill it will become a powerful weapon in the students’ intellectual arsenal.

- Login your account at www.cicerohistory.com
- Select Unit 4: Birth of Liberty. Then click on “Primary Sources”. Then select “Proclamation of 1763”.
 1. Have students read the Proclamation of 1763
 2. In a whole-class format ask the following questions and post the answers on the board:
 - a. Analysis
 - i. What is the main idea or big picture elements of this document?
 - ii. Who is the author and is the author credible?
 - iii. Who or what is the intended audience?
 - iv. What larger circumstances surrounded the document being written?
 - v. What was the intended outcome of this document?
 - vi. Are there any “between the lines” pieces of information that may be important?
 - b. Bias and Point of View
 - i. What point of view is represented by this document?
 - ii. How does this point of view demonstrate a bias?
 - iii. How might the intended audience have reacted to this bias/point of view?
- The same type of exercise can be conducted with a multitude of primary sources in all time periods.

THE HISTORICAL PROCESS

FOUNDATION CONCEPTS OF HISTORY INSTRUCTION

There are four core foundational concepts in history education that form the foundation of instruction. These concepts are:

1. Historical Facts
2. Evidence and Interpretation
3. Chronology
4. Causation

The teacher has to consciously address these four concepts for himself / herself and for the class. Usually the concepts are formed into simple questions to which the answers serve as the core philosophy of instruction. The questions may look something like the following.^{xii}

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the role of facts? 2. What role does evidence play in developing an interpretation? 3. How does chronology relate to continuity and change? 4. How do events and causation relate? |
|--|

Figure 5: From Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts

The answers to these questions are crucial to the students understanding that there are some underlying rules in the analysis and interpretation of history. Without these types of rules the study of history becomes an academic version of the wild-west where it is every person for themselves. The intent of the historical process is for students to develop and hone the mindset and skills necessary to learn history on their own, but without set parameters individual interpretations can, and will, become historical cacophony.

THE PREMISES OF THE HISTORICAL PROCESS

There are four premises that the historical process is built on.

1. There must be a systematic approach to teaching and learning history
2. Teaching history is not just lecture and learning history is not just listening
3. Students learn history best by actually doing history
4. Intellectual engagement and investigation are critical to teaching and learning history

Without a systematic approach to teaching and learning history then the outcome at best is that history becomes a sweeping story and at worst an exercise in rote memorization. Much like the formula that the Math teachers use, history needs to be taught systematically, from start to finish. This does NOT mean that history has to be a simple chronology, but that the concepts that are being taught and elaborated should be “built” from their logical and historical beginnings to the appropriate conclusion(s). Concepts, themes, and periods should be tied together so that they represent a historical continuum rather than disconnected sets of events, people, and dates. The curriculum should be organized in such as way that lessons build upon each other and are logical to student and teacher alike.

Unfortunately teachers lecturing and students listening is the classic method in the history classroom. This type of direct instruction is effective at providing an incredible amount of information to students very rapidly, but it has proven ineffective at making learning permanent. Students in this mode of instruction become passive receptacles of whatever knowledge the teacher decides to talk about. This information is taken as the truth with little chance to analyze or contextualize what has been learned. Far too many students and adults see history as the amassing of facts and dates because of this type of instruction. Students learn far more by being involved in the process and being active in the educational process.

What do historians do? This is a semi-loaded question, but an important one nonetheless. Historians engage in in-depth reading, analysis of primary sources, research, interpretation of causation and consequence, and study and review other works of history (just to name a few). While it is true that historians attend lectures this is a distinct minority of what a professional historian does with their time. In the sports world there is an old saying that “practice makes perfect”, and its cousin, “practice makes permanent.” In order for students to become adept at history it is imperative that they actually DO history. This means getting their hands dirty with documents and other sources and getting their minds in gear by analyzing, interpreting, and dissecting what they gather from the sources.

By actually doing history students become active and engaged in the learning process. They investigate and sift through information, then compile what they have learned into some type of product. The students are no longer passive, but active. They no longer simply accept and regurgitate, but question and synthesize. Students mimic what actual historians do rather than try to memorize bits and pieces of information that often makes little sense to them or the world around them.

DANGER OF RELYING ON NARRATIVE HISTORY

Narrative history is that classic construct of history education and popular memory. Powerful books such as Bruce Catton's *A Stillness at Appomattox*, Ernst Junger's *Storm of Steel*, and even David McCulloch's highly acclaimed *1776* have enthralled hundreds of thousands of people. The sweeping narratives of people and the events they experienced have the potential to "hook" students and adults alike into a love of history. Unfortunately the very things that make narrative history so enthralling and powerful are what hinder students learning history as a process.

Textbooks simply reinforce the narrative model of history. Even though these texts are written for the lowest common denominator and are politically correct to a fault, they are what far too many students and teachers see as "History". Within the confines of a shiny and colorful cover you will find numerous slick pictures, charts, graphs, and even some excerpts from primary sources. However the bulk of the textbook is a dry, stripped down, and sterile narrative that attempts to tell the entire story of American history.

Narrative history's great pitfall, even in the textbooks, is that history remains at its core a story. Many narrative histories, such as Rod Gragg's newest work, *Covered with Glory*, are especially powerful, detailed, incredibly well-researched, and highly readable. These characteristics make them attractive options for teachers to further their own learning and to use with students in the classroom. However the story component is the academic weakness of narrative history. There is very little discussion of critical analysis, little space given to sources that contradict the writer's theme or thesis, and usually there is nothing about differing interpretations of the events. Instead the subject of the book becomes an end unto itself and the actions described in the book become the de facto truth of what took place, why it took place, and why it is important.

With a reliance on narrative history, what students learn and are taught remains a simple story rather than a rigorous discipline or academic thought process. The narrative model further more does very little to develop historical thinking or deeper levels of understanding. Narrative history is useful and in many ways very powerful, but it should not be the only type of history that students work with.

HISTORICAL PROCESSING

The key component of a systematic plan for teaching and learning history is to build in consistent and rigorous mental processes rather than relying on narrative. These processes need to mimic those of the historian so that students become engaged in working with complex historical material and applying historical thinking skills to that material. It is easy to look at an activity and rationalize that it is a rigorous historical process, however we must be honest with ourselves in developing these activities if our students are to succeed. Rigorous processes in history are generally multi-step affairs that require students to gather information, analyze that information, distill that information into component parts, and corroborate or refute that information based on a set of criteria. This may sound like a complicated and involved activity, but it is essential if students are to truly learn history in a meaningful way.

Understanding is ultimately a function of information processing. It is virtually impossible to increase student understanding of the past without processing some amount of information. This means documents, images, monographs, speeches, videos, and almost any other form of history material. Historical processing utilizes historical thinking skills to strip away much of the veneer of the past to determine the core understandings, the various interpretations, and attempting to determine the elusive historical “truth”. Historical processing occurs best and most efficiently when there are multiple sources and an assignment that requires an analytic and constructive product. To roll it all together, true historical processing is manifold. Students have to meaningfully work with multiple sources, be they primary, secondary, or even synthetic. Students then must rigorously analyze those sources to get at their meaning, their bias, their information, and their impact. Finally students have to take the information that they have gathered, combine it with their analysis, and develop some type of product (essay, project, etc) that requires them to construct an interpretive piece of history.^{xiii}

Of course there are numerous pitfalls in having students DO history. One of the most common pitfalls is that teachers focus on the trappings of doing history rather than the thought processes. This often derives from teachers who are not well versed in history content or the processes of historians. The result is a classroom where students copy the behavior of historians but that is all. Another pitfall is assuming that students will have the assumptions that historians have and the activities fall flat. Students have to be taught these assumptions and move along an often-frustrating learning curve before they are able to effectively do history. Lastly too many teachers see doing history as the history equivalent of collaborative or cooperative learning. While there is an element of collaboration and cooperation in the process, the social interaction in the classroom must undergo change. The interaction must be purposeful and aligned with the task(s) at hand.^{xiv}

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH THE HISTORICAL METHOD

Utilizing a systematic historical method rooted in historical thinking and processing is one of the best ways that a teacher can ensure that they are providing students with all of the tools necessary to learn and contextualize historical material. Like anything in education there will be a number problems and issues that will rear their heads and try to derail your attempts to utilize the historical method. If you are aware that these problems may arise, then they are much easier to understand and solve.

HISTORICAL THINKING IS UNNATURAL

One of the first issues that may crop up when trying to utilize the historical method and historical thinking in your classroom is that these processes can be “unnatural”. Unfortunately most history teachers are taught to see an almost immutable harmony between the past and the present. In most history courses, especially at the survey level, we are taught the biblical adage of “this begat that” and so on. While this makes for a seamless story where the plot builds upon those events that came before, in the end it is a stilted view of history. When utilizing the twelve skills and processes presented here, student and teacher alike need to divest themselves of the idea of a timeless past.^{xv} Take for instance the scene in late July 1945 in the Oval Office. If President Harry S Truman had decided not to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the Nagasaki, would the history of America have changed? Indeed it would have changed, and that change hinged on the decision making process of one man, alone in his office. Please be aware that there will be times when the thought processes involved in utilizing the historical method will be different for you and also for your students.

HISTORICAL THINKING IS FOREIGN

Another common issue associated with utilizing historical thinking is that it is foreign. Many teachers and students see the study of history as a process of amassing as much knowledge and factual information as possible.^{xvi} Very few teachers and even fewer students see the study of history as a way of thinking, reasoning, or being. Many teachers continue to treat history as a compilation of dry facts, stale dates, and dead people, and their teaching reflects this belief. Much of the blame for teachers maintaining such a belief system, and students slowly but surely absorbing the same beliefs, is because they were taught that way. As a practitioner of the historical method, you have consciously change instruction from a process of gathering and into one of analysis, evaluation, and even mental construction.

THE HISTORICAL METHOD IS NOT EASY

Perhaps the most common issue that arises from attempting to utilize the historical method is that it can be difficult. In education there is the constant change that comes with the fad of the day mentality that many administrators have. As such we are saddled with new methods, philosophies, and systems at almost every turn. Maintaining the paperwork, assessments, and interventions required of these fads is enough to sap the strength out of the hardest teacher. In order to properly implement and integrate the historical method into the classroom requires hard work. The method is designed to develop a caution, where we don't jump to conclusions or rely on initial emotional reactions. Doing this requires a commitment to carefully plan lessons that use the individual skills and processes, and then work through them with students so that they become adept in their use. Most students believe that history is simply a process of gathering, and we have to change their focus toward context, change, continuity, and meaning. Dr. Sam Wineburg said it best, history is *"... a tool for changing how we think, for promoting a literacy not of names and dates but of discernment, judgment, and caution."*^{xvii} It is hard work to master the historical method but the results are well worth it.

SACRED VERSUS SECULAR TIME

As a country America is relatively young with just over 230 years of existence as a separate nation. In those two and a half centuries there have been a certain few events that have developed such a powerful image and hold on our understanding of the past that they have become in many ways sacred. Examples of these events include the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the crash of the stock market on October 29, 1929, or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. This in and of itself is relatively benign and is to be expected from a nation that has grown so fast and become so powerful. From a history and history teaching perspective it is very problematic to have such sacred events. The periods of time before and after these sacred events becomes disjointed for students with issues getting amalgamated into the sacred time.^{xviii} How many students have you seen that believe that the American Revolution virtually began with the signing of the Declaration or that World War II only began with the attack on Pearl Harbor? This confounds students' ability to think chronologically and muddies the already confusing waters of the past.

OBFUSCATIONS

Unfortunately history education has not been at the top of the educational pantheon for decades and as such rigorous instruction often suffers from two forms of obfuscation. One is that the terms of discourse that history education professionals rely on to discuss history

are being eroded from daily life.^{xix} The second obfuscation is closely related to the first in that common references are no longer known or understood by the population. In the on-demand digital world we live in a tremendous amount of what we would term common historical knowledge (facts, dates, etc) is left unknown as students rely on their ability to retrieve them as they see fit. This creates a situation in the classroom where teachers are discussing something as innocuous as the steel plow and students without exposure to farming or agricultural pursuits are in the dark as to the nuances and importance of this piece of equipment.

HISTORY AS APOLOGY

One of the current trends in professional history is the apologetic history. These histories are developed in many ways out of historicism or presentism, and the supposed need to apologize for the wrongs that were committed in the past. The emerging cultural histories and hyphenated histories serve to further obscure an already complicated and intricate past. In the quest for inclusion and the desire to offend no one textbook manufacturers have begun to include these new histories as part of the content in their mainstream texts. While the new histories have a powerful clientele and a place at the table of professional history, for the student and teacher they tend to obscure the study of the past. In part these histories build a false hope for rehabilitating the past, a process that creates a fundamentally flawed interpretation of history.^{xx} The rage that many of these histories exhibit, and the demands for some form of restitution serve to generally dilute the past and transform it into little more than self-loathing.

NO STATE STANDARDS FOR THE HISTORICAL METHOD OR THINKING

Another area of concern to many teachers in utilizing the historical method is that it and the skills are not necessarily aligned with state or local standards. Virtually every state in the union has a set of curriculum standards that teachers are required to adhere to. Usually these courses of study contain conceptual frameworks, terms, essential questions, and other forms of content. In this age of high-stakes testing and accountability, administrators expect that each lesson is aligned with the proper standard(s) and is conducted at the proper point in the semester. Even though there aren't state standards for historical thinking or processing, one cannot effectively separate the content from the thought process behind it. Historical thinking versus historical content is an academic version of which came first, the chicken or the egg? Utilizing and teaching a formal historical method helps provide students with the ability to use and assimilate the content that they come into contact with, and as such is a critical component of a standards-based curriculum.

THE HISTORICAL METHOD REQUIRES A DEEPER LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE

Finally, a historical method requires that teachers develop a deeper understanding of the material that they teach. No longer will it serve to know only what is in the text or in the state standards and little else. To effectively use the historical method in their classrooms, teachers will have to look at their subject(s) from multiple perspectives and possess a greater depth of knowledge and skill than before.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

ⁱ Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 15.

This quote from Hofstadter is purposefully incomplete. He originally made the statement for professional historians discussing the complexity of the past and political immobility. The excerpts quoted here adhere to the spirit of what Richard Hofstadter so often expressed about the power of the past.

ⁱⁱ Francis G. Couvares, Martha Sexton, Gernald N. Grob, George A. Billas, ed., *Interpretations of American History: Patterns & Perspectives*, 7th ed., Volume II: From Reconstruction (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 1.

Croce's argument about good history being current history is in sync with Gordon Wood and other historians such as Don Higginbotham who have written extensively about how Americans look for meaning to current events through studying the past. However as Higginbotham has aptly pointed out in a well-regarded article about the Vietnamization of the American Revolution, this line of reasoning has its own pitfalls and false conclusions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gaea Leinhardt, "Lessons on Teaching and Learning History from Paul's Pen," in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 225.

Leinhardt makes some very valid points about students' exposure to history outside of the school setting. As educators we would be remiss if we did not both understand these influences and in some way attempt to co-opt them in the learning process.

^{iv} Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 16.

On page 11 of this book Dr. Wood states, "To possess a historical sense does not mean simply to possess information about the past." This sentence is perhaps the genesis of my thoughts beginning to coalesce around history as a formal method or process rather than a product.

^v Drake, Frederick & Lynn Nelson, *Engagement in Teaching History*. (Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2009), 55.

It is a good sign that the developers of the National History Standards see that there are issues with the ability of students to properly think about the past. However as other historians and educators have stated, these skills are incomplete and seem to have been attached to the standards as an after-thought rather than as the heart of the instructional process.

^{vi} Desmond Morton, "Teaching and Learning History in Canada," in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 58-59.

Morton is absolutely correct here. Far too often history is not deemed important at all or when there is a concerted effort to include history it is often romanticized. History is not something that can be learned or comprehended cafeteria-style which is the treatment it often gets in schools for a variety of reasons.

vii David Lowenthal, “Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History,” in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 64.

viii David Lowenthal, “Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History,” in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 64.

The skills and concepts that Lowenthal lays out are an excellent first step in the development of a comprehensive program of historical thinking. Those that he lays out have a lot in common with other sets of skills such as those from the American Historical Association and the NCHE.

ix Desmond Morton, “Teaching and Learning History in Canada,” in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 58-59.

The three propositions that Morton discusses are by themselves incomplete. They do however form a good basis from which to extrapolate other skills and concepts that are important to understanding history.

x Drake, Frederick & Lynn Nelson, *Engagement in Teaching History*. (Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2009), 54.

xi Shelley Weintraub, “What’s the New Crap? What’s Wrong with the Old Crap?,” in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 187.

Weintraub’s group was on the cutting edge of history education with the curricular and historical thinking framework that they developed in the early 1990’s. This group led the way in making historical thought and skills the centerpiece of instruction rather than a mere add-on.

xii Sam Wineberg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 141-146.

One of the bigger issues that Winberg uncovers is whether facts and history are synonymous and whether history can be “built”. My contention is that facts form the basis for building history and this philosophy is at the heart of the historical method. Likewise Winberg discusses interpretation in this same section. My contention on interpretation of evidence is that historians should use a formal and systematic process.

xiii Derived from: Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineberg, *Knowing Teaching & Learning History* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 375-386.

This article by James Voss and Jennifer Wiley is on the cutting edge of history instruction. Their study on using documents and historical processing is very instructive in terms of developing classroom activities. The authors discuss the often nebulous terms of “understanding” and “learning” and how there is little consensus on the definition and use of the terms.

xiv Derived from: Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineberg, *Knowing Teaching & Learning History* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 334-335.

This article by Bob Bain is a great introduction on using research as a teaching tool and doing history. Bain is adamant about the pitfalls of doing history in only a perfunctory manner. In summation of this point he states, “Teaching history is more complicated than either transmitting historical facts or engaging students in historical projects.” This summation is crucial to understanding the process.

^{xv}. Donald Yerxa, ed. *Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 37

Wineberg takes the term “fundamental timeless past” from David Lowenthal. Wineberg though makes a very valid point about how students (and perhaps teachers) tend to “mush past and present” to the point that everything is seemingly current. The historical method and historical thinking skills are designed to help alleviate this.

^{xvi} *Ibid*

^{xvii} Sam Wineberg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), ix

^{xviii} David Lowenthal, “Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History,” in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 67.

This is a problem that does not seem to be getting better as we learn more about how students learn and assimilate history. My belief is that this problem underscores students’ lack of a mental schema and historical framework upon which to place new knowledge.

^{xix} David Lowenthal, “Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History,” in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 68-69.

^{xx} David Lowenthal, “Dilemmas and Delights of Learning History,” in *Knowing Teaching & Learning History*, ed. Peter Stearns, Peter Sexias, and Sam Wineberg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 70-71.