

A Different Way of Viewing History Teaching:

Balancing Competing Intellectual Challenges

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Not long ago, I was introduced to Swedish crime fiction. In several novels by Henning Mankell, the protagonist, Kurt Wallander, regularly faces bewildering crime scenes with few clues about the perpetrator. The narrator frequently tells the reader that Wallander realizes he can discover new things if he looks at the same challenges from a different, sometimes unexpected, perspective. As a result, he often makes great progress on a case that had at first seemed intractable. Several years before introducing me to Wallander, Robert Bain, professor of education at the University of Michigan, offered me a new perspective on challenges I was facing as a teacher. He suggested that teaching challenges could be viewed as fundamentally intellectual ones, rather than simply practical ones, as teachers typically view them. History teachers worry about keeping students interested. They wonder, “What if they find the Philadelphia Convention boring? How can I make it more exciting?” With state content standards always looming in the background, history teachers also express concern about “covering the curriculum.” And, many history teachers say they have to abandon teaching the “fun stuff” in order to teach state-mandated content.¹

While teaching challenges do, of course, entail practical considerations, this article argues that teachers gain insight into planning effective instruction if they view the challenges they face as fundamentally intellectual, involving conceptual knowledge and historiography. As such, the decisions teachers make in this area have the potential to significantly shape the way students understand the past. Recasting these challenges as intellectual ones may seem to complicate the task history teachers face, but it deepens the wisdom of teachers’ planning by helping them to ask the

right questions and thus to focus on the most important elements of instruction—deep, meaningful understanding of history content and thinking.

In what follows, I suggest that history teachers face three particular intellectual challenges they need to manage which rest at the core of historical understanding. These challenges involve issues of time (the past and the present), scale (the large-scale and the small-scale), and pattern (the unique and the more common). Teaching with these issues in mind offers a challenge because both poles of these three issues have legitimacy and deserve

consideration. Teachers must attempt to attend to both. In all these cases, I will explain why each pole deserves a history teacher’s attention; I will present a question to ask in deciding how to balance the competing demands of each pole; and then I will offer a brief example of one way to implement instruction that attempts to honor both poles. For the sake of thematic consistency, all three examples are drawn from antebellum United States history.

The Challenge of Time: Past and Present

The challenge of time involves the need to balance the concern of relevance with the desire to avoid “presentism”—thinking that people in the past were simply foolish for thinking and behaving the way they did rather than as enlightened twenty-first century people like themselves.² Professional historians have increasingly acknowledged the connection between their work and contemporary concerns. All the more, teachers—whose primary audience is not other historians but students—must pay attention to the importance of the present, the world in which their students (and they) live, but still respect the integrity of the past. There is little argument

Challenge	Competing Demands	Example
Time	<p>Past: Historical events need to be understood in context</p> <p>Present: Historical events must be relevant to students</p>	Debates about the role of women in a democratic society were shaped by values of the antebellum era, but remain important today
Scale	<p>Large: Historical events become significant as part of larger trends</p> <p>Small: Historical events gain texture and interest when examined in detail</p>	The caning of Charles Sumner provides a fascinating, in-depth look at larger trends separating the North and South that ultimately triggered the Civil War
Pattern	<p>Unique: Outstanding individuals shape history in important ways</p> <p>General: The experiences of most people differed from those of outstanding individuals</p>	Frederick Douglass was a remarkable example of slaves' desires for freedom, but circumstances prevented most slaves from making the same choice

among researchers or classroom teachers about the need to establish relevant connections between course content and the lives of students.³ A teacher who relentlessly drills students on the names and dates of Civil War battles without establishing the greater significance of the battles—or, more importantly, the larger war—fails in the basic teaching task. History teachers have found many ways to create relevance for students through the use of hooks at the beginning of lessons, current events articles that connect to the past, or role-playing exercises that cast students in similar situations in the past.⁴

In their legitimate quest for relevance, however, history teachers run the risk of collapsing the distance between the past and the present. Teachers sometimes ask students to imagine, for example, that they are workers in a factory and to consider how they might feel. But without substantial contextual knowledge, students are unable to perform this task well and fall into the trap of presentism. Concern about presentism is no frivolous philosophical issue teachers can ignore. It goes to the heart of studying the past: people in the past thought differently

and, consequently, behaved differently. If students are not compelled to consider how and why this was true, they will simply pass judgment on historical figures without ever understanding them. One of the humanizing functions of learning history will be lost as a result.⁵

How can teachers manage this challenge? They can begin by asking a basic question about whatever event or institution they are teaching: What is a *genuine* link between this content and the present world my students and I inhabit? Teachers should never teach any historical content “for its own sake.” The past has meaning because people invest it with meaning. Conversely, individuals (including historians) and nations at large regularly choose to forget much of the past because it fails to meet the standard of meaning.⁶ Anything students are required to learn should be linked to the present in some way. The link may be indirect. Indeed, the further in the past, the less the likelihood that there will be an immediate connection to students. Teachers in world history courses, for example, must work to establish a connection between the development of agriculture 10,000 years ago and the lives of contemporary urban

young people. But it can be done. The key is to probe deeply to look for genuine commonalities that unite the historical past and the present, and to avoid superficial similarities that do a disservice to either the present or the past.

Here is an example of an attempt to find that genuine link. In a model lesson for eighth-grade teachers about the roles of women in the antebellum era, I initially created a hook that asked students to talk about their reactions to the idea of a woman president. Alternately, I considered posting data on the relative number of women in Congress and asking students to react. In the end, I rejected both hooks, as neither would be especially relevant to students. Eighth-graders are several years from voting, and many would find these hooks abstract or uninteresting. In my effort to find a link between the past and the present—women’s participation in the political realm—I had failed to address relevance.

As I continued to muse on this challenge, I came up with a different hook that asked students whether there were any real differences between males and females, apart from physical ones. In more nuanced terms, this question has often shaped debates about the roles and rights of women in American society.⁷ And the question of gender differences is never far from the concerns of adolescents. It is thus quite relevant to them and would engender a lively classroom debate, as a hook is designed to do. At the same time, this question more effectively links the antebellum world to today by identifying a basic—and important—question these eras share in common.

The question of degree of similarity or difference between men and women lay at the heart of debates about women’s roles in the antebellum era. Traditional justifications for excluding some people from political or social participation were being destroyed by relentless appeals to the ideals of equality in the “Age of Democracy.” If all men were equal regardless of social rank, did this logic apply to women?⁸ Social reform-

ers like Catherine Beecher argued that just as God had established order in all human institutions through hierarchy and subordination, so the differences between men and women—which are not simply physical—indicate a divine role of wifely submission and non-participation in political activities.⁹ On the contrary, the Seneca Falls Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, echoing the egalitarian words of the Declaration of Independence, assumed a fundamental similarity between men and women.¹⁰

By opposing these two documents to one another, teachers can help students see how contested the question of women's roles was in this era. An effective teacher's contextualization of these documents allows students to see why the author of each thought as she did. The teacher could draw attention to the relative lack of support at the time for the Declaration of Sentiments, to challenge students' likely tendency to sympathize with that document. Students would be compelled to think about why most nineteenth-century Americans—including women like Beecher—answered the question about men and women's differences differently than many of them might today. In the process of connecting the past and present in a meaningful way, they would have wrestled with several content standards.¹¹

The Challenge of Scale: Large and Small

The next challenge history teachers need to manage involves tension between the importance of large-scale and small-scale history. Each approach has its defenders among historians. At the extreme ends, this might be thought of as a duel between Carlo Ginzburg and Fernand Braudel, both historians of sixteenth-century Mediterranean Europe. For Ginzburg and other "microhistorians," the virtue of a very close study of a small historical event or moment lies in the texture one experiences when viewing the historical past up close. Such careful study is rewarded by a rich understanding of that

moment in time. A person like Domenico Scandella comes to life in a fascinating way in Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*.¹² Time-conscious teachers, however, often worry about the instructional time that such a presentation demands.

According to Braudel, on the contrary, the big picture is the one that matters most.¹³ Large-scale, long-duration changes are the most significant in determining human experience. The event-oriented history that many historians focus on, argued Braudel, is simply the froth on top of a much larger wave. For example, Braudel drew attention to the ways that climate and geography shape people's experiences in fundamental ways that often change little over millennia. On a somewhat smaller scale, patterns of subsistence and trade often endure for hundreds of years. Though history teachers, especially those teaching United States history, rarely deal with such large periods of time, they may still apply Braudel's insight to understand that students need to be taught to recognize the common trends that lead historians to group events together as an era. While the abstraction inherent in a large-scale approach runs the danger of swallowing up real human actors in larger movements or trends, it probably constitutes the lesser of the dangers for teachers than a focus on the small-scale does. History teachers often deal with history episodically and would benefit their students by regularly scaling up to help them see larger patterns.

How can the competing demands of the large-scale and the small-scale be managed? As teachers seek to create texture by considering case studies around which to build lessons, they should regularly ask, "How well does this reflect larger patterns?" The right case study will draw students in through interesting people and lively events. If it is carefully chosen, it can simultaneously illustrate much larger patterns. Such an approach only works if teachers first establish a context for scale in their classroom. Teachers constantly move up and down in histori-

cal scale. They must intentionally construct larger-scale understandings of time with their students, and alert students when they change scale.¹⁴

Several years ago, I had to create a model lesson for an observation of an AP U.S. history classroom. I was teaching about the coming of the Civil War, but was looking to avoid simply having students chart the differences between the regions. Having recently traveled to the Pottawatomie Creek area, I was inspired by the intense violence of the events surrounding "Bleeding Kansas." Guided by the primary sources provided in T. Lloyd Benson's *The Caning of Sumner*, I created an entire block lesson around the question, "What does the caning of Charles Sumner tell us about the coming of the Civil War?"¹⁵ One observer initially felt skeptical of the wisdom of devoting an entire 90-minute period to the beating of a senator by a congressman, and I secretly shared his apprehension. But by the end, we both sensed that the lesson had worked as a good example of using a case study to reveal a larger pattern. The period began with a brief examination of Sumner's offending speech and of Preston Brooks's attack on him. The remainder of the period was devoted to reading and analyzing various types of primary sources that revealed different reactions—North and South—to the caning. Out of this investigation, students witnessed different understandings of virtue and honor, of the appropriate uses of violence, of slavery, and of God's view of recent events. In short, they saw in high relief many of the significant differences in belief between the two regions. At the close of the lesson, I asked the students to discuss what this event revealed about the coming of the Civil War. Most concluded that in answer to an old historical question, that the conflict between the North and the South did indeed seem "irrepressible" by 1856, given the nature and intensity of disagreement between citizens of both regions. Thus, by placing a specific event in a larger context, this lesson struck a balance between the

small-scale—with colorful actors and lively events of interest to students—and larger-scale, more abstract questions about the conflict between the regions and the inevitability of civil war. In so doing, the lesson drew in a number of content standards in a coherent way.¹⁶

The Challenge of Pattern: Unique and General

The final challenge is that of the tension between unique events and more general patterns. How can teachers balance a concern with investigating exceptional people versus focusing on more common experiences? While this tension shares with the previous one a concern about the relationship between the small, individual event and the larger trend or pattern, the two are ultimately distinct. The challenge of *scale* deals with detail—the degree to which a teacher focuses on the features of specific events rather than focusing on larger, more abstract trends. The challenge of *pattern*, by contrast, deals with typicality—the degree to which a person conforms to more general trends of the era. As with the other tensions, teachers must attend to both the demands of the unique and of the more general.

For the non-specialist, interest in the past often focuses on unique people or unrepeatable events. Adults and children alike are drawn to the stories of people like Genghis Khan, Mansa Musa, Queen Elizabeth, Lewis and Clark, Gandhi, and Rosa Parks. From both a historical and a pedagogical standpoint, this interest is appropriate. Historically, some individuals do make a tremendous difference and therefore deserve to be studied as individuals. Pedagogically, it is much easier to capture student interest through an exciting story. Such stories also fit students' preconceptions of history as essentially individual and narrative. In seeking to balance discussion of unique people or events and more general patterns, teachers should not shy away from interesting individuals and events. But it is crucial for them to ask, "In what ways is

this distinctive?" Then they need to plan instruction to systematically encourage students to explore why an individual was able to accomplish what he or she did.

Consider the example of Frederick Douglass, an undeniable hero of the antebellum era. He physically defended himself against a white man hired to beat him into submission. He escaped to freedom. He became one of the most passionate and articulate critics of slavery and an advocate of equality for women. Teachers can share his story and his inspirational speeches to great effect in the classroom. But if they are not careful in this regard, they distort students' understanding even while inspiring them.

In introducing my students to the story of Douglass, I read to them the stirring account of Douglass's resistance to the slave breaker, Mr. Covey, that ends with

Well, my dear reader, this battle with Mr. Covey,—undignified as it was, and as I fear my narration of it is—was the turning point in my "life as a slave." It rekindled in my breast the smouldering [*sic*] embers of liberty... I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a FREEMAN.¹⁷

At the same time, I attempted to place him in the larger context of antebellum slavery in two ways. First, I helped students understand the oppressive nature of the antebellum slave system. If I had not done so, students would have assumed that other slaves should simply have done what Douglass did. That most slaves did not do so suggests to students, however subtly, that continued enslavement might have been slaves' own fault. Obviously, such blaming of the victim is erroneous and insidious.¹⁸ Historian David Brion Davis argues that slaves routinely

weighed the option of resistance and concluded that under most circumstances it would have been suicidal. Tolerating the oppression of slavery—rather than running away—thus represented a rational decision for most slaves.¹⁹ Second, then, I had to help them explore how Douglass was able to overcome his circumstances: he lived in a border state, which allowed easier escape; he spent time in Baltimore, an urban seaport that allowed him to gain knowledge about the larger world and possible routes of escape; and he had the opportunity to learn to read from one slave mistress. None of these factors in any way diminishes the heroic stature of Douglass, who took advantage of all of these opportunities and became a genuine icon. They do help explain, however, why other people who equally despised enslavement and longed for freedom were unable to follow his example.²⁰

Conclusion

Three things are required for teachers to successfully manage the intellectual challenges of teaching history by focusing on time, scale, and pattern. First, it should be clear that teachers need substantial content knowledge to possess enough pedagogical weapons in their arsenal to develop, for example, effective case studies. Equally importantly, however, teachers need historiographical knowledge of the eras they teach. Without an understanding of the major trends or the questions that historians pose, teachers will be unable to decide which case studies will illustrate larger patterns or how an individual event differs from larger patterns in the era. At the same time, while teachers' knowledge base must be substantial, it is not necessary to teach all of that content explicitly to get students interested and learning. While the lessons discussed above were often time-consuming to prepare, they were not time-consuming to teach. After examining different reactions to the caning of Sumner, for example, I required relatively little instructional time to teach various causes of the Civil War.

I explicitly and repeatedly connected the individual event to larger patterns so students could make the necessary connections. Second, this approach only works if teachers engage in routine reflection. Since they regularly confront the competing tensions described above whether they realize it or not, it behooves them to be attentive to the decisions they are making and the basis on which they are making them. Finally, because this approach involves a constant shuttling between the world of the students and the world of the past, it is imperative that teachers routinely and systematically gauge their students' knowledge and understanding. They should regularly ask, "What will students take away from this lesson?" While there are various ways to do this—regular, quick "assessments" of students' knowledge and attentiveness to their understanding as expressed in their comments—experienced teachers often will also be able to project student (mis)understandings based on previous experience with the subject. While challenging and, at least initially, time-consuming this approach to learning history ultimately gives students the opportunity to enjoy history and see its relevance, while developing a rich, sophisticated understanding of the past. 📖

Notes

1. My thanks go to Bob Bain for shaping my thinking about history teaching in important ways over the last several years, as well as for introducing me to Swedish crime fiction.
2. For an excellent example of such thinking by a high school student and analysis of the dangers of presentism, see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 7-12.
3. Keith C. Barton, "Research on Students' Ideas About History," in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, ed. Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008), 245-248, reviews a range of research studies on the importance of social context in student interest and learning of history.
4. In "They Thought the World was Flat?," in *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*, eds. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2004), Robert Bain introduces an inquiry model of history instruction that takes students' interests seriously and builds instruction around that interest.
5. Wineburg's description of a conversation between Holocaust survivor Primo Levi and a fifth-grade student, in which the student asks why Levi did not try to escape, illustrates the danger of allowing students to maintain their presentist assumptions. See his *Historical Thinking*, 22-24.
6. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) examines at length the human process of remembering and forgetting the past. He argues that "to remember more than a small fraction of our past would be enormously time-consuming." So "memories must continually be discarded and conflated; only forgetting enables us to classify and bring chaos into order" (205).
7. For example, the debate between egalitarian and "maternalist" feminists around the turn of the twentieth century centered on whether women should focus on the fundamental similarities between all men and women or on the unique strengths of women as those who bear and nurture offspring. The debate continued into the late twentieth century as women historians sometimes struggled to accept maternalist feminists as genuine feminists at all. See Linda Gordon, "Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in the Early Twentieth Century," in *US History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, edited by Linda A. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995, 67-71.)
8. For a brief summary of the debate about equality for women within the context of the democratizing trends of the antebellum era and market revolution, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 849-852.
9. Excerpts of Beecher's treatise, whose full title is *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, are provided by many history and history education websites, as a search of the History Gateway at the National History Education Clearinghouse reveals (www.teachinghistory.org/history-content). The entire treatise is available on Project Gutenberg at www.gutenberg.org/etext/21829.
10. The text of the Declaration is available in its entirety on the Internet Modern History Sourcebook, www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/senecafalls.html
11. This lesson addresses at least five topics in the California History-Social Science Content Standards (8.1.2, 8.6.3, 8.6.4, 8.6.5, 8.6.6). California standards are available at www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf. Advanced Placement U.S. History offers one of the few examples of active "standards" on the national level. This lesson addresses each of the following elements of the AP U.S. History Topic Outline in some way: "Beginnings of industrialization and changes in social and class structures," "Immigration and nativist reaction," "Jacksonian democracy and its successes and limitations," "Evangelical Protestant revivalism," "Social reforms," and "Ideals of domesticity" (see www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/history_us/topics_1_9.html?ushist#6)
12. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.)
13. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper, 1976), trans Sian Reynolds.
14. For a thoughtful example of the systematic use of scales of time in world history, see the World History For Us All website, www.worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu.
15. T. Lloyd Benson, *The Caning of Sumner* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2004). The author and his colleagues in the Department of History at Furman University have provided a tremendous resource by digitizing dozens of newspaper editorials reacting to the caning of Sumner. They have done similar work for other events leading up to the Civil War: Kansas-Nebraska, Dred Scott, and John Brown. See their *Secession Era Editorials Project* at <http://history.furman.edu/editorials/see.py>.
16. This lesson addresses multiple topics in the California History-Social Science Content Standards (8.9.1, 8.9.4, 8.9.5, 8.10.1, and 8.10.2). Likewise, it addresses multiple AP U.S. History topics: "Beginnings of industrialization and changes in social and class structures," "Pro- and antislavery arguments and conflicts," "Compromise of 1850 and popular sovereignty," "The Kansas-Nebraska Act and the emergence of the Republican Party." See note 9 for references to the two documents cited here.
17. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, 1969), 246.
18. Wineburg makes a similar point about students' tendencies to blame victims of the Holocaust for not escaping, due to students' ignorance of the circumstances of those imprisoned. See *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, pp. 22-24.
19. David Brion Davis, "Some Nineteenth-Century Slave Conspiracies and Revolts," in *Inhuman Bondage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
20. Though ostensibly addressing a much narrower topic, this lesson nonetheless touches on several California content standards (8.6, 8.7, and 8.9) and subjects from the AP U.S. History Outline ("Growth of slavery and free Black communities," "Planters, yeoman farmers, and slaves in the cotton south," "Evangelical Protestant revivalism," "Social reforms," and "Pro- and antislavery arguments and conflicts." See note 9 for references for these two documents.)

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