Putting History Teaching 'In Its Place'

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Over the past four decades, the reigning paradigm among history educators has tacitly ignored the concept of place in its emphasis on helping students “do history.” In practice, the slogan has included a range of activities, from skillful cognitive explorations of what it means to think and read and write “like a historian” to document-based questions on advanced placement history exams to simply giving students photocopies of “primary sources.” In recent years, the discussion has included an exploration of the concept of “signature pedagogy.” Drawing on his work with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Lee Shulman observed that some professions employ discipline-specific pedagogies to train future practitioners in the knowledge, values, and worldview of the profession—law students debate practice cases, medical students conduct clinical rounds, and seminary students follow a routine of prayer and sermons. Shulman contrasted discipline-specific pedagogy with the apparent default pedagogy of arts and science education grounded in textbooks and lectures and he called for the creation of signature pedagogies rooted in the theory and practice of individual disciplines. 1

Historians have taken up Shulman’s challenge, and, in the process, have begun to debate the “signature pedagogy of history.” Scholars such as Sam Wineburg, Lendol Calder, and David Pace have applied recent findings in cognitive science to begin to identify the mental tasks performed by practicing historians—sourcing, corroborating, and connecting, among others. 2 In another approach, Stéphane Lévesque, Keith Barton and Linda Levtik, and Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke have sought to embed history pedagogy in “procedural concepts” (Lévesque’s term) unique to, or at least uniquely applied among, historians—change over time, context, narrative, empathy, significance, and distance from the past, among others. 3 Third, Peter Lee and Rosalyn

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3 Stéphane Lévesque, Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century (Toronto, 2008); Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levtik, Teaching History for the Common Good (New York, 2009); Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?,” AHA Perspectives, 45 (Jan. 2007), 32–35.

doi: 10.1093/jahist/jaq066
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March 2011
The Journal of American History
1067

Downloaded from jah.oxfordjournals.org at University of Texas at El Paso on March 3, 2011
Ashby, Gaea Leinhardt, and the Visual Knowledge Project participants explore critical thinking in history to highlight historians’ use of evidence, argumentation, explanation, and perspective. Finally, Calder and Bob Bain emphasize the unique way that historians problematize previous stories about the past, formulate their own questions, and design and follow processes of inquiry.

In part because of the context of Shulman’s plea, the parties pursuing cognition, concepts, critical thinking, and inquiry approach the question as an intellectual problem about disciplinary knowledge. All four approaches will be enriched by remembering that the power of the pedagogies highlighted by Shulman originates not in epistemology but in experience. Explicitly, learning occurs by inhabiting a professionally relevant place—medical students train at the bedside, law students argue in a mock courtroom, preachers practice at the pulpit. One other characteristic that further defines these places of pedagogy is that they are public. This observation does not discount the fact that the professionals also study, or attend conventions, or host consultations in their office, or haggle with potential jurors and health insurance providers—it merely identifies as crucial the moment when a professional looks up from learning to diagnose a patient, persuade a jury, or preach a sermon.

Where do we historians practice history? Can our students conceivably do history in the same places that we do? What would our teaching look like if we sought to put our students in the places of historical practice? We can put history teaching back “in its place” by uniting archival research, scholarship on the learning and teaching of history, and effective teaching methods within a new paradigm conscientiously constructed around the places of history practice. When our students experience where we do history they will more readily understand why we do what we do when we do history. Putting history teaching back in its place may also be the first necessary step to restoring the value of history—in school curricula, in the humanities, and in public life.

Where Do Historians “Do History”? 

The first question for consideration is deceptively simple: where do we practice history? Most likely, the answer that initially springs to mind will be in an archive. This answer

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reflects the roots of the historical profession in the work of Leopold von Ranke and the generation of American doctoral students who went to Germany for training among the sources. The answer reflects over a century of academic historical practice emphasizing objectivity and archival sourcework. The answer provides context for the critiques of history education—from the “progressive historians” to the Foxfire approach to active learning strategies—that have called for student engagement of primary sources. The answer also reflects current rhetoric about historical practice: the Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich created a compelling PBS documentary about her archival work to reconstruct the eighteenth-century world of the midwife Martha Ballard, the “Top Young Historians” spotlighted by the History News Network frequently share “personal anecdotes” that locate their professional development in the archive, and the academy rewards research far more than it rewards teaching.6

But is the archive the only place where we practice history? Do young historians have transformative experiences in archives, or is that simply what they imagine their established colleagues will want to hear? After a distinguished career, Perry Miller explained that his interest in Puritan history came not in an archive but in an “epiphany” in the jungles of Africa. Years after the death of James B. Randall, “the dean of Lincoln studies,” his wife revealed that his fascination with the sixteenth president originated when, as a child, he spent hours drawing and painting the craggy face of Abraham Lincoln. Free from tenure-track restraints, the journalist Tony Horwitz reported that his passion for Civil War history began as a child looking at photographs with his grandfather.7

The archive certainly forms an essential part of our experience, but not the most important. We do not just stumble into the nearest archive and ask for the daily special. Archival research is preceded by an intense and sometimes lengthy conceptualization process that involves at least the unarticulated awareness of present needs, current historiographical debates, the types of sources that may be relevant to needs and debates, and the collections and locations of particular archives that might provide those sources. This lengthy process also occurs, in practice, in conversation with others. We explain to grant funders, governments, and our employers why we must travel to the sources (or order reproductions of them). We engage the catalogs and collection guides preserved by families, maintained in archives, and indexed by librarians. We read, discuss, challenge, and absorb the interpretations (or dismissals) of our fellow historians, both past and contemporary. We receive feedback on our work from students, conference attendees, peer reviewers, editors, publishers, interviewers, and members of the general public who attend book talks and post comments on Amazon.com. True, we are hired individually and receive tenure and awards for individual contributions—but even hiring and tenure decisions rest heavily on the responses that our work has received in public. Readers, grant funders, and tenure and promotion committees all look for another narrative about our work—why we went to the archive, what we thought we might find, how what we actually found advanced


previous knowledge. The stories we tell others about the archive are just as important—possibly more so—than the stories we tell them from the archives.

As we expand the view to see ourselves outside of the archive and engaged in a host of public conversations, we must next ask which of all the interactions will be most helpful in putting history teaching back in its place. If doctors meet patients in hospitals and lawyers join clients in the courtroom, where do we encounter our publics? On some occasions we meet the public as the informed provider of knowledge—we give lectures in classrooms, present papers at conferences, talk about our books in public or televised lectures, and make depositions to governmental hearings. In these settings, we draw on the knowledge gained in our research, determine what is important or relevant, and structure our presentation for the audience. On other occasions, we meet the public in a setting where they determine what is significant and pose the question to us. We work as park rangers at historical sites or docents in museums, we respond to journalists or documentary filmmakers as talking heads, we serve as expert witnesses in the courtroom, we are hired as consultants, or we assess the value of an heirloom on Antiques Roadshow.

In this expanded view of historical practice we see historians doing history in the archive and at the presenter's podium. The crucial moment arrives when historians look up from their manuscripts, remove their white archival gloves, and—whether structuring presentations or responding to a prompt—decide which of all the sources examined and books read are most relevant to the situation and significant to the audience. Thus the debate about the signature pedagogy of history must consider both how historians find information, meaning, and evidence in the archive and how we evaluate, select, and organize our findings to address our publics and respond to their questions. The most critical act in the entire process is that of selecting what is most significant and relevant from a mass of information. Good history teaching, therefore, should place students in a position where they turn from their research to either make a presentation or respond to an audience's questions, or both. In a world in which it has been estimated that the total volume of electronic knowledge doubles every eighteen to twenty-four months, no other skill is more vital for humans to master.8

Can Students Really “Do History” in the Archive and at the Podium?

Having located professional historical practice in the archive and at the podium, the question immediately arises: Can students really practice history the same way that trained historians do? To answer this question, I will look up from my own archival research and briefly relate one story of students learning history in the archive and at the podium. The Southwestern Indiana Historical Society was organized in 1920 by the lawyer John E. Iglehart in Evansville, Indiana, and eventually drew over five hundred members from all walks of life and from across the nation. Three times a year for nearly two decades they

came from Maine, California, and Texas to southern Indiana to hear historical papers read by one another—lawyers and politicians, university-trained historians and collectors, genealogists and high school drama teachers, college presidents and newspaper editors. Society members reacted to Abraham Lincoln's biographers who had emphasized his presidential greatness by contrasting it with the “stagnant, putrid pool” of the Indiana frontier.9 Out of both familial pride and historical justice, the society worked to put Lincoln into proper historical context by conducting archival research, interviewing elderly residents, indexing old newspapers, erecting monuments, and writing and publishing about their findings.

In so doing, members of this society believed it was critically important to help young people. One speaker noted that “if you can get a boy interested in any subject matter at this age he will probably retain his interest for a life time.” Society members believed that students could become interested in history, and they also thought that early twentieth-century American school methods generally erased that interest. Catechized questions bore “no human interest and quite often hardly any connection between a question and the one before or after it.” School materials were “usually compiled in such a way as to be of little or no interest to a child.” One member observed humorously: “When the writer was a boy at school history was the driest subject on the program. . . . The class, as a unit, was sure that the island Noah’s dove found should be called History, because it was the only dry spot during the flood. Nothing could have been drier. All regretted that the flood did not cover it.” Beyond personal experience, society members also constructed their rationale based on the subject of their own historical interest—Lincoln became the greatest American with less than two years of formal education. Had they lived half a century later, these society members could have been advocates for critical thinking—they complained that students were taught to repeat answers “but not to think or initiate,” the “jar of memory was crowded but his ‘thinkbox’ was empty.” Had he lived then, Lendol Calder would have appreciated their critique of coverage: “The trouble with History is that too much is taught and not enough learned. The child is stuffed with data and not fed.”10

As the influence of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society grew, it was approached by school districts to provide training for teachers and to produce ready-made lesson outlines for class use. While the society’s executive committee entertained such requests, the discussion never turned into action. What emerged instead was a program of engaging students in the very activities of the society members—conducting archival research and presenting findings at society meetings. The Indianapolis insurance agent George Wilson advocated taking history “straight at the . . . boys and girls.” The society bypassed the classroom and the curriculum and pushed “school teachers to send their classes out to do some real first-hand research work.” They also experienced artifacts and places. A high

school drama teacher argued: “It is so much easier to get our children interested in the study of county history if they can really see and examine these things [and] they will be more permanently retained in the mind if they can see them.” A biologist with a self-identified “sideline” in history explained that “if you want to stir up the interest of our college students, all you have to do is to propose a journey to one of these historic spots, and their interest is easily aroused.”

Encountering the traces of the past in archives, museums, and sites was only the first step, however. The society’s founder “wished to have the schools interested so that students of history might later be able to do something along the line of historical papers.” A local college president offered the college newspaper as an outlet for publication and a reporter for a local newspaper happily noted that school kids “have gone to the court house and to other sources of information and . . . have taken this material to the papers and the papers have given it space.” At one school, the history teacher organized a club in which students wrote a constitution, elected officers, invited historians to speak to them, conducted research, and published their own newspaper. Club members worked collectively on a history of their community and the paper was read at the full meeting of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society. Ten years later the society’s president reported that the program helped students take an interest “forty years sooner than they would otherwise.”

Thus, my research in the archive helps me reconstruct a story of students thinking and acting like historians—both in the archives and in public. Not only does the evidence indicate that the students liked what they did, it also appears that they were successful in their work.

The case of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society during the 1920s and 1930s is not unique. When a similar program was adopted in a neighboring midwestern county, parents wrote letters to the school superintendent: “My boy was never interested in any kind of history until he took up your outline. Now it is his favorite study.” Another reads: “My daughter will hardly go to bed of nights since she has begun her local history work. She wants to be interviewing some one about something all of the time.” A third: “The boys of our town are delighted. You have shown them that they can be both makers and writers of history.” In many ways, this approach is not dissimilar from the National History Day initiative that helps students study history and present their findings in regional, state, and national fairs. As early as 1910, the editor of Indiana’s state history magazine—a historian trained at Yale University and Columbia University—editorialized: “We too often take our students to the granaries into which long-known historical facts have been


garnered by other writers and ask them to shovel piles of grain around from one place to another. We too seldom ask them to do the more vital and productive work of threshing out the wheat from the straw and the chaff, and themselves putting more grain into the granary.”

A host of recent research confirms that students—as young as elementary school aged—can think and act like historians. Americans preserve diaries and photographs, evaluate the trustworthiness of sources, and bring their own organizing narratives and theories of change to bear on the assessment of new information. Students bring a lifetime of experience and knowledge to our classrooms and actively employ it to filter our pronouncements, make sense of the world, create their own “private cognitive structures,” and learn to “know” what we teach by repeating our words while simultaneously not “believing” what we are saying. Our students are not simply “everymen” who may one day perform the quasi-historical action of balancing a checkbook. They are historical beings who live and make meaning within temporality as they review old pictures, preserve the ashes of deceased loved ones, and reconnect with past friends via social media. Like historians, they are called on to place genealogical information about an ancestor into historical context, decide whether a present war bears any resemblance to past wars, or evaluate Barack Obama’s history of racism, Mitt Romney’s history of religion, or Dick Cheney’s history of terrorism and national security. Ordinary people do history every day—not in the same contexts, or with the same jargon, or by the systematic sophistication of academic historians—but they do it nonetheless. We must put history teaching into its place in classrooms on the new assumption that students are temporal beings and on the new expectation that they can refine and systematize the historical thought and actions that are already a part of their everyday lives.

How Can Teachers Use the Archive and the Podium in the Classroom?

With a new set of assumptions about and expectations for our students, we are ready to put them to work in the archive and at the speaker’s podium. Perhaps the easiest way to place students in public is to write the public into the assignment. Lendol Calder asked his students to write a memo to a U.S. senator recommending one of the course’s books


for adoption in the national history month reading list, Sam Wineburg assigned students to write to a textbook publisher to correct an error, and I have asked students to prepare a report for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Students can write memos that recommend a book for purchase by the school library or evaluate a piece of writing for publication. Students can be introduced to case studies in which different audiences have responded differently to museum exhibits about slavery or the Enola Gay exhibit, proposed state or national history standards, or a controversial monument or event in the local community. Then, the same writing assignment may be repeated for different audiences. In each case the audience exists only rhetorically, but its presence nevertheless influences student performance.

The students in the classroom can act as a public audience, though it is sometimes difficult to suspend the reality of their being peers. Students at the same school but not in the same class provide a more realistic experience. Students may assume the role of a public audience in debates, press conferences, or testimony before a government or community committee. When classes meet at the same time the audience may witness the presentation live; when they meet at different times the performance may be recorded. In another variation, student work could be posted on the wall during one time period and formally (peer) reviewed during another.

Of course, the community provides ample opportunity for public presentation. Parents and interested citizens can be invited to attend presentations or see student exhibits mounted as a one-time fair or “museum for a day.” Student work may be displayed at local libraries, museums, and community institutions. Students may also publish their work in print or online for members of the community. Oral history projects have proven to be of great interest to communities when students publish their findings in a student-run newspaper, a book, or as the audio for a community tour. One very innovative model combined students in fifth grade through eighth grade into an after-school program in which younger students conducted interviews under the advice and supervision of older students who had done the same work previously. The Internet allows for the public presentation of artifacts as well as text.

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With a public waiting, our students can enter the archive with a greater sense of purpose. History teachers typically agree, in principle, that students should read primary sources, but in practice challenges arise: most communities do not house the National Archives or the Huntington Library and teachers have almost no means of funding travel for student research. Photocopies of sources, collections of sources in readers, and, more recently, the Internet have provided a substitute, but they reduce the archival experience to the senses of sight (and sometimes sound). The full archival experience cannot be achieved until our students have dust-blackened fingers and recognize the smell and feel of old paper. Putting history teaching back into its place in the archive means paying attention to senses as well as sources, to experience as well as e-holdings.

Each day, students leave our classrooms and return to an archive they usually call home. When viewed as an archive, the home provides ready access to aging witnesses, historic photographs, unique documents, and valuable samples of material culture. Students can interview old people (anyone over the age of 30?) as the starting point for assignments that document and compare family experience to national narratives, newspaper accounts, or textbook treatments. Students who trace their family genealogy on a pedigree chart can make comparisons to the publicly available pedigrees of famous people—Albert Einstein, the pope, J. K. Rowling, or Barack and Michelle Obama—as well as to fictional/fictionalized characters such as Laura Ingalls Wilder or King Arthur. Students may chart the locations of ancestral residences on a map and compare the routes taken by their families to the east-to-west narrative of American history commonly presented in textbooks. Students may also track demographic and cultural features over time, such as height, health, occupations, cars, naming practices, child rearing, holidays, or favorite foods and pastimes. Writing assignments can summarize family values, explore the impact of experience on achievement, compare experience across generations, and contrast with the experience of families in other times and places. A recent survey found that 92 percent of history teachers use film in the classroom at least once per week, and a study in the United Kingdom found that students side with movies when the

24 For examples of genealogical charting exercises, see, for example, Family History in the Classroom, http://genealogy.about.com/od/lesson_plans/a/family_tree_projects_2.htm.
25 Ibid.
information contradicts what is found in textbooks. How many teachers assign students to watch movies with their families? Sam Wineburg found that parents who lived through particular events depicted in the film *Forrest Gump* were not content just to watch with their kids but instead discussed representation and interpretation in the film. Older adults can help students compare books and films such as *Gone with the Wind*, *Roots*, or *Gandhi*. And, of course, the witnesses can be invited to speak to the class.

The home archive also houses photographs and documents. One student in Texas found a box of photographs documenting her grandparents’ activities, clothing, and landscape. Photographs open up questions and pique student interest when explored as texts, as documents, and as a history of family life. Students who examine their own birth certificates may also find information about their parents’ occupations and residences as well as the doctor and hospital (and the research can be put in the engaging context of debates over the birthplaces of Barack Obama, James Garfield, and Michael Bloomberg). Research in the home archive has uncovered journals of grandparents fleeing the Mexican Revolution and love letters written during the Great Depression and World War II. The cognitive and empathetic value of such an exercise was described by Booth Tarkington in the novel *Alice Adams* (1921) in which the title character, a teenage girl, stumbles on the love letters written by her parents. “For the first time she was vaguely perceiving that life is everlasting movement. . . . Until this moment, Alice had no conviction that there was a universe before she came into it. She had always thought of it as the background of herself: the moon was something to make her prettier on a summer night.” Moreover, if her parents, once young and in love, had now grown old and uninteresting, “so she, herself, must pass to such changes, too.” Every classroom will benefit from heightened student awareness of time and perspective.

Finally, homes contain stuff—heirlooms, toys, newspapers, advertisements, and hobby supplies. Students can identify and write about family heirlooms then come together to discuss why some things are valued over others. For example, hundreds of Civil War officers’ uniforms have been saved by families whereas private uniforms have largely vanished. Toys document the history of consumerism and illustrate patterns of recurring fashion—as at present when toys from the 1980s are being made into feature films and resold to a new generation. Stuffed animals connect with a longer history of teddy bears that is documented in online museums and historical scholarship. The advertisements


32 Hunter and Hunter, “La Castaña Project.”

that arrive in the morning newspaper can be compared to copies of the Sears and Roebuck catalogs now preserved online. Students who profess no interest in history will be surprised to learn that the things that do interest them—music, teenage resistance to parental control, baseball card collections, sports statistics, and pets—have histories documented within the walls of their homes. Even the home itself can be placed within history—with its efficient and lightweight modern appliances, kitchens and bathrooms incorporated into the footprint of the house instead of in separate buildings, the lack of a parlor, and individual place settings around the dinner table.\textsuperscript{34}

Homes form only part of the wider neighborhood archive. Building styles and materials document change over time in the community. James Percoco took his students to monuments of Abraham Lincoln, and James Loewen suggests that controversial monuments can be found in every community. Students can analyze a single building or monument or they could survey collections of structures.\textsuperscript{35} Cemeteries provide opportunities to read and touch tombstones, interpret symbols, and write about death in general or one’s own epitaph in particular.\textsuperscript{36} Material culture can be engaged by attending local reenactments, searching for artifacts at a flea market, or recording and analyzing local legends about town politics, famous local figures, or haunted buildings.\textsuperscript{37} If, in the past, librarians and archivists bristled at the arrival of the uninformed public, today their professional associations are calling for a “teaching revolution” to bring patrons (and funding) in troubled times.\textsuperscript{38} There are many models of successful long-term partnerships between classes and institutions.\textsuperscript{39} Make sure to provide opportunities for students simply

\textsuperscript{34} Mary Johnson outlines several benefits of using material culture. See Johnson, “What’s in a Butterchurn or a Sadiron?”; Miriam Forman-Brunell, “Teaching American History with Teddy’s Bear,” \textit{OAH Magazine of History}, 15 (Summer 2001), 46–47. See also online museums of toys and bears at \


to browse and touch and smell as well as to learn how professionals preserve, organize, and archive materials from the past.\footnote{Vanderstel, ‘‘And I Thought Historians Only Taught,’’; Beth M. Boland, ‘‘Historic Places: Common Ground for Teachers and Historians,’’ \textit{OAH Magazine of History}, 16 (Winter 2002), 19–21.}

Though any of the preceding activities may be undertaken at any relevant time in a course, entire courses may effectively be built around student work in the archive and at the public podium.\footnote{Percoco, \textit{Passion for the Past}, 97–109.} I have taught such a course for college undergraduates in both Indiana and Texas. In Indiana, my students conducted research about deceased town residents that was used by the local historical society to create the script for a successful cemetery walk fundraiser in which volunteer actors portrayed the people studied by the students. In Texas, my students donated their findings to the local history museum where their work was used to create three new exhibits. In both cases, the students hosted a formal ceremony in which they exhibited their work to the public, won prizes donated by local businesses, and deeded their work to the partner institution.

Both of those courses had a different “feel.” Students displayed a more intense earnestness to do good work, but the anxiety was constructive as it led to deep conversations about history and method and to scrupulous revising and editing—in one instance a student slipped me a new copy of her paper moments before donating it to the museum because she had “found three typos in the other one.” Where in the past students had questioned the need for proper source citation, now it was obvious who would read their papers and what that audience would need. Overshadowing the nerves, however, was a profound sense of excitement—the quiet joy of finding a fat archival folder, the exultation of discovering a treasure trove of photographs after searching in the library for six hours (no small feat for a “digital” native accustomed to instant online searches), the fun of growing nineteenth-century style facial hair to match that of a student’s subject. “I had never really understood how history worked,” one student reported, but “by going out and actually doing the research I enjoyed it.” Said another: “Thank you for equipping us with the tools to do some real research. I learned a great deal, and I hope in the future I can sharpen these skills.”

We can and must put history teaching back in its place by teaching our students how to work in the archive and present to the public. We cannot settle for photocopies of primary sources when archival sources are so close that our students can touch the past and smell the dust from its pages. Students who present their archival findings to the public will learn to explain not only what they found but also why history matters. By viewing every home as an archive, every student as a temporal being, and every teacher as a link to the archive and the public, we will put history teaching back in its place in classrooms, in curricula, and in American public life.