What Does It Mean to Think Historically?

Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, January 2007

Introduction

When we started working on Teachers for a New Era, a Carnegie-sponsored initiative designed to strengthen teacher training, we thought we knew a thing or two about our discipline. As we began reading such works as Sam Wineburg’s Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts, however, we encountered an unexpected challenge. If our understandings of the past constituted a sort of craft knowledge, how could we distill and communicate habits of mind we and our colleagues had developed through years of apprenticeship, guild membership, and daily practice to university students so that they, in turn, could impart these habits in K-12 classrooms?

In response, we developed an approach we call the “five C’s of historical thinking.” The concepts of change over time, causality, context, complexity, and contingency, we believe, together describe the shared foundations of our discipline. They stand at the heart of the questions historians seek to answer, the arguments we make, and the debates in which we engage. These ideas are hardly new to professional historians. But that is precisely their value: They make our implicit ways of thought explicit to the students and teachers whom we train. The five C’s do not encompass the universe of historical thinking, yet they do provide a remarkably useful tool for helping students at practically any level learn how to formulate and support arguments based on primary sources, as well as to understand and challenge historical interpretations related in secondary sources. In this article, we define the five C’s, explain how each concept helps us to understand the past, and provide some brief examples of how we have employed the five C’s when teaching teachers. Our approach is necessarily broad and basic, characteristics well suited for a foundation upon which we invite our colleagues from kindergartens to research universities to build.

Change over Time

The idea of change over time is perhaps the easiest of the C’s to grasp. Students readily acknowledge that we employ and struggle with technologies unavailable to our forebears, that we live by different laws, and that we enjoy different cultural pursuits. Moreover, students also note that some aspects of life remain the same across time. Many Europeans celebrate many of the same holidays that they did three or four hundred years ago, for instance, often using the same rituals and words to mark a day’s significance. Continuity thus comprises an integral part of the idea of change over time.

Students often find the concept of change over time elementary. Even individuals who claim to despise history can remember a few dates and explain that some preceded or followed others. At any educational level, timelines
can teach change over time as well as the selective process that leads people to pay attention to some events while ignoring others. In our U.S. survey class, we often ask students to interview family and friends and write a paper explaining how their family's history has intersected with major events and trends that we are studying. By discovering their own family's past, students often see how individuals can make a difference and how personal history changes over time along with major events.

As historians of the American West and environmental historians, we often turn to maps to teach change over time. The same space represented in different ways as political power, economic structures, and cultural influences shift can often put in shocking relief the differences that time makes. The work of repeat photographers such as Mark Klett offers another compelling tool for teaching change over time. Such photographers begin with a historic landscape photograph, then take pains to re-take the shot from the same site, at the same angle, using similar equipment, and even under analogous conditions. While suburbs and industry have overrun many western locales, students are often surprised to see that some places have become more desolate and others have hardly changed at all. The exercise engages students with a non-written primary source, photographs, and demands that they reassess their expectations regarding how time changes.

**Context**

Some things change, others stay the same—not a very interesting story but reason for concern since history, as the best teachers will tell you, is about telling stories. Good story telling, we contend, builds upon an understanding of context. Given young people's fascination with narratives and their enthusiasm for imaginative play, pupils (particularly elementary school students) often find context the most engaging element of historical thinking. As students mature, of course, they recognize that the past is not just a playful alternate universe. Working with primary sources, they discover that the past makes more sense when they set it within two frameworks. In our teaching, we liken the first to the floating words that roll across the screen at the beginning of every *Star Wars* film. This kind of context sets the stage; the second helps us to interpret evidence concerning the action that ensues. Texts, events, individual lives, collective struggles—all develop within a tightly interwoven world.

Historians who excel at the art of storytelling often rely heavily upon context. Jonathan Spence's *Death of Woman Wang*, for example, skillfully recreates 17th-century China by following the trail of a sparsely documented murder. To solve the mystery, students must understand the time and place in which it occurred. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich brings colonial New England to life by concentrating on the details of textile production and basket making in *Age of Homespun*. College courses regularly use the work of both authors because they not only spark student interest, but also hone students' ability to describe the past and identify distinctive elements of different eras.

Imaginative play is what makes context, arguably the easiest, yet also, paradoxically, the most difficult of the five C's to teach. Elementary school assignments that require students to research and wear medieval European clothes or build a California mission from sugar cubes both strive to teach context. The problem with such assignments is that they often blur the lines between reality and make-believe. The picturesque often trumps more banal or more disturbing truths. Young children may never be able to get all the facts straight. As one elementary school teacher once reminded us, "We teach kids who still believe in Santa Claus." Nonetheless, elementary school *teachers* can be cautious in their re-creations, and, most of all, they can be comfortable telling students when they don't know a given fact or when more research is necessary. That an idea might require more thought or more research is a valuable lesson at any age. The desire to recreate a world sometimes drives
students to dig more deeply into their books, a reaction few teachers lament.

In our own classes, we have taught context using an assignment that we call "Fact, Fiction, or Creative Memory." In this exercise, students wrestle with a given source and determine whether it is primarily a work of history, fiction, or memory. We have asked students to bring in a present-day representation of 1950s life and explain what it teaches people today about life in 1950s America. Then, we have asked the class to discuss if the representation is a historically fair depiction of the era. We have also assigned textbook passages and Don DeLillo’s *Pafko at the Wall*, then asked students to compare them to decide which offers stronger insights into the character of Cold War America. Each of these assignments addresses context, because each asks students to think about the distinctions between representations of the past and the critical thinking about the past that is history. Moreover, each asks students to weave together a variety of sources and assess the reliability of each before incorporating them into a whole.

**Causality**

Historians use context, change over time, and causality to form arguments explaining past change. While scientists can devise experiments to test theories and yield data, historians cannot alter past conditions to produce new information. Rather, they must base their arguments upon the interpretation of partial primary sources that frequently offer multiple explanations for a single event. Historians have long argued over the causes of the Protestant Reformation or World War I, for example, without achieving consensus. Such uncertainty troubles some students, but history classrooms are at their most dynamic when teachers encourage pupils to evaluate the contributions of multiple factors in shaping past events, as well as to formulate arguments asserting the primacy of some causes over others.

To teach causality, we have turned to the stand-by activities of the history classroom: debates and role-playing. After arming students with primary sources, we ask them to argue whether monetary or fiscal policy played a greater role in causing the Great Depression. After giving students descriptions drawn from primary sources of immigrant families in Los Angeles, we have asked students to take on the role of various family members and explain their reasons for immigrating and their reasons for settling in particular neighborhoods. Neither exercise is especially novel, but both fulfill a central goal of studying history: to develop persuasive explanations of historical events and processes based on logical interpretations of evidence.

**Contingency**

Contingency may, in fact, be the most difficult of the C’s. To argue that history is contingent is to claim that every historical outcome depends upon a number of prior conditions; that each of these prior conditions depends, in turn, upon still other conditions; and so on. The core insight of contingency is that the world is a magnificently interconnected place. Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have turned out differently. Lee could have won at Gettysburg, Gore might have won in Florida, China might have inaugurated the world’s first industrial revolution.

Contingency can be an unsettling idea—so much so that people in the past have often tried to mask it with myths of national and racial destiny. The Pilgrim William Bradford, for instance, interpreted the decimation of New England’s native peoples not as a consequence of smallpox, but as a literal godsend. Two centuries later, American ideologues chose to rationalize their unlikely fortunes—from the purchase of Louisiana to the discovery of gold in California—as their nation’s “Manifest Destiny.” Historians, unlike Bradford and the apologists of