

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. ¹ 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.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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

westward expansion, look at the same outcomes differently. They see not divine fate, but a series of contingent results possessing other possibilities.

Contingency demands that students think deeply about past, present, and future. It offers a powerful corrective to teleology, the fallacy that events pursue a straight-arrow course to a pre-determined outcome, since people in the past had no way of anticipating our present world. Contingency also reminds us that individuals shape the course of human events. What if Karl Marx had decided to elude Prussian censors by emigrating to the United States instead of France, where he met Frederick Engels? To assert that the past is contingent is to impress upon students the notion that the future is up for grabs, and that they bear some responsibility for shaping the course of future history.

Contingency can be a difficult concept to present abstractly, but it suffuses the stories historians tend to tell about individual lives. Futurology, however, might offer an even stronger tool for imparting contingency than biography. Mechanistic views of history as the inevitable march toward the present tend to collapse once students see how different their world is from any predicted in the past.

Complexity

Moral, epistemological, and causal complexity distinguish historical thinking from the conception of "history" held by many non-historians.⁶ Re-enacting battles and remembering names and dates require effort but not necessarily analytical rigor. Making sense of a messy world that we cannot know directly, in contrast, is more confounding but also more rewarding.

Chronicles distill intricate historical processes into a mere catalogue, while nostalgia conjures an uncomplicated golden age that saves us the trouble of having to think about the past. Our own need for order can obscure our understanding of how past worlds functioned and blind us to the ways in which myths of rosy pasts do political and cultural work in the present. Reveling in complexity rather than shying away from it, historians seek to dispel the power of chronicle, nostalgia, and other traps that obscure our ability to understand the past on its own terms.

One of the most successful exercises we have developed for conveying complexity in all of these dimensions is a mock debate on Cherokee Removal. Two features of the exercise account for the richness and depth of understanding that it imparts on students. First, the debate involves multiple parties; the Treaty and Anti-Treaty Parties, Cherokee women, John Marshall, Andrew Jackson, northern missionaries, the State of Georgia, and white settlers each offer a different perspective on the issue. Second, students develop their understanding of their respective positions using the primary sources collected in *Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents* by Theda Perdue and Michael Green.⁷ While it can be difficult to assess what students learn from such exercises, we have noted anecdotally that, following the exercise, students seem much less comfortable referring to "American" or "Indian" positions as monolithic identities.

Conclusion

Our experiments with the five C's have confronted us with several challenges. These concepts offer a fluid tool for engaging historical thought at multiple levels, but they can easily degenerate into a checklist. Students who favor memorization over analysis seem inclined to recite the C's without necessarily understanding them.

Moreover, as habits of mind, the five C's develop only with practice. Though primary and secondary schools increasingly emphasize some aspects of these themes, particularly the use of primary sources as evidence, more attention to the five C's with appropriate variations over the course of K-12 education would help future citizens not only to *care* about history, but also to *contemplate* it. It is our hope that this might help students to see the past not simply as prelude to our present, nor a list of facts to memorize, a cast of heroes and villains to cheer and boo, nor as an itinerary of places to tour, but rather as an ideal field for thinking long and hard about important questions.

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Notes

1. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
2. Mark Klett, Kyle Bajakian, William L. Fox, Michael Marshall, Toshi Ueshina, and Byron G. Wolfe, *Third Views, Second Sights: A Rephotographic Survey of the American West* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2004).
3. Jonathan D. Spence, *Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Viking, 1978); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf, 2001).
4. Don DeLillo, *Pafko at the Wall: A Novella* (New York: Scribner's, 2001).
5. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Random House, 1952).
6. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
7. Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents* 2nd ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005).

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Sam Diener • 3 months ago

No comments yet? This deserves some.

It's a realistic and practical approach to helping teachers at many levels promote historical thinking with students. I'll share it with teachers with whom I work.

One piece I see missing would be "empathy," but if we want to keep the "c" theme I'd call it compassion. The authors hint at this when mentioning that we want to move beyond the heroes and villains model. Teaching students to empathize with (have compassion for) the complexity of emotions all the various actors in unfolding historical dramas (and some of the exercises described above, in particular the role plays, do exactly this) helps students understand people's historic choices (and thus enhances an understanding of contingency), vivifies histories that too many students consider boring, and enhances students' emotional intelligence and capacity for creative conflict resolution (which is at the center of my work as a peace activist and peace studies practitioner).

I use a tool, which I modified from one developed by Educators for Social Responsibility (where I used to work), called Find the Feelings (link at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ilcv...>, which guides students through empathizing with different characters as they read or listen to historical or fictional works.

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