

# DEVELOPING HISTORICAL IMAGINATION IN STUDENTS

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## **Abstract**

Based on collaborative work between teachers and researchers, we address the problem of how to teach history for understanding. This paper discusses a framework for teaching for understanding, how historians deal with such problems, an example of how to use the previous ideas in designing a unit, and finally practical suggestions which emerge from this work.

The framework for teaching for understanding assumes that understanding something entails having a repertoire of performances associated with that something. An effort to teach for understanding needs to incorporate four essential features: build on a generative topic, establish understanding goals, design understanding performances which embody the goals, and build in assessment which is transparently related to those understanding goals and hence reflect the nature of the task.

Regarding the teaching of history we are struck by the gulf between what educators see as the general goals for teaching history in highschool and the experience of learning history for the students. In particular, educators argue that in a pluralistic society, there is a need to develop knowledge and attitudes which allow people to understand and tolerate alternative views of reality and in doing so, an expanded view of their own historical identity. Such reflection leads to the question: what are the 'habits of mind' which would enable students to grasp and interpret alternative views of reality including their own subjectivity? We isolate three challenges which anyone trying to understand the past must face, including historians: they are, 'presentism,' 'localism' and 'univocality.'

We focus on seven strategies deployed by historians to counteract the challenges: apply sourcing heuristics to contextualize and test the credibility of sources, find anomalies to make theories overt and disconfirmables, seek out alternative versions and a variety of sources to extend multiple points of view, establish a chronological order to provide sequence and lay out possible causes and patterns, engage conflicting bodies of evidence, articulate social science and other concepts to theorize complex explanations, and write a historical account to communicate findings.

The presentation becomes more concrete as we explain how in planning a teaching for understanding unit on Vietnam, we followed the general guidelines of a pedagogy of understanding — i.e., mapped the generative topics, set understanding goals, constructed understanding performances, and identified opportunities for authentic assessment, while at the same time considered the challenges and strategies to think historically. To conclude, we summarize some of the general pedagogical tactics which promise to be useful in teaching history for understanding.

## **Introduction: The challenges of teaching history for understanding.**

Why teach history in high school? The most common answers are: to make students aware of their own heritage, to develop an awareness of the past and see how it influences the present, to develop citizenship and the ability to make choices in society and to develop more tolerant and flexible attitudes towards others. <sup>1</sup>However, the experience of learning history in schools is associated with 'cramming' names of presidents, battles and dates. As the experience of learning history becomes further and further removed in time, vague memories of dates and names are jumbled with notions of heroes and villains. Students tend to believe that the history is 'looked up in books,' or is 'someone else's facts.'<sup>2</sup> They do not seem to develop the critical thinking skills germane to the field of history.

And yet, in their own personal histories and in those of their family and community, students display expertise in remembering and using the past to make sense of the present and are aware of the complexities and ambiguities of doing so. Furthermore, they not only have pertinent knowledge but they can use that knowledge to argue a certain point of view, explain why something happened, and so forth. That students have such proto-historical abilities has long been suggested by historians and by educators. In his 1935 essay "Everyman his Own Historian" Becker<sup>3</sup> argues that in dealing with the affairs of his own personal life, a certain 'Mr Everyman' has to think like a historian. To be able to function in his everyday life, Mr. Everyman needs to remember what was said and done. When in doubt, he searches for evidence. In fact Mr. Everyman actively keeps and uses records of business transactions so that he can use such evidence to settle disputes. Becker's argument is that every person knows some history, in fact that everybody must do so, every waking moment, if one is to be able to cope with the often contested flux of everyday events. Without memory of what was said and done we could not function in society. Every morning, Mr. Everyman "reaches out in the country of the past and of distant places and instantaneously recreates his little world of endeavor, pulls together as it were things said and done in his yesterdays, and coordinates them with his present perceptions and with things to be said and done in the future." For instance, he

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<sup>1</sup>Carretero y Pozo, 1989

<sup>2</sup>Holt T. 1990

<sup>3</sup>Becker,C.1935

may remember something vaguely- a bill to be paid- which seems important but he cannot bring it alive in his consciousness. He tries to recall the sequence of events but fails. So he digs into his “private record file” to find concrete evidence of what happened: an order form dated and signed. Becker’s argument is that if Mr. Everyman looked at the records to write a history on accounting book instead of paying a bill, one would be more willing to view him as a historian. Becker emphasizes that Mr. Everyman’s exploration of the past is directed by a purpose just as a historian’s research is guided by a particular agenda.

Another similarity between the average person and the historian’s craft, has recently been emphasized by historian Thomas Holt,<sup>4</sup> whose research shows that if students are asked to write about an event of particular significance to them, they will do so in ways akin to those of a historian. For example, one of Holt’s students- Debbie- chose to write about the death of a friend. She was fully aware that to communicate to the reader the significance of that event to her, she needed to give an account of her previous relationship to that friend. Like a historian, Debbie intuits that the end of the story justifies all that precedes it; Like a historian she also has a sense of narrative: a beginning and a development which is structured by a set of goals which shape the end. She also seeks to accomplish something in telling the story.

Unfortunately, much of history in school is taught in a rather abstract way which does not lend itself to having students draw on their narrative abilities and engaging students into more generative discussions about the past and by implication the present. Closing the gap between what the teaching of history ought to be and what the students experience in the classroom and use in their future lives by drawing on student’s background knowledge and expertise provides the central motivation for the work reported in this paper.

Starting in 1991, a group of history teachers and university based researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, met for two hours a week to work on ways to ‘teach history for understanding.’ Our methodology included discussions, watching and discussing videos of teachers’ practice, writing and discussing memos and reviewing the literature. In the fall of 1991 we produced, observed and analyzed teaching cases which in different ways incorporated the framework for ‘teaching for understanding.’ Work on these cases made us aware both the usefulness of the general approach and the need to take a more systematic look at the particularities of understanding in history.

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<sup>4</sup>Holt,T1990

The general teaching for understanding framework is based on the central idea that understanding something entails the ability to do or perform in a way which goes beyond one's routine knowledge. Understanding is both acquired and demonstrated in practice; in other words, it is the ensemble of activities associated with writing a paper, or preparing and participating in a debate that a person builds, deepens and demonstrates his or her understanding. These so-called *understanding performances* are activities through which understanding is both gained and demonstrated.<sup>5</sup> At the core of learning for understanding are episodes of reflective engagement in understanding performances, as opposed to episodes of information presentation/assimilation.

In this paper I start by approaching the problem of understanding in history in its most general form by asking; what are the fundamental problems which anyone trying to understand the past needs to face? I isolate three challenges: imposing the point of view of the present to interpret the past, i.e., *presentism*; imposing the point of view of a certain group of people, i.e., *localism*, and taking only a single point of perspective on an issue or event, i.e., *single perspective*. The community of professional historians have developed a variety of strategies or 'habits of mind' to counteract these general problems. After pinpointing some of the strategies used by historians, I explore in the example of a unit on Vietnam, how in planning a specific unit one can combine the overall teaching for understanding framework with the challenges and habits of mind of historians. After presenting this example, I generalize some general pedagogical tactics which speak to particular constraints of understanding history and which in themselves constitute understanding performances.

In general pedagogical terms, reflective engagement forces the learner to monitor his own understanding. A key argument advanced in this paper is that in the case of history, reflective engagement takes on a particular meaning: throughout the inquiry the learner, whether a historian or a high school student, needs first to make a conscious effort to be aware of his own biases, misconceptions and philosophical assumptions about events, cultures and time periods that he is called upon to recreate, so that these may be suspended and the past understood on its own terms. Over time, as the disciplined historical imagination matures and is combined with the accumulation of factual knowledge about other places and people, the learner learns to appreciate ambiguity and emerges with a more critical perspective of his own historical identity and more importantly with a more tolerant attitude towards others.

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<sup>5</sup>Gardner1991, Perkins 1992

## A framework for Teaching for Understanding

“Did you understand?” / “Yes teacher”

“Are there any questions?” / “No.”

How often does one hear this in a classroom! Often such interactions mark the conclusion of an episode of information presentation on the part of the teacher and of assimilation on the part of the students. As an observer, one wonders: did they understand? Are they learning for understanding? How would we know?

Understanding entails more than knowing the facts. We define understanding as being able to do something new with knowledge, something which, to borrow Bruner’s famous phrase, ‘goes beyond the information given.’ To illustrate this definition of understanding, let us imagine that a teacher just went through talking about the role of the railroad in American history. How can we tell whether the students understood? How can the students demonstrate that they understood? Simply repeating what the teacher has told them does not show or *demonstrate* deep understanding. Our working definition of understanding is that when people understand something well they can engage in different types of performances.

To demonstrate an understanding of the role of the railroad in American history, students should be able to use what they have learned to explain what the introduction of a railroad meant to a small town, and to explain how the introduction of the railroad created particular problems and solutions (such as time zones and the use of standard time). Students should be able to apply what they have learned about this particular case of innovation to other more general arguments which account for how economic changes bring with them changes in the social structure, the economy and the culture of a society. In the specific



case of the railroad industry they need to know that the rail road was a major industry in the 18th century and that it became the nucleus for an expanding economy. To understand this process students must in part be able to reflect on the capital intensity and the technocal capacity which made that and other industires possible. Students should be able to apply arguments to present day expansions in communication and transportation such as that automobile industry or computers. Breadth and depth of understanding would be characterized by the variety and levels of complexity of the performances.

In contrast with the passive reception of information, learning for understanding is founded on the previous knowledge and expertise. This previous knowledge may support new understanding or may stand in its way. In history, new and old understanding often relate dialectically to each other: new knowledge and interpretations 'opens up' the past for new insights. In this way, understanding is build through a series of understanding performances that increase in challenge and variety. Key in being able to learn for understanding is that the learner be alert to whether or not he/she is understanding. To get a meaningful answer to the question "Did you understand?" from a student, the learner needs to be *reflectively engaged* in an approachable but challenging understanding performance. In history this reflective engagement entails both trying to construct or imagine the past, while at the same time keeping one's imagination in check so that the past is not misunderstood in terms of our biases.

How can teaching promote learning for understanding? Teaching for understanding needs to be taken seriously with what we have said about understanding and learning for understanding. Our framework to teach for understanding involves selecting a generative topic, setting understanding goals, organizing instruction in a series of understanding performances that articulate and build towards those goals, and arranging for ongoing assessment so that learners can direct their learning efforts to reach the set goals through a progression of increasingly challenging understanding performances. Let me comment briefly on each of these elements

### 1.1. Generative topic.

Often what students learn in schools is stored as 'inert knowledge,' that is, knowledge which may be helpful in passing a test but which later on does not see

much active use. In contrast, 'generative knowledge' is knowledge that students use to think with: connecting it to other knowledge and actively using to illuminate other problems.<sup>6</sup> Much like the notion of 'generative grammar,' that once you acquire some rules you can apply them to generate a number of sentences, generative knowledge leads to multiple connections, associations and usages. Deep understanding history is generative as new data are made available and pertinent to a problem, both past and present, and as established data engender new interpretations. In this generative enterprise "the only certainty is future because the past is always changing."

In selecting topics for instruction one should choose those with greatest generative potential. A topic's generativity depends on three criteria: that it be central to the discipline, accessible to the students (i.e. connecting to their background, interests and expertise) and rich in potential connections. What is generative for a group is context dependent: it includes the interests of participants embedded in an environment of current issues and events. While a group of historians may find the social and cultural conditions and consequences of industrialization a very generative topic, a group of high school students may be more engaged by the question, "does industrialization mean progress?" A topic's generativity is related to what one already knows about the topic and feels its relevance, but knowing more about it, one is able to throw light on a series of other interconnected issues.

## 1.2 Understanding goals

In planning a course or a unit, it may be difficult to think of understanding performances right away. Hence we propose that teachers ask themselves: "What do I want my students to understand about this topic?" Once *understanding goals* have been defined, it may be easier to think of performances that operationalize those goals. The concept of goal is multi-leveled. This means that in addition to defining understanding goals at the unit level, one needs to consider the overarching goals of a whole course. In an ideal case, goals at different levels of specificity would be organized in a coherent goal structure, with unit level goals nested within overarching goals.

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<sup>6</sup>Perkins 1992, p.26

### 1.3 Understanding performances.

As mentioned earlier, a necessary and sufficient condition to claim that we understand something, is that we can demonstrate such understanding by performing beyond the information given. Such *understanding performances* are the vehicle for constructing understanding and evidence to say that understanding has been achieved<sup>7</sup>. Three essential features characterize an understanding performance: first it needs to go beyond what the learner already knows, second, it involves active connection making ;and third, it needs to build new understanding.

Obviously, understanding is not a 'once-and-for all' affair. One's understanding of Industrial Revolution is tied to a sequence of understanding performances which allows the learner to use the factual knowledge and explanatory theories around the Industrial Revolution in different contexts. There is no such thing as 'a complete history of the Industrial Revolution' with an 'end.' One simply stops doing that sort of understanding and one hopes that the student will pursue this understanding later in life.

### 1.4 □Ongoing assessment

Lastly one needs to consider the role of feedback in learning. The goal of assessment is to evaluate and support the students' understanding performances as they develop over time. In helping students focus their attention and effort, assessment should be a learning experience not just a testing experience. The most effective assessment is both ongoing and authentic. Ongoing means that it should be part of the daily routine of teaching, in the form of monitoring the quality of classroom discussions, listening to the questions students ask and how they are answered, reflecting on the connections and leaps students make, and finally encouraging students to self-assess. Making assessment authentic means that the criteria for assessment should not be extrinsic to the nature of the task but be derived from the nature of the task itself. An essay is to be judged by the attributes which make a good essay work: clarity, organization, coherence and the power to engage the reader. Students need to understand clearly how these criteria relate to the quality of their product and they need practice in self-

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<sup>7</sup>Gardner 1991, Perkins 1992

assessment. After all, if our aim is to have students carry out an activity independently, they need to internalize and apply effective assessment criteria.

While the various elements of the framework have been advocated by individual educators, the power and challenge of the framework is to have them operating in tandem.

### **Understanding in history**

The understanding goals of teaching history in a highschool are not necessarily the same as the understanding goals pursued by historians. However, in so far as both historians and students construct new knowledge and understanding via understanding performances which go 'beyond the information given,' we can think of them as being in a similar situation of trying to build an understanding of the past. Key challenges and conceptual tools used by historians in understanding the past can provide us with ideas on how to design of understanding performances for highschool. Our aim is to highlight how in making sense and overcoming the challenges, historians impose particular constraints on their understanding performances, constraints which both guide and discipline their imagination.

At its core, history has to do with the study of change over time. The overarching goal of historians is to establish what changes over time, in what ways, and for whom. Historians try to explain how between dates X and Y certain sorts of things change. What kinds of changes will be focused on and what significance is assigned to them depends on what happened and the particular intellectual orientation of the historian engaged in the work.

#### 2.2 Three challenges in understanding 'what it was like'

Historians come across a fundamental problem in interpretative sciences:

how to get at the point of view of 'the other,' in this case a person or group of people long since dead. Because any attempt to understand starts out with one's background knowledge, which is grounded in a particular time and space, historians in some ways, as anybody else, tend to impose their own previous knowledge onto the historical material, including their own biases as members of a given 'school of thought.'

In sum, anyone trying to understand the past in its uniqueness faces three major challenges around the general tendency of narrowness in perspective. First, is the problem known as *presentism*. How can one deal with imposing attributes, values and perspectives of one's own time onto events and sources from the past? And the reverse problem: how to get at the biases and values of the sources from that time? Second, the problem of *localism*. How to deal with imposing the values from one place? And the reverse problem: How to get at the values of that place at that time? Third, the problem of a *single perspective*. Even within the same place and time, people may have different accounts and interpretations of an event or sequence of events. How to decide which perspectives to include and how to articulate them? And the reverse problem, how to discover the perspective from which the data inform us about the past?

Notice that the category 'narrowness in perspective' subsumes localism, presentism and by definition single perspective: localism because one takes the point of view of a particular local or group, presentism because one takes the point of view of the present at the expense of the point of view of an other period in time; and single perspective, by definition takes into account only one voice. In the work of any historian trying to understand and the point of view of the historical source used in this inquiry. None of these challenges can be completely resolved.

Each of these dimensions has a scale and a corresponding range of values associated with it. The scale of presentism, for example, could range from viewing the past from the point of view of 'today' without awareness of change over time, to being unable to imagine beyond one's generation, one's century or one's historical period. The scale of localism could start with one's own local situation, and expand to include one's community, nation and finally civilization. The scale of single perspective ranges from being able to analyze something from a single point of view, to being able to take a range of perspectives into consideration.

How people perform according to these scales might depend on their

expertise with a particular kind of history. Within the context of constructing and using their own family history, students may score higher on awareness of the challenges than when addressing a traditional historical problem in school. For the point of view of presentism, for example, students understand that generational differences exist in what is selected as relevant.. The same is likely to be true from the point of view of localism, i.e. students are aware that people of the same generation but of different localities may have different versions of 'the same' past. Finally they are aware that different people include and by implication exclude different voices in their account. In sum, both analysts and as sources, people understand that what others and they themselves construct as 'the' family history, depends on their own values and purposes as well as that of others. (I use the verb *understand* deliberately to stress that people can use that knowledge and skills to perform in a range of everyday situations.)<sup>8</sup>

While fundamentally, all three problems and their associated scales could be reduced to 'narrowness in perspective' we feel that such characterization would be too abstract. Instead narrowness of time, locality, and the voices of different people in a society give specificity to the understanding problem.

### 2.3 Seven conceptual strategies to overcome the challenges

To meet these challenges of grasping the past in its uniqueness, we have identified seven strategies which historians commonly use:

1. Apply sourcing heuristics to contextualize sources and test their credibility.
2. Find anomalies to make theories overt and disconfirmables.
3. Seek out alternative versions and variety of sources to extend multiple points of view.
4. Connect events, establishing a chronological order to provide sequence and lay out possible causes and patterns.
5. Engage conflicting bodies of evidence.

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<sup>8</sup>In Bordieu's sense, people have a 'practical understanding of their family history'

6. Use concepts from the social sciences and other disciplines to frame questions and develop complex explanations and interpretations.
7. Write an historical account to communicate findings.

These conceptual strategies reinforce and relate to each other in dealing with the dangers of presentism, localism and single perspective. In the remainder of this section we shall expand on how each strategy works. After this rather theoretical exposition we shall illustrate, in the final section, how these conceptual strategies can contribute to the teaching of history, provide criteria for selecting material, setting understanding goals and shaping understanding performances with ongoing assessment.

[1] Apply sourcing heuristics to contextualize and test the credibility of sources.

Because historians cannot go back in time to interview people and observe how change occurred, historical inquiry is based predominantly on evidence such as written documents and other sources which reveal something about the past. As relics from the past, documents provide evidence and stimulate the historian's imagination.

The analysis and interpretation of sources is at the very root of historical inquiry. Like lawyers in court, historians deploy the following 'sourcing heuristic:' *what* the text says is inseparable from *who* says it. To contextualize the source one needs to ask: who is this person, what does he want, what is he saying? Metaphorically speaking, historians play the role of both prosecuting attorneys and defense lawyers. Like prosecuting attorneys, they do not just listen to testimony but actively draw it out by putting documents side by side, by locating discrepancies, actively questioning sources and delving into their conscious and unconscious motives.<sup>9</sup> Like defense lawyers,

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<sup>9</sup> Weinberg 1991

they seek to get a their point of view. As Wilcox wrote “the historian must not share the bias of his source, quite on the contrary. But he must understand it in order to allow for it.”<sup>10</sup>

Faced with a document, historians ask a variety of questions aimed at extracting information well beyond its strict propositional content. They explore texts as artifacts which inform us in many different ways. For example one needs to know the kind of a rhetorical artifact this is: a letter to be read privately by a spouse or a public proclamation? If it is a letter to a spouse, what does its form of address, its organization and vocabulary tell us about the kind of relationship which existed between spouses at the time, or about the world view of those people. As mediating a social relation between spouses, the letter needs to be understood as part of a speech act, i.e. intended to do something: make a promise, provide and excuse, incite action, break up a relationship. In addition one needs to know something about the author to be able to ascertain his or her credibility regarding that issue. In sum, the literal text constitutes but the surface of what a historian seeks to understand.

Becker’s argument, alluded to in the introduction, is that in so far as we are all capable of dealing with speech acts we are all historians who, in the context of everyday life, distinguish certainty from probability, read between the lines of what people say (and write). We understand our own history precisely because we have learned the facts and the methods for interpreting those facts at the same time. In our everyday life, our historical imagination is kept in check by the competing interpretations of the people around us, who will call us to ‘establish the facts’ when necessary. The challenge is how to do something analogous in the teaching of history.

In sum, to understand a document entails going beyond the literal meaning of the text to construct a contextual meaning which takes into account the author and the social and cultural context within which the document is embedded. Each source leads to other sources, with each new piece of data contributing to a better understanding of the previous documents as it is *in using* and *connecting* these fragments that an understanding of different times and places emerges.

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<sup>10</sup>William Wilcox



[2] Finding anomalies to make theories overt and disconfirmables

One way of understanding the problems of presentism and localism is that in encountering a body of evidence we all bring a theory to bear upon it. Such theories need to be made explicit and questioned. We just saw how in 'cross-examining' a source, digging for things which do not fit, is an effective heuristic. This second move-finding anomalies- is related to the sourcing heuristics described above. In this context, however, the cross-examination targets include one's own theories and assumptions.

A basic move in this strategy is to look for an anomaly, something which does not fit the data or the proposed explanation. For example, regarding the experience of war, we know that they are horrible places to be. If this is so, why do people volunteer to fight in a war? Asking these counter-intuitive questions brings forth the assumptions which one holds and are not allowing the data to 'make sense;' in this case, one could question the idea that most soldiers volunteer. We might be imposing presentist and localist assumptions about the nature of military recruitment in general and at times of war in particular.

At the level of explanation one also needs to ask such counter-intuitive questions. For example, the overarching cold war explanations of why the U.S. was in Vietnam in the first place makes it difficult to understand why there was so much protest against the war at home. How can the explanation of 'Amerika,' as a fascist and corrupt country be reconciled with the tremendous opposition to the war?

Much like anthropologists who seek to 'make the familiar strange' and 'the strange familiar,' historians try not to take things for granted. They often ask: Why are these particular issues being raised? Why by the people? Why now and not earlier? Modern historians also seek to explain the silences, i.e. focus on the issues are not being raised

[3] Seek out alternative points of view via alternative versions

To foreground 'point of view', the general questions are: What point of view is being argued? By whom and why? What issues/points of view are being left out and why? How does the account change when you add another point of view? Questions regarding privileged points of view permeate the work of historians at many levels.

At the level of the kind of history considered legitimate, the dispute between political and social historians can be construed as a debate regarding the rationale for constructing a historical account 'bottom up,' from the point of view of ordinary folks as opposed to 'top down,' i.e. from the point of view of the presidency and the state. Which point of view to privilege and how to balance points of view is at the heart of historical craftsmanship.

The same issue underlies the selection of topics of inquiry such as asking the question "Why was Vietnam such a watershed event in American history?" implies a point of view. Clearly, the inquiry would be very different if one included an attempt at understanding what Vietnam meant to the Vietnamese, or what how to talk about Vietnam in a global history course.

At the level of inquiry methods, we already described how techniques akin to those of lawyers are part of what historians do to get at the point of view and bias of the source. In addition to this critical approach, historians as other humanists, use the method of 'empathy' to try and grasp what the past was like. Historical empathy, i.e. asking what was it like to be there and to be that sort of a person, fuels historical imagination and works against presentism and localism by making the historian consciously de-center from his or her own life experience and biases.

Historical empathy needs to be tempered by the awareness of the unique position of an outside observer who is in danger of developing a sense of naive 'realism.' As outsiders, historians know something about the context that the people on the spot do not. For example, the soldier in Vietnam is not constantly asking himself: what is it like to be a soldier? In this way, many of the features which the empathic understanding identifies as defining the soldier's situation, are not easily accessible to their consciousness. Since that kind of 'being a

soldier' is the only one they know of, they are in some sense not aware of it.

The same issue of consciousness relates to the question of how to use certain kinds of data. For example, using diaries as the basis for describing everyday life runs into the criticism that people who write diaries are, for the most part, not representative of 'just plain folks.' As documents-cum-author, diaries may well be biased in particular ways. If diaries is all that has survived from a give time period, the historian might well be facing the problem of 'given a non-random sample of trees, describe the forest!'

[4] Establish a chronological order to provide sequencing and lay out possible causes and patterns.

To understand the flow of history one need to understand time, historical time i.e. chronology. The establishment, analysis and synthesis of chronological data is a key activity for a historian. Historians do not operate according to a single notion of time. Instead, they can deal with temporal frames which include ideas about order (some events occur before others), simultaneity (events or phenomena develop simultaneously), duration (some events last different lengths of time), and chronological eras (larger periods of time).<sup>11</sup> A historian's sense of time also includes notions of causal succession, such as long term and short terms consequences, or simple linear and multiple dynamic causes. In addition, modern historians also acknowledge that time is relative to a cultural norm. For example, there is an enormous difference between Eastern and Western notions of time.

Chronology and 'points of view' interact in interesting ways. Different points of view in sources result from the fact that the world keeps changing but people keep certain ideas and ideals. Thus some people may think of the world as if it was still 1968, other as if the cold war was still on. What that tells you, is that something was happening over that sequence of years to the 'the world' that we are trying to understand and that 'it' happens over time.

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<sup>11</sup>Carreteo, Pozo y Asencio 1989

A point of contention among historians is the value of synthesizing large quantity of data over long periods of time also known as of *perioditization*. While useful in trying to teach 'survey course,' perioditization can reinforce stereotypes which come from the past. In the context of a survey course, recourse to perioditization quickly conveys the learners some of the findings around that era. Faced with a document from the Middle Ages, say, the learner can anticipate a series of features about the socio-cultural and political context from which it originated. However, in using perioditization one needs to acknowledge that the goal of characterizing periods in history, arose at a time when history itself was construed as following an evolutionary ladder towards more civilized and rational societies. Hence labeling the Middle Ages as the 'Dark ages' was necessary to establish the progression towards the Enlightenment. In this idea of history as an evolutionary progression, the present European society at its pinnacle of development. Coupled with a narrative mode of discourse, perioditization lends itself easily to the assumption that one is either a.) describing a sequence that everybody will go through or b.) describing the way most of the history works.

[5] Engage conflicting bodies of evidence.

To stretch understanding, a historian might engage a whole body of conflicting evidence. This is not simply a matter of finding something that constitutes an anomaly and does not fit, rather confronting two or more very different images of the past. For example, there is the well-known 'standard of living debate' which centers around the question of whether the industrial revolution raised the standard of living of the English working class or not. On the one hand there is evidence that as workplace, factories were horrible places to work and that, by any simple minded measure, the standard of living went down. And yet on the other hand there is ample evidence that large numbers of people moved voluntarily from the countryside to the cities. Such debates carry on over many years and can engage a number of historians. Bringing these debates to the attention and scrutiny of students could add a dimension of authentic

open-ended to their inquiry

[6.] Use social science and other concepts to frame questions and theorize complex explanations.

There is a humanistic tradition in history which frames historical inquiry within the enterprise of humanistic philosophy, following Thucydides dictum "History is philosophy learned from experience."

History also draws concepts from the social sciences to generate explanations. As the historian collects facts about what happened, the inevitable process of 'going beyond the information given' in search for an explanation commences. The kind of explanation a historian constructs relates deeply to the kind of history he or she prefers. Historians use concepts derived from psychology, economics, sociology and other social sciences both to frame their questions and to propose explanations.

How does this use of social science concepts relate to the large challenges of presentism, localism and single perspective? The social science concepts which could be useful (borrowed from biology, sociology etc) turn out to be equally contextual and reflect a particular world view. For example, the incorporation of Darwinian concepts into interpretations of the past result in very different interpretations than say a feminist perspective. Both these views are in turn associated with particular times and places.

[7] Write a historical account to communicate findings.

Before, during and after collecting information, the historian draws on social science concepts to aid her in the interpretation of her data. Finally the findings have to be written up in a suitable form.

The way historians analyze and communicate their findings has become a major point of contention. In the current state of the profession, the layman's view on history as one of 'recounting the

past,' as telling the story of what happened, constitutes a red flag. Narrative conjures up the very traditional view of history in terms of 'and then they did, and then they did.' Instead of a narrative story as a sequence of events, many historians argue that they should focus on the analysis of the materials. According to some, narrative is not the proper mode of discourse. History, they argue, should strive to be more of a social science. According to this view, events are the 'small pebbles' which bear a relationship to the overall enterprise of history similar to the relationship of number facts to mathematics. The work begins there. Events are of course necessary but explanations based on events simply illuminate how the sequence took place. For example, to explain why a certain fist fight between two people took place, one could describe why these two people were in the same room, at arms length as it were. Looked at more closely, however, this kind of explanation is nothing more than a more elaborate description. According to this model, understanding in history entails a combination of the narrative of events, structural analysis (i.e. social, economic and political systems which give the structure to events) and 'themes' (i.e. long term tendencies in the development of particular sets of ideas which societies 'develop' as they change.)<sup>12</sup>Historians are keenly aware that there is no one 'correct' version of history, but what they produce is one of many possible versions. Except for when historians write textbooks for high school, they acknowledge multiple narratives and interpretations.

We have reviewed some of the major issues around historical thinking and developing 'disciplined historical imagination.' It becomes clear that what historians learn and understand is intricately linked to the methods they use to build that understanding. How might all this inform teaching for understanding? One approach could be to translate the previous strategies into a series of understanding performances around each of the strategies; another to orchestrate these strategies into larger more complex understanding performances. While both these approaches have their merits, our examples tend to be on the more wholistic side of the spectrum. The reason is that students need experience solving complex problems and the higher order thinking skills implicated in that process cannot be reduced

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<sup>12</sup>Leinhard, G. in press

to drill.<sup>13</sup> In the next section we will demonstrate how the challenges and conceptual moves of historians as learners shape a unit designed with the ‘teaching for understanding framework.’

## **Developing Historical Imagination in Students**

This section draws on work the History Group undertook in the Spring of 1992 to explore how discipline-specific modes of thinking might impinge on the general framework of teaching for understanding. In the context of collectively planning a unit, we started by selecting a topic and then exploring its generativity from each of the participants points of view. Having pooled what each of us considered generative about that topic, we brainstormed a series of understanding goals. We prioritized and selected three goals. Next, we sought to design understanding performances, i.e. activities in which students had to ‘perform beyond the information given.’ As we worked through each performance, we identified ongoing assessment criteria. Throughout this process we tried to tap into the generativity of the topic by keeping in mind how student’s expertise/interests could be articulated with central ideas of in modern historical thought in rich understanding performances. This section briefly discusses the planning strategy we followed, and the understanding performances which we ended up with. To conclude the paper, we highlight some of the generalizable pedagogical tactics which emerge from this attempt at designing a unit which would teach history for understanding.

### 3.1 The Planning Process

In the History group we began by proposing a number of generative topics, from Watergate to the history of work in America. We selected Vietnam because it could easily fit within the existing courses on American history, its echoes are felt by students as well as teachers, it has been characterized as a ‘watershed’ event in American history, and its manifold complexity could lead students to appreciate that history is not locked up in

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<sup>13</sup>D. Wolf, introduction to “Thinking Historically” by T. Holt, 1990

books but is always open to new interpretations.

1.Exploring the topic's generativity. Making a conceptual map of what each of the members of the history group associated with the topic of Vietnam, led us to appreciate both our own generative understanding of the topic and the great number of "entry points" for students with different interests. Because this mapping exercise worked to well for us, we anticipated using this same technique with students as the means to establish common ground for discussion. We also started to envision a number of understanding goals and performances that would realize those goals.

### 2. Brainstorming and setting understanding goals.

Given the time frame of two to five weeks for the unit, we prioritize a list of seven goals and decided to focus on the following three:

1. to understand the importance of the event in contemporary American history;
2. to understand its complexity;
3. to understand its lasting influence on more recent history.

After we had established these goals, we started to think in terms of the Vietnam experience as a particular instance of a larger phenomenon about which students were bound to know something: *war*. We realized that the goal of understanding something about 'war' is a general humanistic goal which could be pursued through a number of humanistic studies ranging from literature and psychology to history. Our task then became to see how a concrete historical approach can contribute to understanding such general topic.

### 3. Developing understanding performances

In light of our previous work on thinking historically, of working on the maps and setting understanding goals, we had a good sense of the kinds of desirable understanding performances and why we wanted them. Briefly, to



get at some of the philosophical biases which students bring to this unit and to initiate a dialogue regarding the relevance of this unit for students, we envisioned to start out by asking students to reflect on a fundamental philosophical question underlying this unit. To get at the multivocality of history we envisioned activities which would lead students to understand the war from the perspective of different social actors (e.g., soldiers and leaders). To give students insight into how the decision making of people in different positions within a social structure is embedded in history, we wanted a sequence of understanding performances which would address the issue of going to war at two levels: One, how did people at the time decide to go to the war? And two, how did leaders decide to send others to the war?

When appropriate, activities would be framed and assessed within the context of three questions which, at the time of the Vietnam war, were how participants remembered the war was publicly discussed in the 60's and 70's.<sup>14</sup>

- What are the moral dimensions of the war?
- What are the military dimensions of the war?
- Is it winnable?

We also saw the need for a chronology of the major events and turning points during the war so that students could appreciate how events unfolded and how the decisions of going to war and sending other to war were/could have been affected by those events.

To give students a firsthand experience of how history is not 'locked up in books' but open to interpretation, students were to talk to a range of people who had lived through the Vietnam War and whose accounts and interpretations diverged.

Finally, to get students to appreciate elements of continuity and change, were to note and analyze how the Vietnam legacy 'echoes' in today's world.

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<sup>14</sup>As a project one could ask students in the 90's to compare and contrast how other recent wars, such as the Gulf war, have been presented.

Throughout the design process, we went back and forth between materials and activities individual teachers had tried, new material which we envisioned, and the understanding goals we had set. The availability and lack of materials forced us to give body to the structure of the unit and to rethink understanding performances.

Throughout the process we sought to specify understanding performances which would allow students to personalize their understanding, to raise authentic questions and to pursue them in the context of a sequence of interconnected activities.

### 3.2.The finalized understanding performances

The understanding performances we ended up with include generating collective maps around the nature of war and around Vietnam; “waking up” to the Tet Offensive by counseling a friend; reading first-hand accounts of the war; displaying leadership during a time of crisis; carrying out research in their school and community, and identifying echoes of Vietnam. The following unit plan emerged. The performances are presented in the order in which they occur in instruction.

#### *1. Putting assumptions and background knowledge up front via associative maps.*

In this first understanding performance, students develop two kinds of associative maps, one around the nature of war, and one more particular around Vietnam

To start the unit, the class engages in generating an associative map around a fundamental philosophical issue in this unit: the nature of war. We expect such a discussion to bring up front presentist and localist assumptions students bring to their historical understanding as well as their insights and previous understandings. After having addressed this general question for themselves, they are ready to explore what that question meant

in another period of history.<sup>15</sup>

A second map centers around the topic of 'Vietnam' itself: what do the students know and feel around this topic? What would they like to know? From whom? What interests them?

Both maps, the one around war in general and about Vietnam, serve learners and teachers as sources for establishing what the learners bring to the study of this unit. In terms of ongoing assessment, the maps are used to support engagement and reflection on what is being learned and to provide continuity and support for subsequent activities.

*2. An authentic beginning: "Waking up" to the Tet Offensive by having to counsel a friend.*

Students are told that they are to imagine themselves on January 31, 1968. That morning they receive a letter from a very close friend telling them that they have been drafted. That same evening they watch the evening news and the report on the Tet Offensive which started that day. After the students have watched the clip on video, they have to respond to their friend. What advice would they give? To draft the letter, students can refer back to their maps. To guard against the dangers of presentism and post-hoc wisdom, students need to constantly ask themselves: would the people at that time have known what I am using in my argument? Could they have found out?

Students return with their letters and the teacher leads a general discussion. The arguments of students are put on the board. They are organized by the teacher, making sure that at least three levels of argument are identified: first, what are the moral dimensions of the war? second, what are the military dimensions of the war? Third, is it winnable? These become guiding questions as they rewrite the letter.

In addition, students are fed new information designed to provide counter-evidence to what ever argument they developed. Students who

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<sup>15</sup>See Holt 1990

advised the friend not to go, are confronted with the fact that thousands of young Americans did go to the war. Their task is to think about what was going on through those people's minds. And students who advised their friend to go, are confronted with counter-evidence of the incipient anti-war movement at the time.

Note that regarding chronology, the unit does not follow the traditional sequential approach but rather seeks an 'authentic beginning.' As students draft their letter to their friend, they need to go back in time and try to consider why and how the U.S. ended up in the 1965 position.

At this time, students begin to construct a time line of significant event in Vietnam. This allows them to organize the information they themselves collect and are given in class. In one class the teacher asked the students to construct this time line from both the perspective of American history and from the point of view of Vietnamese history. The goal was to have the students appreciate how the significance of Vietnam differed for each society.

Keeping maps, time-lines and notes which document their own understanding is a vehicle for ongoing assessment and provides the learning community an opportunity continuously reflecting (individually and/or collectively) on how their own views on the war evolve as they go through the unit. Changes in their own understanding, should, by analogy, provide them with insights into how the perception of war evolved at the time.

### *3. What was it like to be at the front? Reading Soldiers' diaries*

For this understanding performance, firsthand accounts of the war come from actual diaries of soldiers and a clip of the film "Letters Home." In reading the diaries of four soldiers (one of the Vietnamese) students are to apply sourcing heuristics. They need to ask: What is this? Who wrote this? Why? For whom was this intended? Students are asked to reflect on diaries as particular kinds of objects, as places where people write their private thoughts. What can we tell from these diaries as guides to what life in the front was like, as an indication of the kind of people who went to the war? In what ways might soldiers who write diaries be different from soldiers who did not? They should wonder about what gets recorded, what is not said and why. To contextualize the diaries, they can compare and contrast the image of

the war they are getting through the diaries, with the image which emerges from the many letters home.

*Performance 4: Rewrite the President's escalation speech.*

By the end of 1965, after an extended debate among his advisors, LBJ decides to Americanize the war in Vietnam. One central piece of historical knowledge which at the time was being used by the advisors was the 'like the French' argument. Some thought that the French experience should be a warning to America. In June 30, 1965 McGeorge Bundy, the White House National Security Assistant, wrote a memo entitled "France in Vietnam, 1954, and US in Vietnam 1965-A Useful Analogy?" While the memo was written more in the spirit of advocacy, it contains lines which read like prophecies. LBJ ignores much of the counter-evidence presented by his advisors. Instead, he decides the course 'gradually escalation.'<sup>16</sup>

Using Bundy's memo, the speech of LBJ's political opponent, Goldwater, "Here I stand" calling for drastic military action, and examples of other presidential speeches at time of war, students work in teams to rewrite the president's speech either in favor of massive escalation or withdrawal. We selected this exercise because May and al. found that, based on what people knew at the time, their students were unable to write the 'get out speech."

As students' work the teacher coaches them on a variety of topics, from how to organize the group process, to ways of sharpening the arguments in their speech. Students are warned that they need to anticipate all possible counter-arguments coming from political opponents, the press and the public at large.

When drafting and rewriting the LBJ speech, the ongoing assessment component works by asking students to self-assess their speech in terms of the following three questions:

- Does the speech deal with domestic issues (cost, scale, winnability)?

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<sup>16</sup>see Thinking in Time, Dodging Bothersome Analogues, Americanizing the Vietnam war in 1965.

- Does it deal with international issues (morality)?
- Is the speech persuasive?

The speech also has to take into account counter-arguments presented by the press or political opponents (as, for example, in a press conference or congressional rebuttal).

Students of different teams present the speech and the members of other teams act as the press core. The counter-speech is assessed based on the accuracy of the facts used, and the three criteria which students had used to self-assess their speech.

At the end, students watch the a brief clip of “Vietnam, a T.V. History,” which documents how in 1968 and in the course of 24 hours, a team of speech writers turns LBJ’s war speech into a peace speech, a speech which prompts LBJ not to seek re-election.

#### *5: Research in the School and the Community*

Students plan and carry out a panel on the Vietnam conflict, inviting people from the community to participate. This experience of eliciting, collecting and analyzing data gives them insights into excitement and dilemmas of doing original research. Eliciting a range narratives and explanations from war veterans and others, and exploring alternative narratives, should lead students to appreciate that behind the sanitized narratives often encountered in textbooks authors select facts and make choices. Ultimately, this exercise should contribute to the insight that whatever account one is reading, generating a text necessarily involves a point of view which impinges upon the selection of facts and the presentation of the findings.

#### *6: Echoes of Vietnam*

Finally, by looking at recent events such as the Gulf War, students analyze the ways in which Vietnam continues to resonate in contemporary

American life. Have politicians changed the way they talk about war? How is the collective memory of Vietnam used in different contexts?

Three teachers tried the Vietnam unit in their classroom. The implementation of the unit in class was not formally studied, however, based on the self-report of teachers and on a few interviews with students, led us to the following preliminary conclusions, as follows.

The maps were very revealing to the teachers, who did not know how much students, as a group, knew about Vietnam. Often, the case was that some students knew a fair amount, while others had hardly known that such a war had been fought. When asked what about Vietnam they wanted to learn, a girl expressed her strong desire not to hear anymore about the horrors of war (she had seen enough in various films) but, rather, to explain why the war had happened in the first place and why it lasted so long.

Regarding the letters to the friend, in one particular class, there was a very marked difference between the letters which male and female students wrote. While boys tended to give advice on how to avoid getting killed in the war, the girls tended to talk about the grief and anxiety of leaving family and friends behind.

In interviewing students, one student wondered about what the experience of war had been like for the soldiers of the first and second World Wars. While he knew much about the events leading up to and around the World War, he realized that he knew nothing about the soldier's experiences. These spontaneous questions are evidence of 'generative factual knowledge' which while learned in one context, raises questions and doubts about one's understanding of other analogous events.

To some students, building the time line from the point of view of the Vietnamese and of the Americans war truly enlightening as they could literally see how from the Vietnamese temporal perspective, the American invasion was the last in a series of other foreign invasions, while for 'young' America, the war in Vietnam was a unique and intense experience, hence its 'watershed' character.

Not all the teachers were equally comfortable trying the unit. For the teacher who had the most experience with the unit, the discussions and the unit plan enable her to give more structure and focus to the activities, many of which she had already tried. Being familiar with the material allowed her to try out different approaches. In particular, she experimented with students

generating their own associative maps and using them to monitor their own understanding of the war. She later used this performance to illustrate to the students how at the time people's perception of the war also changed.

For units like the unit on Vietnam to develop into mature units, various rounds of experimentation and adjustments are necessary. As teachers become more familiar with the material, they are able to manage more complex understanding performances and sequences of performances. In addition, the criteria for ongoing assessment which are to be shared with the students, also require various rounds of testing and assessment. Ideally, units like the Vietnam unit would not stand alone but be part of a larger course which aimed explicitly at developing 'disciplined historical imagination' in students. This would mean that students would have repeated opportunity of using the strategies employed by historians.

### 3.2 General pedagogical tactics to stimulate 'historical imagination'

from our work and that of other researchers, four particular tactics emerge as useful pedagogical devices in dealing with developing historical imagination in students while at the same time addressing the three fundamental problems of presentism, localism and single perspective encountered by students.

*Tactic 1: Students generate and analyze their own 'sources'.*

A perennial problem of educators is how to bridge between what students have in their heads and what the curriculum contains. Basically we propose to tackle this problem by having students apply historical methods to their own knowing and understanding process.

As illustrated in the Vietnam unit, in generating associative maps, learners represent their background knowledge, interests and expertise. As instruction progresses, and students get new material and revise what they think, their maps evolve. These maps and their evolution become a source of reflection for different actors in the teaching and learning relationship. For the teacher maps become a resource generated by the students themselves regarding their authentic questions, insights and needs for clarification. For



the learner, maps become a support structure to keep a handle over their own thoughts as they evolve in the course of different understanding performances. Because maps focus on students' own understanding, maps validate their contribution and identity as learners.

One can encourage students to 'objectify' their own sources. As historians would cross-examine them, students can relate them to other sources (i.e. what other in the class understand, but also to their readings and activities) and in general make them part of the resources available to them. In working with their maps, students can move from a set of anecdotes that they were carrying around in their heads to the beginnings of a schedule of sorts. They can engage processes of posing and answering questions which are authentic to them. For example, in the case of the Vietnam unit, students know something about other wars too. Some of what they found may be directly applicable to Vietnam, other data or ideas will not be as obviously related to Vietnam. They will need to transform such data and ideas in order to connect them to Vietnam. Reflective engagement with their own knowledge as resource heightens their awareness of their own biases and progress. The same thing that the historian does, go to the people on the street, past and present, and find out what they think, can be done to oneself.

### *Tactic 2 Enacting the multivocality of history via simulations .*

Simulations, i.e. having student groups enact particular events in history, have the potential of 'embodying' the multivocality in history. If simulations are designed properly, students can vicariously experience how points of view, sources, articulating social science concepts and generating explanations work in building and understanding of a particular episode in history.

From the point of view of inquiry, simulations allow students to explore a historical problem space. For example, consider a simulation of the negotiations between freed slaves, Northerners, Southerners and yeomen farmers, in which can experience the difficulties of trying to reach an agreement among groups with different interests. From the perspective of teaching history for understanding, the power of this experience can be harvested by drawing on both the similarities and contrasts between the in-class simulation and the historical events.

Very much as a historian stretches his own understanding, the teacher can use the students presentism (always an important factor in these simulations) as a hook to engage them precisely in the next understanding performance. Now the students have to solve the puzzle: how come you came up with this plan and they did not at that time? How can one explain such that difference? In building such explanation, the students can get to the insight the racist values in part what explains why the negotiations in the South were different from those they simulated in class.

In all cases, it seems that if one wants to make these simulations part of a teaching for understanding in history, special attention has to be given to 'presentist' and 'localist' misconceptions which surface during these activities and are the hardest confusions to confront. However, it may be prudent to give such feedback to students after the simulation has finished, in an assessment round, because as teachers point out, corrections may well interrupt the flow of the activity, and students can have difficulty recovering such flow.

Our data also suggest that students remember those simulations with particular pungency, because they dared to say and do things which they never thought they could. They enacted how they imagined the past. Even if they were wrong, and maybe because they were wrong, they will understand more deeply, not just the past but their own values.

### *Tactic 3. The relevance of the past and the present to each other*

To engage students in appreciating continuity and change over time, it is important to get students to identify and analyze ways in which the past and the present relate to each other. At one level one can do so by seeking to identify the 'echoes' of other periods of history. Reading newspapers and discussing current events in terms of past continuities and changes are fruitful contexts.

But beyond that level, there needs to be a closing activity in which students can reflect about what they have learned in the wider context of their own lives as individuals situated in time and place. Once they have tried to

deal with the challenges of localism, presentism and single perspective, one needs a reflective performance which helps to generate an understanding which is relevant to themselves as individuals and as members of different communities<sup>17</sup>

*Tactic 4. Making the familiar strange and the strange familiar*

Last but not least, there is the tactic of “making the strange familiar” and “the familiar strange,” which anthropologist Marcus sees as pivotal in being able to develop without falling into the pitfalls of ethnocentrism.<sup>18</sup>

In essence, all the above performances encourage students to face ‘opposing points of view’ by creating a social situation in which students need to take counter-arguments into account. In preparing for and enacting these performances, students ‘stretch’ each other’s understanding. Such activities build awareness and enrich one’s understanding in a social process of give and take as students prepare, perform, reflect and write about these performances in debates, mock trials, role plays, overt discussions of presentism, localism and single perspective.

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<sup>17</sup>‘Facing History and Ourselves,’ Summer Institute 1991

<sup>18</sup>Seed, Patricia 1992

### 3.3 Conclusions and Open Questions

Recall that at the beginning in the context of Becker's argument that 'we are all historians,' we encountered Mr. Everyman. To tie this essay together, I would like to ask: in what ways are students and Mr. Everyman the same and in what ways are they different from historians?

Superficially, students and historians do seem rather different, in particular, the fact is that historians work extensively on their own while students learn best in groups. However, examined more deeply, we find that much of what students (and Mr. Everyman) do, resembles a 'distributed version' of what historians do in their heads. This means that students, like Mr. Everyman, require the *overt* social stimulus of interacting in a community of learners to stimulate their imagination, to contest their versions of 'what it was like,' to provide them with counter-evidence and so forth. It is in this way that Mr. Everyman, like the students in class simulations, experience the contested nature of history. I would call them 'socially distributed historians.'

What students do as a group, historians are capable of doing by themselves. In reading documents, historians ask questions, pose challenges, generate their own ideas as sources. Ideally, they are self-conscious of their own presentism, localism and personal perspective, as they critically argue with and about texts. But historians did not start out that way. It is over years of training that historians come to internalize their teachers, mentors and critics and become able to carry out these understanding performances more or less individually. I say 'more or less' deliberately because one cannot ignore the role of readers, critics and colleagues in the production of any single authored text.

These observations regarding the distributed nature of students' performances versus the much more individualized performance of professional historians, might point towards the desirability of gradually moving students towards understanding performances when they need to have internalized some of the historian's strategies. For example, writing individual essays, which often turns out to be the way teachers end a unit, might be one way of getting students to personalize and internalize those distributed activities.

However, in trying to see a continuity between what historians do and what Mr. Everyman does, one cannot underestimate the difficulty in understanding

fragmented evidence which is not only written, but written in a world and according to norms which have been deciphered too! In other words, the medium of inquiry available to most historians is difficult to manage. If contemporary texts are often difficult for students to comprehend, what can we expect from texts produced in a different world?

Last but not least, we can return to the question of why teach history in high school? Should our goal be to make student historians? Should historians who work on their own trying to decipher documents be models for high school students? Possibly not. However, we may agree that being able to debate, to de-center and ask critical and probing questions is an essential attitude which active members of democratic and pluralistic societies need. One hopes that over the years, instead of associating the study of history with cramming facts and names, students will remember the performances through which they got to understand more about others and about themselves.

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