How Clio Learned: An Inquiry into Teaching Historic Method
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According to the American Historical Association, “History is a part of the foundation of liberal learning. It helps develop basic skills in critical reading, thinking, and questioning and represents a useful way of understanding the world.”¹ These skills are the stock in trade of the historian - his method - and yet historians are often reticent when they describe their methods. As John Gaddis put it, “our reluctance to reveal our own [methods], however, too often confuses our students – even, at times, ourselves – as to just what it is we do.”² Luckily, some historians have published their thoughts regarding this issue. A survey of literature of historical thought and education sheds some light onto the questions of both how historians think, and how historians teach their methods.

How do historians think?

All disciplines depend on conceptual models to solve problems that allow the scholar to both store large amount of knowledge relevant to his discipline, as well as simplify the problem by allowing him to ignore knowledge which is irrelevant.³ For a historian, this often means to re-enact the past in his mind,⁴ in order to conduct “thought experiments.”⁵ Since the historian cannot know everything about the past, he must exercise “imagination, even dramatization,”⁶ to answer questions about the past. Obviously,

⁵ Gaddis, 40.
this is risky: methods which rely upon imagination seem more appropriate to writing fiction. But both Astronomers and Geologists are forced to work this way, and few would accuse them of writing fiction.

There are several ways a historian avoids becoming a fiction writer. As he builds his conceptual model of an event or period, he compares it with available evidence and other knowledge, looking for both differences, and for gaps in his knowledge. This alerts the historian of the need to either re-assess his current knowledge, or to acquire new knowledge. Either will likely involve the examination of textual sources, and this is done on two levels. First, he attempts to understand the source at face value: this includes the “architecture” of the argument, as well as the emotional response and other associations it triggers. Second, he attempts to understand the source on a deep level: essentially evaluating it in light of the historian’s existing knowledge. The new knowledge is added to the conceptual model, which the historian again tests for validity and gaps. This process repeats until the historian reaches the point he feels he has a defensible thesis, at which point, he presents his findings.

How do historians teach their methods?

Traditionally, education in history as well as other fields stressed “memorization and mastery of text.” Teaching history was, and sometimes still is, seen as the practice of transferring knowledge to students “in a process akin to pouring liquid from one container to another.” In some cases, the knowledge may consist of an agreed-upon narrative, while in others it may privilege “facts and figures” above all else. Publishers supported this by producing textbooks that either gave a single narrative that is “accurate and complete” without any of the “hedges” typically found in historical writing, or presented

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7 Gaddis, 40.
8 Collingwood, 216; Bloch, 88.
11 Trachtenberg, 59; Wineburg, 70.
12 Wineburg, 65-70.
13 National Research Council, 239.
14 Booth, 59.
15 Booth, 53, 59.
masses of detail without “causal/explanatory linkages.” Booth claims this model is still seen today to a greater or lesser extent in the History curricula of many colleges and universities. And yet, it cannot be conducive to encouraging the “critical reading, thinking, and questioning” that we hope to achieve by studying History, since the student never sees the process or the skills needed to produce them.

One solution to this dilemma is to simply teach the students the skills they need, but this can be problematic. As researchers have discovered, trying to teach research skills separate from the project typically yields poor results. This likely stems from the difficulty of transferring learning from one context to another. Kobrin concluded that skills “are best learned in the process of struggling with the project.” This is what Booth and others have referred to as “active learning,” that is, to learn by practicing the skills of the discipline. Perhaps the first step in implementing this approach is to design the course around the desired objectives. As simple as this seems, Booth found it is often not the typical way courses are designed: instead, instructors think about the content they want to teach, design a syllabus, and only when formal course planning documents need to be submitted do they develop the objectives for the course.

One method of course organization which seems to achieve the goal of teaching historic thinking is Inquiry-based Course Design. This goes by many other names: Booth & Hyland use the term “practice of inquiry,” while Grant and Gradwell prefer “big ideas,” and Korbin has no name for it at

16 Wineburg, 47-8; David Kobrin, Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 5; Bloch, 87.
17 Booth, 68.
18 Galano.
19 Kobrin, 50-2; Alan Booth and Paul Hyland, eds, The Practice of University History Teaching (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 62.
20 National Research Council, 55-6, 67-70.
21 Kobrin, 50.
22 Booth and Hyland, 189.
23 Booth, 75-80.
25 Booth and Hyland, 64.
26 S.G. Grant and Jill M. Gradwell, eds, Teaching History with Big Ideas: Cases of Ambitious Teachers (Lanyham: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2010), 3.
all, although this is clearly the process he describes.\textsuperscript{27} In practice, Grant and Gradwell describe this as organizing blocks of lessons around answering a single question, with a single sub-question for each individual lesson that helps answer the main block question.\textsuperscript{28} While this method necessarily reduces the amount of “coverage,”\textsuperscript{29} as Booth points out, “it’s not what we do; it’s what students do that’s important.”\textsuperscript{30} Kobrin offers a variant of inquiry-based course design which is based entirely upon the use of primary sources. However, he cautions that instructors must carefully “set the table:” they must carefully select the sources, track the student’s progress, provide the context of the documents, and model their thought processes.\textsuperscript{31}

Many researchers agreed that collaborative learning was helpful for achieving course goals, for several reasons: Kobrin believes that collaborative learning is essential for a primary-source only course, since the students lacked the ability to interpret documents individually. Booth notes that students are often more comfortable discussing topics in small groups instead of in a large class, which in turn helps create a context for active learning.\textsuperscript{32} Both Kobrin and Grant and Gradwell describe one way to do this: the students are divided into groups that each worked to answer their own separate sub-question. They would present their findings towards the end of the block, before taking individual exams. This made them invested in not only their own research, but in that of their peers as well.\textsuperscript{33} Of course free-riding can be a problem in any group work, but Booth offers a solution: When all other group-members agree that one person is a free-rider, the instructor issues a warning. If performance does not improve after a few weeks, the free-rider is removed from the group and must complete a project on his own.\textsuperscript{34}

Like course design, student assessments, or grades, should also be designed around the course objectives. As Booth points out, students are far more concerned about their grades than instructors, and

\textsuperscript{27} Kobrin, 38-9. \\
\textsuperscript{28} Grant and Gradwell, 45-6. \\
\textsuperscript{29} Booth and Hyland, 65. \\
\textsuperscript{30} Booth, 62. \\
\textsuperscript{31} Kobrin, 36, 38-45, 53-59. \\
\textsuperscript{32} Kobrin, 33-4; Booth, 97. \\
\textsuperscript{33} Grant and Gradwell, 31-4; Kobrin 38-45. \\
\textsuperscript{34} Booth, 139.
tend to weight their efforts along the lines of how they are graded. Thus we should, as Wineburg suggests, focus on assessing modes of thought rather than factual detail. In history, this is typically done with the essay, often as an examination. Yet the essay-exam may not accurately measure how well students can think: as Booth discovered, many students find they can get by on rote-memorization. Thus, instructors should carefully decide how they will assess essay-exams, and make their standards clear to their students at the beginning of the course. Additionally, Hounsell points out the having students peer review each other’s work may help them better understand how they will be graded, and cause them to use some of the tools of historic method if the assessment encourages this. Self assessment may also play a role in the overall assessment. This can take several forms: any one of the classroom assessment techniques can work for a single or group of lessons; a midterm or end of term (or both) portfolio review, along with the student’s own written assessment may also be useful. Self assessment should also benefit the student, giving him an opportunity to reflect on what he learned from the class.

Looking at the literature of historical thinking and teaching history, it seems that traditional methods of teaching history do little to encourage thinking historically. The rote memorization of fact and narrative does not require students to use historic method. If the value of studying history is improving one’s ability in “critical reading, thinking, and questioning,” then we should reconsider what we do in the classroom. By designing our courses and assessments around developing the student’s ability to think like a historian, we encourage our students to think deeply and critically. While this is an ambitious goal, it provides the student with far more than the traditional methods can deliver.

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35 Booth, 128.
36 Wineburg, 179-86.
37 Booth and Hyland, 181.
38 Booth, 132-33, 129-32.
40 Booth, 141-44.
41 Galgano.


Annotated Bibliography

Teaching

A concise survey of the literature on history teaching in post-secondary education, Booth’s main argument is the need for active learning in the History classroom. Chapters cover ideas for implementing active learning in course planning, lesson delivery, and assessment, with concrete suggestions and the research that backs them up. Possibly the best overview of the subject, and certainly one of the first books on teaching that history instructors should reach for.

This collection of articles clearly served as the model for Booth’s later book (above), since it covers much the same topical areas. However, where the later book is tight and concise, this one has a bit more detail and concrete suggestions, at the cost of greater length and looser structure. A useful collection of articles, but perhaps not necessary with Booth’s later book.

The heart of this book is seven articles, each written by secondary-school teachers recounting their experiences using “big ideas” to teach history. “Big ideas” seem to be similar to “Inquiry Guided Learning,” and the book argues that this method is more effective than traditional methods. While intended for secondary-school teachers, college-level instructors will find some use of its numerous examples of how to implement this method.

This short book presents the challenges and lessons learned by the author and four other secondary-school history teachers. Korbin’s argument is that teacher can and should dispense with textbooks and, using primary sources, allow “the future to write the past.” This book is also aimed at secondary-school teachers, but instructors of college-level introductory survey classes could find some of his suggestions useful, along with the evidence that less-than-perfect students are capable of learning using his method.

Wineburg is one of the few (perhaps only) researchers trying to understand historical thinking from the perspective of Cognitive Psychology. This collection of his articles spans over 10 years, and the intended audience of this book is broad: historians and teachers at all levels will find Wineburg’s observations interesting. However, Wineburg offers little about how to operationalize his ideas, except to say that change is needed.

42 Grant and Gradwell, 3
43 Nilson, 175-6
44 Korbin, 93
Historical Thinking

Intended as a reflection on historic method, this book has become a classic in the field. Bloch argues for the kind of history he is associated with today, *Annales* school, which attempts to look beyond the narratives of great men and nations. Bloch’s intended audience seems to be working historians, who may find this useful as they reflect upon their own work.

While in the same vein as Bloch, Carr focuses more on the nature of history. He argues that as a construct of the historian, no history can be objective. Carr speaks to both historians and to society at large. While interesting, it may be too broad for those seeking to understand historic method.

Collingwood’s book predates Bloch, but was published after the latter’s death. It consists of two major parts: the first is a history of how historians have conceived of their craft, and the second is Collingwood’s own ideas on the subject. Those who want to see how historic thought has changed over time will likely find it useful. As a guide to historic method, Collingwood’s ideas are perhaps less finished than those of Gaddis, Carr, and Bloch.

Like his predecessors Bloch and Carr, Gaddis’ book seeks to describe historical method. Like Carr, Gaddis engages in a contemporary debate on the use of history, and argues that historical thinking is more relevant to solving today’s problems than that of the social-sciences. At least the conceptual side, this is one of the better books on historic method.

This book is more of a how-to guide, unlike those of Gaddis, Carr, or Bloch. It includes sections on history and theory, locating sources and interpreting documents. While Trachtenberg’s intended audience is International and Diplomatic historians, other historians will find the author’s practical advice useful.