Social Education 83(5), pp. 290–294

Historical Thinking Skills: A Second Opinion

Mike Maxwell

History teachers have long faced a dilemma. Formal education exists to impart important knowledge of the world that can help students and society to function effectively in the future. But history schooling teaches students about one-time events from the past that may have little or no relevance to the lives students will live in the present and future. Consequently, it's been difficult for history education to fulfill the basic function of education.

Enter historical thinking skills, said to be the kinds of skills employed by professional historians when plying their craft of history writing. Thinking skills posed an attractive alternative to coverage of historical content: unlike events from the past, thinking skills could be applied in the future—and who wouldn't want students to become better thinkers? If students weren't acquiring useful content knowledge in history classes, perhaps they could acquire useful thinking skills.

The movement to teach historical thinking skills gained traction in 1988 when the influential Bradley Commission on History in Schools declared that fostering history's *habits of mind* ought to be the "principal aim" of historical study. The commission identified 13 habits of historical thinking, such as recognizing the "interplay of change and continuity" and the "complexity of historical causation."[1]

Six years later, the National Standards for History recommended that American students be taught 36 "standards in historical thinking,"[2] advice subsequently repeated in various formats and quantities by other groups including the College Board and the National Council for the Social Studies. In the minds of many educators, thinking skills have replaced knowledge acquisition as the primary purpose of historical study.

Yet after a quarter-century with historical thinking skills at the forefront of the history-teaching agenda, the news from history education is not good. In 2012, for example, the American Historical Association (AHA) observed, "the systematic teaching of history had all but ended in elementary schools across the country."[3] In late 2018, the AHA reported, "Of all the major disciplines, history has seen the steepest declines in the number of bachelor degrees awarded."[4]

With the fortunes of history education declining despite the emphasis on historical thinking skills, it might be time to consider a second opinion. Following a seven-year study of contemporary history schooling, I concluded that historical thinking skills haven't lived up to their potential due to two limiting factors: useful thinking requires useful knowledge to think about; and historical thinking skills aren't exclusive to history.

Useful Thinking Requires Useful Knowledge to Think About

Learning is essentially a two-stage process: the brain encounters new information streaming in from the senses and stores it for later use. The encounter with new information takes place in what scientists term *working memory*, where information is retained for only moments before the brain must respond to ever-newer information about to arrive in the next few seconds. When a learner finds information meaningful in some way, the brain may send the information from working memory into *long-term memory* storage where it will be available to inform future thought and action.

Thinking occurs when we retrieve knowledge from long-term memory and bring it back into working memory to assist with an immediate task such as solving a problem, ordering from a restaurant menu, or understanding new information presented by a teacher. If relevant knowledge is unavailable in long-term memory, the learner will lack a sufficient basis for responding effectively to the task, a condition known as ignorance.

Cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham of the University of Virginia has written extensively about learning and thinking. He says, "The very processes that teachers care about most—critical thinking processes such as reasoning and problem solving—are intimately intertwined with factual knowledge that is stored in long-term memory…. Factual knowledge must precede skill."[5]

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Perhaps no American educator is more closely associated with the drive to teach historical thinking skills than Sam Wineburg, author of the 2001 book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. Under Wineburg's leadership, the History Education

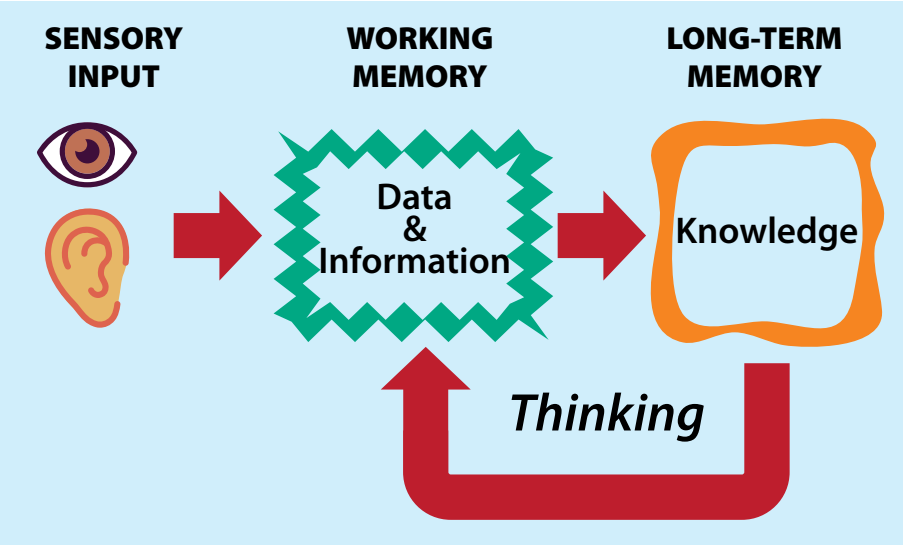

Figure 1. The learning-thinking process

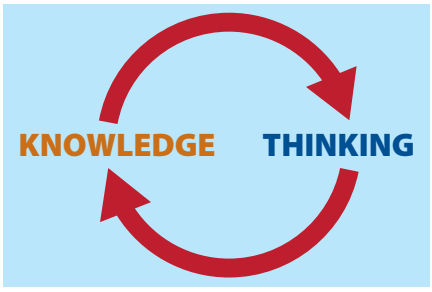

Figure 2. Knowledge-thinking feedback loop

Group at Stanford University developed the *Reading Like a Historian* curriculum that has been downloaded thousands of times from the Internet by history teachers across the country.

Although Wineburg might be seen as "Mr. Historical Thinking," he acknowledges the primacy of content knowledge in his latest book, *Why Learn History?* He writes, "Of course, knowledge is a prerequisite to critical thinking. At the same time, knowledge represents its highest aim."[6] Viewed in this light, knowledge and thinking form a positive feedback loop in which knowledge begets thinking that begets more knowledge that begets more thinking, and so on. In this way, both knowledge and thinking can advance over time.

Not all knowledge is created equal, however. Some kinds are more useful than others. Useful knowledge is by definition knowledge that can be applied in future situations, the kind of knowledge that education is meant to provide. But history schooling deals in knowledge of the past.

The application of thinking skills to non-useful knowledge can't be expected to somehow produce useful knowledge. A historical-thinking activity that asks students to examine an event from the past may provide students with practice in using a historical thinking skill, and it may cause students to think about the event under consideration. But it probably won't produce historical learning that can be applied to future events, the kind of learning that satisfies the purpose of education.

Thinking requires knowledge to think about, and *useful* thinking requires *useful* knowledge to think about. In the absence of useful knowledge, half the feedback loop is missing, and useful thinking is unlikely to occur.

Historical Thinking Skills Are Not Exclusive to History

The emphasis on historical thinking skills might have succeeded in improving the standing of history education *if* history schooling possessed unique thinking skills powerful enough to justify the existence of a school discipline that otherwise offered little in the way of knowledge useful in the future. History education is not such a discipline. Its thinking skills tend to be general in nature, much like the general thinking skills of other school subjects.

The historical thinking skill of causation, for instance, involves recognition that major events usually result from multiple causes, some long-term and some more immediate. Multiple causation also plays a key role in the sciences, where experimenters must carefully control for various extraneous causes, or variables, that might affect research findings. Multiple causality also plays a big role in fields as varied as the stock market and weather patterns.

The signature thinking skill of history is source analysis, a chief concern of professional historians and common exercise in history classrooms. Source analysis compares conflicting accounts of events in an effort to determine which source is more trustworthy, a skill grounded in the universal realities that people promote their self-interest, so bias is all around us, and comparing multiple sources is a good way to approach the truth. Source analysis may be applied to virtually any field, not just history.

The Common Core State Standards, for example, declare that mathematically proficient students are "able to compare the effectiveness of two plausible arguments, distinguish correct logic or reasoning from that which is flawed, and—if there is a flaw in an argument—explain what it is."[7] The Common Core standards in English language arts assert that competent students have the ability to "evaluate other points of view critically and constructively.... They also question an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning."[8]

Like history teachers, teachers of mathematics, language, science, and other school subjects may encourage their students to distinguish between fact and opinion; view circumstances in a wider context; seek valid evidence and corroborating viewpoints; consider underlying assumptions, alternative explanations, and unintended consequences. Because such critical thinking processes are general in nature, the educational system does not need a separate discipline of history dedicated to teach-

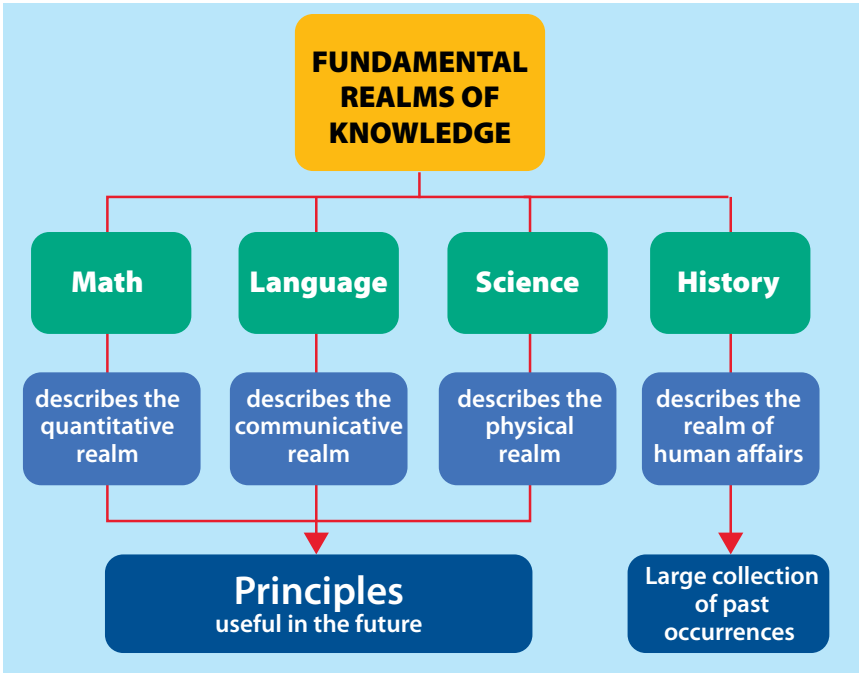

Figure 3. History compared to other core school subjects

ing them; other school subjects can adequately handle the job.

The big distinction between history and other school subjects does not lie in the type of thinking skills that history offers, but in the type of subject matter that history offers. Mathematics describes the quantitative realm, language the communicative realm, science the physical realm, and history the realm of human affairs. The education system needs history in order to teach students about the crucially important realm of human affairs. If history education fails to effectively do so, there is little reason to retain history as part of the curriculum taught to all students in school.

Principles of Knowledge Useful in the Future

The best hope for improving the situation of history education may be for history to become more like other school subjects that remain central to the educational enterprise; that is, to contribute to cross-disciplinary efforts to help students develop critical-thinking abilities, and to supply subject-matter knowledge that can be usefully applied in the future. Does history possess this kind of useful subject-matter knowledge, and if so, where might it be found?

When we look to other school subjects, we see that they are based on teaching students general principles of how the world works, principles that can be applied in the future such as addition and subtraction in mathematics, grammar and punctuation in language, and photosynthesis and gravity in science. General principles possess the extraordinary capacity to carry knowledge of past experience across the boundary of time into the future where this knowledge can help people to function effectively in their lives. It might be said that disciplines of all kinds—from medicine to fly-fishing to small engine repair—exist for the express purpose of identifying, systemizing, and imparting their general principles of knowledge.

History education is unique among school subjects in that it does not identify general principles of knowledge to impart. They aren't found where principles of intellectual disciplines are normally identified: in textbooks, curriculum standards, and formal programs of instruction such as Advanced

Placement courses.[9] Why is history the only school subject not to teach students general principles of knowledge applicable to the future?

Professionals in fields other than history identify general principles derived from their subject matter and pass on this knowledge to teachers who pass on the knowledge to students. Unlike other professionals, historians concentrate on describing events of the past rather than identifying principles useful in the future. Without general principles to impart, history teachers are left to recount one-time events of the past, although this knowledge is not applicable to the future.

Is it plausible to believe that history might be the only intellectual discipline from which general principles of knowledge cannot be derived? The fact is, history has been supplying humans with useful principles of knowledge for at least 24 centuries, since the time of Thucydides in Greece and Sun Tzu in China. Thucydides identified principles of history including three basic motives for war—fear, honor, and self-interest—and the principle that those who promote war tend to scorn those who resist war as cowardly or unpatriotic. Sun Tzu identified principles of history that are still required reading among military strategists today.

The founders of the American republic intentionally mined the past for principles that could guide their new nation into the future, principles such as freedom of expression, due process under law, and the principle that people have a desire and a right to live free from foreign control. In earlier times, history could involve more than the act of describing past events; it could involve the ambition to derive from events principles useful in the future, an ambition that historians of the academic world have largely abandoned.

An exception is the Applied History Project at Harvard University, which is warning of the "Thucydides Trap," the tendency of a rising power to go to war with an established power. The Harvard group hopes that raising awareness of this principle of history (they call it a historical analogue) might help China and the United States to avoid a devastating future war between the two superpowers.

Principles of history cannot be considered laws or rules that always apply in the same way to similar circumstances. The Harvard group found that the Thucydides Trap applied in 12 of 16 cases over the past 500 years, a 75 percent likelihood of occurrence.[10] Rather than rules, principles of history are *tendencies* that can serve to inform judgment in the realm of human affairs.

Principles of history are similar to principles of social science fields such as psychology and sociology that likewise deal with variable human behavior. Not every human is afflicted with depression or subject to mob behavior, yet these general principles are widely accepted in academic circles and routinely taught to students in psychology and sociology courses. Is society better off knowing about these tendencies—although they are not hard-and-fast rules—or would we be better off remaining ignorant of them? How many people would suffer and die due to such ignorance?

How do these principles of knowledge differ from principles of history such as *people tend to resist outside control*, and *rising powers tend to go to war with established powers*? Is society better off knowing about such historical tendencies, or are we better off remaining ignorant of them? How many millions of people have suffered and died due to such ignorance?

One difference between the disciplines is this: psychology and sociology students are taught principles of psychology and sociology, whereas history students are not taught principles of history. Another difference: Principles of history may deal with momentous events that intensely

affect entire societies, including events with the potential to involve large-scale death and destruction. Few intellectual disciplines can offer society more crucial principles of knowledge than history can; yet history education systematically fails to supply such knowledge to students and society.

Everyone says that we should learn from history—a wise sentiment but an empty one without a mechanism for doing so. In our schools and in our society we may learn *about* history, but we seldom learn *from* history. The best practical means to learn from history is to identify general principles that can be applied to new situations arising in the future, the mechanism utilized by virtually all productive human endeavors to provide knowledge useful in the future.

Historical Thinking With and Without General Principles

How might historical learning look different from current practice if students were to apply their thinking skills to enduring principles of history rather than to one-time events of the past as they do now? Let's consider a scenario in which students apply the historical thinking skill of source analysis to the American war in Vietnam.

Under the conventional approach, students would learn a number of facts relating to the Vietnam War, such as the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the 1954 Geneva Accords, the Domino Theory, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the Tet Offensive, the My Lai massacre, and the Paris peace talks. Then students would compare several differing sources, some who favored the war and some who opposed it. At the conclusion of the exercise, students would make a judgment as to which source(s) had the best argument.

What have students learned from this activity that satisfies the basic requirement of education to supply knowledge useful in the future? Not much. The knowledge acquired by students in this scenario relates to the particular case of the Vietnam War—it's not transferable to the future when students might need to make judgments about proposed future wars in places like Iran or Korea. Students learned *about* history, but they didn't learn *from* history.

But what if students were to consider the Vietnam War in relation to other wars studied in history class? Might recurring patterns be discerned that represent general principles that could inform judgment in the future? The Vietnam War is fertile ground for considering a number of important tendencies in history, such as *people tend to resist outside control, stronger nations tend to invade weaker nations, even superpowers experience limits to their power,* and *many or most military invasions of distant lands fail over the long term.*

If students, and the citizens they will become, are aware of such enduring principles of history, they are in a position to apply their critical thinking abilities

to important questions of the day, not just to academic exercises about selected bygone events. They can think critically about questions that may literally involve looming matters of life and death: "Are we inclined to invade County X because it's weaker than we are? Are the people of Country X likely to resist our invasion? Based on historical experience, what are likely costs of this invasion for the people of our country and the target country? Why would this invasion be likely to succeed when so many foreign invasions fail?"

It's not possible to exercise informed judgment about serious matters like going to war without asking questions such as these, yet these questions were not raised in any prominent or sustained way by politicians, the media, or the public prior to the U.S. invasions of Vietnam and Iraq.[11] The questions weren't raised, no doubt, because people were largely unaware of the exceedingly basic and exceedingly important principles of history that would prompt such informed and thoughtful inquiries. There exists only one place in society where citizens may systematically acquire such crucial knowledge of the world, and that place is history class.

If history education were to identify general principles of historical knowledge, the knowledge-thinking feedback loop would become complete: useful historical knowledge would support useful thinking that informs judgment in the realm of human affairs. In so doing, history would fulfill the mission of education by supplying knowledge applicable to the future.

If historians wish to confine their efforts to describing events of the past, that's their business. Then the task of identifying enduring principles of historical knowledge falls to history educators, who bear the professional responsibility to impart important knowledge of the world that can help students and society to function effectively in the future. Because that's *our* business.

Notes

1. *Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools*, Bradley Commission on History in Schools, www.nche.net/content.asp?contentid=160.
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3. Bruce VanSledright, Kimberly Reddy, and Brie Walsh, "The End of History in Elementary Schools?" *Perspectives on History*, American Historical Association (May 2012), www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2012/the-end-of-history-education-in-elementary-schools.
4. Benjamin M. Schmidt, "The History BA since the Great Recession," *Perspectives on History*, American Historical Association, Dec. 2018, www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report.
5. Daniel Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School? A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions about How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009) 28, 25.
6. Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 92.
7. *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 7, www.mathedleadership.org/docs/ccss/CCSSI_Math%20Standards%20Expanded.pdf.
8. *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects,* National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 7, www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf.
9. Mike Maxwell, *Future-Focused History Teaching: Restoring the Power of Historical Learning* (Mancos, Colo.: Maxwell Learning, 2018), 20, 185.
10. Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, Sept. 24, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/.
11. See for example: Steve Rendall, "In Prelude to War, TV Served as Official Megaphone," *FAIR*, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (April 1, 2003), https://fair.org/extra/in-prelude-to-war-tv-served-as-official-megaphone/, accessed June 10, 2019. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) looked at nightly news coverage from ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS during a two-week period leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Of 393 televised interviews about Iraq, most featured current or former government officials sounding the drumbeat for war; only "17 percent of total on-camera sources represented skeptical or critical positions on the U.S.'s war policy."

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