History as Wonder and Connection
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Many years ago, on the first night of a class in medieval history, our professor opened the semester by turning off the lights. Burning candle in hand, she moved to the center of the room, and whispered, “History is the act of communing with ghosts. To become a historian you must listen to the spirits of those who lived long ago.”

This was a dramatic beginning to a course. The professor startled us with the revolutionary idea that history can be intriguing, even mysterious. Over the decades, the field has become even more compelling, enriched by a multiplicity of perspectives – social history, women’s studies, environmental history, and postmodern theories – and today’s scholars study a fascinating array of topics, from the history of families and children to the histories of emotions like anger and cheerfulness.

Yet it would appear that outside of academia many people are not aware of these innovations. In my U.S. History and Western Civilization survey classes, I find that most students still associate history class with memorizing dates, long lists of them. To these skeptics, history is an endless narrative, occasionally interrupted by events both tedious and irrelevant to their lives. A discouraging picture, yes – but at the same time, this scenario presents a dynamic pedagogical challenge: How does one design a history class that will spark the curiosity of even the most alienated student?

There is no single answer to this central question. The teacher’s task is to find ways to draw the student into the lives of those who lived decades, centuries, or thousands of years earlier. Like the professional historian equipped with a repertoire of analytical skills and a personal capacity for empathy, the student’s task is to practice thinking historically, opening portals to the past to look into the lives of fellow humans – an ancient Mesopotamian woman, a nineteenth-century factory worker, a suffragette of the Progressive era: Who were these individuals? What did they see and hear and feel? What influences shaped their lives? What experiences motivated their actions? At its heart, the study of history is the humanist’s quest, an imaginative traveling through time to discover the sensual, cultural, and psychological realities of earlier human beings and their societies. To make these connections across time and space, the student historian learns to “listen” to the voices preserved by primary sources – art, artifacts, and written documents ranging from law codes and letters to excerpts from diaries and literary works.

In LaGuardia’s Social Science Department, the primary source approach is fundamental to teaching and learning. Recently enhanced by “smart” classrooms outfitted with Internet-ready computers, projectors, and large screens, these rooms enable instructors and students to access and share a rich selection of reproductions of historical art, photos of archaeological sites, and excerpts from primary documents. With the increasing availability of digital-based media, it is simpler than ever to afford students multiple and sometimes spontaneous opportunities to encounter diverse geographies, thinkers, writers, and artists.

But availability of sources is one thing; interpretation of sources is a classroom challenge of a different order. In his provocative book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (2001), Stanford professor Sam Wineburg explores the complexities of teaching historical interpretation. Historical inquiry, in Wineburg’s view, is neither natural nor easy; at times less focused on answers than on the process of creating fruitful questions, it may feel murky or uncomfortable. Posing hypothetical or tentative conclusions, Wineburg’s historian is an “expert at cultivating puzzlement,” one who “generate[s] a road map” of questions leading to fresh insights about the subject (21). In his emphasis on “cultivating puzzlement,” Wineburg echoes the recommendations of the...
medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum. In her 1997 address to the American Historical Association, Bynum suggested that “our job as teachers is to puzzle, confuse, and amaze” and to “rear a new generation of students who will gaze in wonder” at history’s artifacts and texts (26). Both Wineburg and Bynum champion the use of primary sources in the classroom, particularly those that highlight history’s complex nature.

Encouraged to read actively from a set of Lincoln’s speeches and letters, for example, students can discover for themselves the contradictory ideals that were part of nineteenth century American history. In my own experience, the use of visual objects can spark interest in an unfamiliar topic: the mystery of an Egyptian sphinx, a medieval gargoyle, a bold modernist painting, or a provocative political cartoon are particularly helpful when modeling for students forms of thinking, interpreting, and questioning historically: What clues can we detect in these historical artifacts? How can we interpret them to understand the people who made them? How can we relate the meanings of the images to the meanings of the texts from the same era? As they prepare to present their own hypotheses about the historical significance of these artifacts, students realize that thinking historically requires thinking creatively.

Questioning, then, leads to discovery; students in my Western Civilization class are surprised by the material conditions of earlier pre-industrial eras, expressing shock, dismay, and genuine concern when they learn that until recently average life spans were half their own. Life without antibiotics and aspirin? No anesthesia? No dentistry? Women dying in childbirth? Many students are absolutely aghast. Teaching us “to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born, history educates (leads outward’ in the Latin) in the fullest sense” (Wineburg 24). If animated by the wonder and mystery of lives remote from her own “fleeting moment,” the student historian who reads ancient primary sources, the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, or The Iliad, will understand more deeply why themes of loss, suffering, fear of death, and the search for spiritual meaning have inspired so many works of literature over the ages.

Forming and pursuing questions encourages students to see themselves as independent and active learners. At the beginning of each semester in my Western Civilization and U.S. History classes, I introduce the interdisciplinary nature of history with an exercise that requires small groups of students to answer one of the following questions: What is the meaning of existence? Why is there violence in the world? Why has there been so much war over the centuries? Why, historically speaking, do men usually have more power than women? How did humans come to exist? What happens after we die? In U.S. History classes I may also ask: Do humans want freedom? What does it mean to be American?

Controversial and without definitive answers, these questions lead students to reflect upon heroism and compassion, callousness or cruelty, freedom or tyranny, and point toward a variety of disciplines - psychology, sociology, philosophy, science, and religion. In the next session, each group makes an informal presentation, and we discuss their responses with the entire class. At this stage, students recognize that their questions have elicited not consensus but a spectrum of responses of increased complexity and purpose. In the end, the class is better prepared for the next, and essential, step of forming independent questions and challenging their own formerly held assumptions about a range of issues, including the most sensitive like gender and religion.

The goal of this activity is to show that tough and tricky questions about human nature require a multidisciplinary approach vital to meaningful reflection and analysis. On the whole, students enjoy the intellectual challenge posed by these questions, and many will begin to reference ideas from other classes, thus embracing a multidisciplinary framework and highlighting broader questions to be revisited throughout the term. For example, a particularly favorite reference is Plato’s Allegory of the
Cave, often first encountered in critical thinking and philosophy courses. Removed from modern life by over two thousand years, Plato’s emphasis on the power of human thinking resonates with many LaGuardia students. One of the many rewards of teaching an introductory course in Western Civilization is the opportunity to share history’s rich philosophical traditions with students energized by discovering the connections between the Allegory and Hippocrates, Thucydides, and other Greek writers.

Similarly, in my U.S. History and Western Civilization II classes, I find that many students are attracted to the Enlightenment thinkers of the late 1700s - those writers who dare their readers to ask troubling questions. Few experiences are more exhilarating than reading Voltaire’s stirring pleas for religious tolerance or Thomas Paine’s defense of individual conscience or Mary Wollstonecraft’s argument that women have the right to an education. Reading these original documents, students experience momentous ideas and their consequences more directly, as they begin to connect Enlightenment thought to the political and social revolutions that have shaped our modern lives.

One of my favorite examples of the transformative power of thinking historically centers on a student, Raymond. A father in his thirties, Raymond was an exceptional student in my Western Civilization II course - energetic and engaged in almost every discussion. One day, after we had completed the chapter on the nineteenth-century social thought of Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, Raymond stayed to tell me how much he enjoyed this particular period of knowledge. Since childhood, he had wrestled with questions about politics, philosophy, and religion. “Always a thinker, always a bit skeptical,” was how he described himself. His parents, however, were not happy with their son’s analytical inclinations; his mother ridiculed his ideas and punished him as a child for saying “crazy things.”

But for Raymond the study of history had been liberating. In particular, he enjoyed the Enlightenment philosophers and the nineteenth-century thinkers who urged critical thinking. After years of enduring insults from family and friends, he found a safe place to discuss his questions about politics, religion, and society, and he was surprised to see that throughout history others shared his reservations about hierarchical forms of authority. Raymond appreciated Marx’s critiques of the economic structure, and sympathized with Nietzsche’s views on religion. “I take this class,” he wrote:

and I learn that not only is it okay to ask my questions but there’s a whole group of people throughout history who have done just that, and they’re considered the great minds. With this last group [the nineteenth-century thinkers], it’s like I found my soul mates or something. You have no idea how happy this class has made me.

A few semesters later, Raymond told me he had followed up by taking more liberal arts classes and hoped to become a high school teacher. Although Raymond’s story is one of the more memorable, many students over the years have shared similar experiences.

Wonder. Humanism. Empathy. Contemporary scholarship on the teaching of history abounds in terms that accentuate discovery and amazement. In generating student excitement in the history class, primary sources play a pivotal role. “As teachers, we must astonish and be astonished” (Bynum 26). Voltaire, Marx, and Nietzsche spoke directly to Raymond, astonishing him with the immediacy and catharsis of nineteenth-century ideas that have meaning in his twenty-first century New York life. Direct engagement with primary documents - with the ideas and values of his “soul mates,” Bynum’s “spirits of those who lived long ago” - liberated Raymond, opening him to the reality of the past, challenging him to construct his own historical and social interpretations, and prompting him to question the complexities of his present.
WORKS CITED


