

David W Fletcher, Fall 2004 (Revised February 2015)

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READINGS ABOUT TEACHING THE PAST AND THEIR APPLICATION

The three books reviewed focus on issues of teaching that relate primarily to the college or university setting. *The Practice of University History Teaching* (Manchester University Press, 2000), edited by Alan Booth and Paul Hyland, surveys current research on course design, techniques, and assessment and applies its findings to the teaching of history. The book draws material from contributors who are mostly from the United Kingdom. *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Temple University Press, 2001), by Sam Wineburg, also looks at the nexus of educational psychology and historical inquiry but more so from within the discipline itself, for example, the *how* and the *what* of the processes at work. He elaborates on the situation of history teaching in the American context, and he includes in his book previously published material (chapters one, two, nine, and ten) and papers that he co-authored with Suzanne Wilson (chapters six, seven, and eight) and Janice Fournier (chapters four and five). *Excellence in University Teaching: New Essays* (University of South Carolina Press, 1975), edited by Thomas H. Buxton and Keith W. Prichard, is an older work that relies little on educational research and represents the savvy of quite a diverse group on the teaching profession generally. No females contribute to this book, but the writers pool their vast experience from various disciplines.

The Practice of University History Teaching (PUHT) effectively uses team writing for thirteen of its eighteen chapters. The university context is decidedly British, since only three of thirty-eight contributors come from the United States. PUHT clearly and repeatedly states its

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opposition to “research and publication” as primary vehicles for advancement in academia and to a “disciplinary culture” that remains aloof from pragmatic concerns of society. Teaching itself is worthy of elevation to higher importance in history and other fields of study. Several contributors emphasize *process* over *content* in history learning, though none suggest a strict dichotomy. Educators who are serious about improvements in pedagogy will ask questions, do self-evaluations, use student feedback, engage peer discussion, and continue their research.

Diversity and eclecticism in course content are real keys. Tutors must be student oriented and focused on student interests and needs. Booth’s “journey of discovery” sums up the process quite well (p. 35). Relevancy drives student interest and motivation. Variety in learning and assessment methods depend on flexible curricula. In such a fluid environment, good pedagogy requires planning and reflection. Haphazard preparation cannot guarantee success regardless of the educator’s level of experience.

Hitchcock, Shoemaker, and Tosh rightly laud the strength of “methodological eclecticism” in history. They portray history as “a uniquely messy object of study” (p. 49). Hence, curricula ought to give students practice “in picking out priorities from the dust heap of historical incident” (p. 50). Active assimilation, rather than passive osmosis, of the “stuff” of history is preferred. And history teachers today have an arsenal of tools to increase student involvement and motivation (see chapter eight). Good, practical assessment, that is based on precise learning objectives and linked to sundry teaching methods, defines progress in learning

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for both instructor and student (p. 230). Patience and reevaluation can help educators elevate standards and achieve comprehensive goals.

On the down side, PUHT repeats a lot of information, probably because it is a composite work. The contributors also offer too much theory. They could integrate more practical ideas, although the book, admittedly, contains a lot of pragmatic suggestions. Perhaps this latter critique stems from PUHT's excessive reliance on surveys that can be unreliable and unhelpful. Too often, surveys address pedagogical concerns generally and do not focus on specific courses or clientele.

Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts (HTOUA) looks at pedagogical processes inherent to historical knowledge, what the author calls "the question of understanding historical understanding" (xi). To be sure, Wineburg overstates the import of his assertion that questions about epistemology in historical study "have rarely been asked" (viii). But he rightly highlights its lack of emphasis. He refreshingly situates the pedagogical enterprise not in the contentious debate over standards but in history's complexity or tension—its personal and relevant facets (i.e., what is familiar and proximate) versus its impersonal and inconsequential aspects (i.e., what is unknown and trivial). This tension, he notes, is "essential and irreducible" (p. 6).¹

His critique of textbooks as "referential illusions" (quoting Roland Barthes) is apropos. But do subjective factors like perspective and persuasion disqualify as historical discourse such exploitations of "various linguistic conventions" (p. 12)? Nevertheless, he underscores the

¹Hegel would be proud!

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uncertainty of how the mind works and how human reason, contrary to the plethora of paradoxes and ambiguities that exist in the world, searches for and constructs order and meaning. But it is not clear whether Wineburg himself avoids the problem of cynicism or solipsism (p. 24).

For further investigation, he suggests a closer look at psychometrics, backward history, and wrong answers. The complicated process of abstract reasoning and its pertinence for history education also require greater elaboration. Increasingly, historians embrace teaching methods based on cognitive psychology, and refinements will follow additional research. But in Wineburg's thinking, the problem for history remains a dichotomy between traditional historiography and recent process criticism (see p. 52). At best, though, the *product* hardly can be separated from the *process*.

On the down side, HTOUA espouses individual student cognition and its matrices to the exclusion of verisimilitude or consistency of human nature in historical epistemology. This is surprising, since Wineburg's background includes studies in religion and psychology. He relies at times too much on a word's etymology for his argument. This causes him to force narrow, strained meanings on words and dismiss their common syntactical usage (see "context" and "educate," pp. 21, 24). Occasionally, HTOUA misconstrues the work of historians in order to make a point contrariwise (i.e., historians as prosecuting attorneys and students as jurors, p. 77). Unless the reader enjoys case studies, the last half of the book is not too interesting. And it is unfortunate that Wineburg, or the publishers, do not credit the female co-authors on either the jacket or title-page.

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Excellence in University Teaching (EUT), to be sure, represents dated and wholly male viewpoints on teaching. But the collective wisdom of notable educators offers valuable insights. As these professors stand on the cutting edge of radical social changes in the mid-1970s, they concur in several recommendations for effective pedagogy. Elevate the importance of teaching to that of research in the universities. Acknowledge and reward teachers who are dedicated to effective practice in the profession. Replace indoctrination with facilitation as the instructor's primary modus operandi. Respect the individuality and opinions of every student, communicate expectations clearly, and promote creativity and student choice in assignments and assessments.

Peter Bien's accommodation to "radicals" via Bergson's philosophy seems credible but overly cinematic. His negative suggestions ("none of the following should be adopted . . . none is likely to work," p. 174) smack of unhappy psychological management instead of confident pedagogical practice. Huston Smith's gestalt approach opts for encounter groups over traditional lectures, but he concedes happily that even orthodox lecture can be incorporated powerfully into a gestalt framework. S. N. Postlethwait avows that the spirit of education involves "a comradeship of sharing and exchanging of experiences and an excitement that grows from common interests and hopes between teacher and student" (p. 220). Accordingly, teacher and students undertake a "symphony of learning" (p. 221). But these educators see teaching, just like learning, as an individual process. Duane Manning summarizes it this way: "Teaching is probably best when it is perfected in such a manner *that one's personality strengths come*

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through in their purest form. This uniqueness of expression and style should be one of the most cherished forms of diversity on the campus” (p. 245).

On the down side, EUT often reflects nostalgic and naive opinions of educators who basically are unacquainted with early research in educational psychology. As a result, a lot of the suggestions by contributors befit anecdotal wisdom and not reality.

Overall, the idea of Wineburg’s backward chronology is intriguing, since that is how humans think about the past, i.e., from the present time backwards. Backward chronology may be used in a limited way in the classroom setting as a backdoor approach to introduce a topic or as projection or flashback to vivify historic events or to show causal relationships over time.

All of the readings encourage use of activities with curriculum, and such could include the following: field study or visitation of a historic site, individual presentation or recital of personal discovery of history, group project or learning history in community, genealogical study or examination of personal history, archival work or the role of primary documents in history, exercise in tracing oral and written traditions or the role of memory in history and its transmission, looking at visual representations or seeing history, listening to musical compositions or hearing history, finding artifacts or the importance of material culture for history, demographic study or “nuts” and “bolts” in history, use of charts and graphs or plotting

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history, use of maps or the role of geography in history, an internet project or the study of history in the electronic age, and group critique of films and movies or Hollywood and history.²

For in class time, students will read from primary sources and some interpretation. Class periods can utilize lectures, discussion of readings, work on and analysis of activities, and student presentation. If the class is not too large, material can be posted on a Web Page for sharing of information and ideas.

Unfortunately, none of the books reviewed deal with the idea of pre-tests and post-tests, and only PUHT gives an appraisal of post-tests (see chapter seventeen). Of course, to administer pre-tests and post-tests is very time-consuming, but since it is in line with more traditional pedagogical approaches, it may be worth the effort.

In my mind, exploration and preoccupation with the method is paramount. The data should be legitimate, but students should not be penalized for any lack of set quantity. Assessment of quality of work should focus on the method itself. This will be difficult, since data tends to determine how well students learn the method. To this end, written reports, maybe a diary of investigations, by students can be kept in a portfolio for instructor perusal and assessment.

Curriculum and corresponding activities should be defined clearly. Goals for learning should be stressed. Terms of assessment are important and can be negotiated. All curriculum

²See David L. Rowe, "Preachers and Prophets: Using Film to Teach American Religious History," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 7, no. 4 (2004): 230-237.

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must be completed for a passing grade, but students can be actively involved in the assessment process by assigning their own, or individual, numerical weight for each section of the curriculum and its activity. In this way, each student can maximize his or her strengths and minimize his or her weaknesses. This would also place considerable importance on the instructor's consultation with every student at the beginning of the course, and this would be a valuable way to get acquainted with students and build information about how to help each one through the course.