Some Additions to the History Teacher's Toolbox: The Scylla of Trivia and the Charybdis of Opinion

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I teach courses in liberal arts, European history, and historiography at a public university in southern Ontario that is named after a far-too-glorified British general in the War of 1812. My Mennonite heritage and professional research interests in Anabaptist history certainly shape my allergy to the cult-like status that some at my university give to Sir Isaac Brock. Despite these misgivings, I feel at home in the diverse, non-denominational, secular environment of Brock University, and I enjoy teaching introductory classes there. Teaching forces me to read and think broadly, and I am sure that this helps me become a better historian, not just a narrow specialist. I do worry and wonder, however, how my students are faring.

Over the dozen years that I have taught at the university level I have tried to figure out how students learn history effectively and what stands in their way. I started my teaching career with the luxury of only having to lead smaller seminars, and I still think these are wonderful teaching venues – when the seminar groups are filled with committed students, which is not always or even often the case. In the last eight years I have frequently taught first-year lecture courses, and the sizes of my lecture classes have markedly increased. Given these challenges of varying student commitment and growing class sizes, it has become harder to cover course material in a satisfactory way, and tutorial sessions are often discouraging. It must be very frustrating for good students in these class settings; it certainly is for me.

I do not yet have definitive answers for how to deal with the challenges students and instructors face, but I can summarize where I stand now. While I used to do my best to make sure I presented students with the full range of course information, I have almost given up on "covering the material." Instead, my goal is increasingly to help students think anew about history so that they can become better at doing history themselves. I share an understanding of history with the British medievalist John Arnold, who

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defines it as "true stories about the past."[1] This definition of history, I have come to suspect, is at odds with a deeply engrained preconception that most students bring to college and university history courses: They think of history as "the past."

The word "history" does sometimes carry this very general meaning in everyday speech, but this meaning only stands in the way of clear thinking and learning in history courses. After all, if students are to learn about the past, which of the millions or billions or trillions or kajillions of details about it should they remember? I'm sure CGR readers who have even only brief experience teaching will have heard a much less philosophical version of this question coming from students themselves: Will that be on the exam? Facts and information are of course important in teaching and learning history, but far less than most students realize. If we think in terms of John Arnold's definition, the preconception that history equals the past results in a belief that learning history in the first place involves memorizing a huge collection of data. From the standard perspective, history is not something students can learn to do or make; they think it just happens and their only job is to learn about it. History devolves into a grand game of trivia.

There is a flip side to students' preconceptions of history as the past. In college and university history courses (and often in high school history classes) students quickly encounter conflicting true stories about historical events and issues. In my experience too many students want to shy away from complexity and competing perspectives. Good students in introductory courses (and even in advanced ones) are usually quick to see that real historical learning is more about interpretation than memorization, but their aversion to conflict or their deeply held preconceptions about history as the past bring them back to the idea that true stories about the past should be uncomplicated and unproblematic. Too often these students will arrive at a weak but common explanation for historians' disagreements, namely bias. My colleagues and I try again and again to teach students to read historical writing for arguments supported by good reasons and evidence, and also to create their own histories with good arguments, reasons, and evidence.

The advanced lessons for students are that scholarship is an ongoing

[1] See John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* 10th ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000).

set of conversations aimed at evaluating existing knowledge and creating new knowledge, and that these conversations can sometimes be quite contentious. Debate is a fundamental part of our profession. I feel a sense of frustration and failure when I run across senior students who have not moved beyond beginners' preconceptions and still think about differing views in simplistic terms. When we ask students to learn about historiographical debates, I fear that far too many equate this with reading blogs and social media entries online. Historians, some students think, are just expressing their personal views about the past, and students should have a turn expressing theirs. Having to learn about the history of debates, reasons, and evidence in support of arguments, and the strengths or weaknesses of various methods for studying evidence from the past, only gets in the way of self-expression. For students who imagine they love "history" but are impatient with disciplinary standards for dealing with plural perspectives, one frequent reaction is to want to "get their own views out there." For them, history devolves into opinion about the past, and they want their opinions to be heard.

My current approach aims at helping students learn to steer between the Scylla of trivia and the Charybdis of opinion. I want to keep the enthusiasm that so many bring to history courses in their first days at university while I also try to transform the way they think about and practice historical scholarship. This is not an easy balance, because most people resist giving up long held views and habits. My goals and the challenges associated with them are certainly not new, and many (maybe most) other teachers share them with me. What is new (or new-ish) are the tools, both practical and conceptual, that I have discovered in the last several years. I share them with students at all levels in my "historian's toolbox," an online resource folder I make available through the course learning management system (Sakai, at my university). Below is a summary and discussion of some of those resources.

Digital Tools for Use in the Classroom

I want students to become better readers, listeners, analysts, and questioners. The new digital worlds that young people know so well are both a blessing and a curse in this regard. On the one hand, digital life means students read and write a great deal, but, on the other hand, I and many of my colleagues

worry about the quality of that textual life and the increasingly distracted and fractured attentions it helps encourage. "Turn off your devices!" demand some of my colleagues. I toy with making this demand, but so far I have not taken their path. I fear I'll start a losing battle against the students' wired selves. What I have tried to do is to become more aware of how students learn (or don't) from the technologies I do use in the classroom.

Connected with this concern is the question, What is the value of lectures? Among my worries is whether I'm inadvertently sending contradictory messages in my attempts to engage students. Like the great majority of my colleagues, I use digital slides in my lectures. I used to fill the slides with text so that I could better communicate information – or so I thought. For several years I have practiced reducing the textual detail in slides whenever possible, because I fear I am not helping students but rather reinforcing misconceptions about history as information about the past. As a consequence, when I employ PowerPoint or other similar linear slide projection tools, I try to use the slides as subjects of analysis and discussion whenever possible. I want students to listen and question rather than copy and forget.

This leads me to introduce my first tool: Prezi.[2] I discovered this relatively new presentation system just over a year ago, and I have increasingly made it my main platform for visual aids in lectures. What is most valuable about Prezi for history teaching is that it allows students to see relationships between images and information.[3] Slide projection has the limitation of showing one frame after another; it encourages linear thinking. By contrast, Prezi presentations consist of only one canvas, and I can show the audience the whole canvas or zoom in on parts; it encourages relational thinking. I prefer the latter, because I can use Prezi to illustrate to students how perspective makes a difference to knowledge, and I can better teach them about relationships between people, ideas, and events in time.[4]

[2] See www.prezi.com.

[3] For a quick example of Prezi's potential to illustrate perspective, see the template created by Adam Somlai-Fischer, http://prezi.com/cqmxgc-xv9jh/template-reveal-a-new-perspective/, accessed on May 23, 2012. For an excellent example of a Prezi integrated into a presentation, see James Geary, "Mixing Mind and Metaphor," TEDGlobal, Oxford, UK, July 2009, available through ted.com.

[4] Prezi is especially good, I think, at showing chronological relationships. For a Prezi I

Another tool that has changed my classroom practice as I shift from covering material to trying to transform student thinking about history is audience-response systems (sometimes called "clickers"). I have known about these for quite a while, but I began using them in my larger classes just three years ago. While some significant administrative and organizational challenges are associated with their use, my biggest initial concern stemmed from my reluctance to employ multiple-choice questions in history teaching. However, David DiBattista, a senior colleague in Psychology at Brock, has helped me see the possibilities of carefully conceived and well-constructed multiple-choice questions.

There are several advantages to using clickers or web-based audience-response systems in large classes. The first and most obvious is that they help test student knowledge. Multiple-choice polling gives me (and the students) instant feedback about the degree to which a class has understood, misunderstood, or not attempted to understand pre-class reading or in-class subjects. The danger, of course, is that I will reinforce the preconception of history as trivia if I ask only straightforward, knowledge-based questions. To counteract this, I repeatedly stress throughout a semester that knowledge is important in historical learning, but more important are higher-order skills such as the application and analysis of knowledge.

With a little training and preparation, instructors can really challenge students in larger classes with questions that test these higher-order skills. Examples include following up an explanation of thesis statements with a question about where in a text selection an author states an argument most clearly; or following up a discussion of perspective with a question about whose interests a primary source selection best articulates. Both kinds of questions have the strong potential to spark discussion even in the largest of classes, or, failing this, at least to allow a chance to provide further explanations based on a clearer sense of student learning. These higher-order skills are very important, and we must help students practice and improve them even before they attempt to write course essays.

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used over several weeks in a first-year history course in winter 2010, see http:/prezi.com/pfcrvaip3h9i/thinking-about-the-renaissance-and-reformation/. I have modified the paths to give general viewers a sense of the presentation. Paths have to be adapted from lecture to lecture.

Another advantage of audience-response systems is that we do not have to ask students merely right-wrong questions. Instead we can ask them about their preferences and preconceptions. Because they don't see who among their classmates is answering a particular way, though they do see a summary chart of the entire class's answers, they get a sense of how their own answers compare with those of their peers. In my history classes I use questions about preferences to draw links between beliefs in class on that day and past beliefs that we are trying to learn about. Polling gives students – even shy ones – an active role in their own learning in lectures. And it has the possibility to reinforce my message, if I use it carefully, that historical scholarship is fundamentally about informed dialogue and debate. On this last point I occasionally poll students before a lecture about which of two or three competing arguments they think is strongest; I then spend the lecture making a case for one or more to illustrate the importance of persuasion; I end by polling them at the lecture's conclusion to see if I have changed any minds. Here the medium helps strengthen the message.[5]

Tools for Teaching Persuasive Communication

Clickers and lectures alone cannot transform student attitudes toward history as a persuasive enterprise. There are lots of good guides to the skills of historical study, research, and writing that are aimed at students. In the last three years I have come to favor a short writing manual aimed at a broad audience across the humanities and social sciences, namely Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Norton, 2006). Some CGR readers might recognize Graff as a contributor to American "culture war" debates in the 1980s. His wise response to those heated public exchanges was to encourage literary scholars to "teach the conflicts"[6] – advice that applies as well now as it did then, and in historical as well as literary studies. Since issues in history and religious studies were often heated (think of the Reformation) and have the potential

[5] For more on related subjects, see Derek Bruff, *Teaching with Classroom Response Systems: Creating Active Learning Environments* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009). Also see his blog, "Agile Learning," at derekbruff.org.

[6] Gerald Graff, "Teach the Conflicts," in *The Politics of Liberal Education,* eds. Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1992), 57-73.

to become so again at any moment, we must ensure that we and our students can make sense of conflicting perspectives.

In *They Say / I Say* Graff and Birkenstein aim to demystify academic writing. They believe, as do I now, that students will be better able to understand why they should – and also, how they can – contribute to scholarly learning when they recognize that scholars do not work in a social vacuum but rather are constantly responding to past and current debates. Since reading this book, I find myself often referring to it in discussions with students inside and outside of class. One of its unique and powerful features is its use of templates. Academic writing, the authors argue, follows common patterns across the disciplines. From chapter to chapter and then in a summary appendix, they lay bare the common formulas academic authors use. These templates help students learn to write clearly and effectively. When I assigned this little guide in my graduate seminar this past year, the overwhelming majority of students told me they wished they had been required to read it much earlier in their studies.

Let me offer two examples of the book's transformative potential. First, it helps students think about, and me to explain more clearly, how they can formulate and develop arguments that matter in the disciplines to which they are relative newcomers. The trick, which good, established scholars know, is first to outline the state of knowledge on a subject and then to respond in a thoughtful way based on reasons and evidence. By contrast, students too often try to sound "objective" by erasing all traces of perspective in their writing about a subject. Because Graff and Birkenstein highlight the form persuasive writing takes and do so free of specific content, students can clearly see how and why their research and reasoning take on stronger relevance and significance only when they first compare their ideas to other arguments and points of view. *They Say / I Say* helps show in practical terms how history (and scholarship generally) functions as a rich debate and how students can participate, even before becoming experts.

Second, *They Say / I Say* helps me teach more effectively about the importance of academic integrity. Too often we warn students about the dangers of plagiarism without giving them powerful enough reasons for why it is so wrong. Sure, they're not allowed to copy, according to university regulations, but copying of various sorts goes on all the time in

a digital world. The results are very confusing for students. I try to resolve the confusion by explaining why plagiarism is a problem from a student's perspective: By blurring the line between other people's ideas and their own, they are obscuring their own unique voice. Honesty matters in part as a disciplinary and institutional standard but also for reasons that should matter to students. My teaching about plagiarism still involves warnings, but I now try to emphasize the positive message about the benefits and rewards integrity brings for self-expression in a community of scholars.

Another tool I have discovered relatively recently for teaching how persuasive communication works and why it matters is historical role-playing. I first learned about role-playing as a pedagogical approach in discussions with Gerald Hobbs at the Vancouver School of Theology. As part of a graduate course in church history Hobbs used a multi-day role-playing session in which each student had a unique role in Strasbourg of the 1520s. After several weeks of preparation, students spent several days negotiating with each other in character (e.g., as cathedral canons, popular preachers, nuns, prostitutes, town councilors, merchants) to achieve competing objectives. I found the idea intriguing when I first heard about it; after all, most courses on the Reformation do not include reenactments of iconoclastic rampages or shouting matches in the midst of sermons. Unfortunately, I was never a student in Hobbs's class, but his enthusiasm for this method of teaching made me pay more attention when I recently learned about the "Reacting to the Past" series of role-playing resources organized through Barnard College.

"Reacting to the Past" offers instructors practical guidance and resources for running successful role-playing units in courses. While I liked the idea of using role-playing, I was wary of the amount of pre-course planning and preparation that seemed (and is indeed) involved in making such projects work. However, when I discovered about four years ago that there was a large network of colleagues that offered support for history teaching using role-playing, I decided to take the plunge. The support takes a variety of forms. Most tangible are fully tested resources for nine role-playing scenarios. These include student game guides published through the Pearson company (a leading international provider of educational resources), and faculty guides available online through the "Reacting"

webpage.[7] In addition, there are online discussion groups for instructors that are supplemented by conferences and training sessions. While I have not attended any of the conferences, I appreciate the network of support. So far I have used two scenarios (one set in ancient Athens and the other in revolutionary Paris) over several years in an introductory liberal arts course. The Reacting community has close to two dozen further scenarios in development. Settings range from the ancient world through to the present, and many will be of interest to CGR readers.

There are some limitations to role-playing as an approach to teaching history. Even with the resources and support that the Reacting community provides, role-playing takes a great deal of energy. I would not want all my courses in a given year to take this format, nor would I recommend it to all my colleagues, since this approach does not match well with everyone's strengths and brings with it real limitations for class size. I am also wary of role-playing if it only involves students embodying a role. All the Reacting resources involve scenarios in which students have to work out competing goals and interests using ideas that would have been available at a particular time and place. My experience with the Reacting pedagogy has convinced me that debate and competition are crucial for the success of this form of teaching.

While I do see limitations to role-playing and have reservations about it, I, like Gerald Hobbs, have become an enthusiastic proponent. I will outline several of its benefits briefly here.

First, scenario-based teaching helps students learn in a deep, lasting way about how and why ideas mattered in people's lives, and by extension how and why they matter today. Second, the competitions that are part of the scenarios not only force students to get involved but make them want to be active in class. One key reason is that they do not merely compete and debate with each other as individuals; their roles force them to use ideas to build alliances, much like people do outside the university. That is, role-playing builds upon the students' social nature to teach about the social nature of ideas.

[7] See http://reacting.barnard.edu/. Also see the discussion of "Reacting" in Dan Berrett, "Mob Rule, Political Intrigue, Assassination: A Role-Playing Game Motivates History Students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 9, 2012.

Third, role-playing is fun. We often refer to Reacting scenarios as "games," and class sessions often involve boisterous debate that students initiate themselves. Fourth, the games help students think about past events not as fixed and discrete realities but as the contingent outcome of lots of factors. I often tell students that the results of past events could have been very different from what actually happened, but there is no better way of making this point than letting students discover it for themselves. For example, in my three experiences with the French Revolution scenario I have seen three different outcomes, two of which corresponded roughly with "the way things actually were" but one in which supporters of the monarchy were able to crush the Revolution with the help of Prussian troops. What better way is there to teach about true stories that could have turned out differently? Finally, role-playing debates and the Reacting resources to support them are a wonderfully effective way to teach the skills of persuasion. While we encourage debate by rewarding grade bonuses to the student or students who "win" a game, their grades ultimately depend on the quality of the arguments they make in support of their assigned objectives. Role-playing brings life and purpose to classroom debates that are otherwise sometimes (or often) staid and artificial.

Tools for Teaching Historical Thinking

By way of conclusion, let me say a little about some of the conceptual resources that, in addition to John Arnold's brief introduction to history, have helped me change the way I organize my courses and my goals. Especially inspiring have been Lendol Calder's essay and webpage, where he details how he transformed a survey course on American history into a course built on the principles of "uncoverage." Rather than trying to cover the subject of American history, Calder now uses his survey course primarily as a vehicle for getting students to practice the skills that historians use.[8] I too now conceive of all my courses, regardless of their format and size, in these terms. For example, if I assign a textbook (even in a first-year course), I do so only secondarily to provide students with knowledge about a subject or set of subjects; in the first place I use the textbook as an object for analysis.

[8] Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92 (2006): 1358-70.

To use Calder's terms, I want to uncover how historians make history so that students can become better at making it, too.

Calder's approach, and now mine, is based on important scholarship from the last several decades by educational psychologists with a special interest in how professional historians actually think and practice their craft. These scholars have used their insights to provide resources for better teaching. Good examples are the "Benchmarks of Historical Thinking" project based out of the University of British Columbia[9] and the work of the Stanford History Education Group in the US.[10] Scholars associated with both institutions have already provided a range of curricular resources.[11] While most of these are aimed at high school audiences, they are easily adaptable to university teaching, especially at the introductory level (see Calder's work).

These resources outline the discipline-specific skills and habits of mind that help explain to students what is unique about research and persuasive writing in history. While there are numerous ways of summarizing the elements of historical thinking, the "Benchmarks of Historical Thinking" are an excellent point of reference: "establish historical significance," "use primary source evidence," "identify continuity and change," "analyze cause and consequence," "take historical perspectives," and "understand ethical dimensions of history." My teaching – whether with Prezi, writing manuals, or role-playing games – aims to develop these habits of thinking.

Why should CGR readers pay attention to the elements of historical thinking? One reason is that scholars of Anabaptist studies usually conceive of their subjects in fundamentally historical terms (i.e., with reference to a beginning, whether biblical or in the Reformation), and occasional reference to basic cognitive steps involved in all historical thinking is a healthy exercise.

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[9] The project is run by the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness at the University of British Columbia under the leadership of Peter Seixas. For details, see http://historicalthinking.ca/. In addition to literature at that website, also see Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the 21st Century* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2008).

[10] See http://sheg.stanford.edu/.

[11] Here are two examples. Wineburg and his colleagues played a key role in the excellent webpage, "Historical Thinking Matters," http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/. The work of both Wineburg and Seixas has been influential for authors of the pedagogical resources at the "Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History" site: http://canadianmysteries.ca/en/index.php.

This exercise can help us to reflect at a meta-conceptual level on how stories about the Mennonite past are constructed and what they might mean. A second reason concerns the scholarly world beyond Anabaptist studies. Since our collection of fields is by no means unique in its historically shaped character, CGR readers have the possibility to contribute their expertise and experience to bigger discussions about historical thinking and educational psychology. Finally, many of us are teachers. I have come to agree with Sam Wineburg of the Stanford History Education Group that historical thinking is for many people "an unnatural act."[12] Most people think about the world from their own perspective in the present, and they find it difficult to learn about different worlds from conflicting perspectives. Therefore, the better we (both in the CGR community and beyond) know how we do or do not think effectively in historical terms ourselves, the better we will be able to teach our students to think historically.

I think it is increasingly important in our rapidly changing world for us to teach these skills so that students can be active contributors to debates that shape their lives rather than passive consumers of stories that others tell them. I want to help students steer a course between the Scylla of trivia and the Charybdis of opinion, so that they one day can reach Ithaca – or Goshen, Princeton, McGill, Cambridge, or other dreamed-of destinations, both inside and outside the university world.

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[12] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2001).