

Robert Blackey, et al., Teaching Innovations Forum: "Thinking Historically in the Classroom," *AHA Perspectives* 33.7 (October 1995)

NOTE: in his introduction, Blackey explains that the "contributors to this forum were asked to define and describe what thinking historically means, particularly with regard to their students, and then to explain, with the use of examples, how they teach and train their students accordingly." They produced ten distinctive yet complimentary essays.

Below, I have noted some of the highlights from their essays.

Robert Blackey (editor, Teaching Innovations Forum column): "[As professors,] Knowing that sooner or later much of the content we teach is forgotten (even *we* are not likely to remember much about the history we studied but do not teach), we believe that there is something more to our discipline than 'content.' At the heart of that 'something' is 'thinking historically' – a critical way of understanding and learning about the past that can be carried over into the study of other disciplines and beyond school walls, [and perhaps even a way of thinking that can help students become better human beings]." (1)

Allison Blakely (Howard University): "I want [students] to leave a class with a better grasp of the way the world works, and where they fit, than they had when they arrived. History's special contribution toward that end is in discerning basic patterns that have been evident in the evolution of human societies and in revealing dynamics at work among the forces promoting both continuity and change." (4)

Peter Frederick (Wabash College): "Students learn to think historically, ultimately, by getting out of their present time and into the kinds of real choices people faced in the past.... Immersing students in historical time and context reveals for them the complex realities of the human experience in the past; it also engages them in the kind of active learning that just might motivate them to discover that studying history can be both meaningful and fun." (24)

Robert Guitierrez (Florida; High School): "Current pedagogy emphasizes the need to make today's classrooms relevant and exciting. This is a troublesome concern, given the influences of popular culture.... [Still] there are some ideas and practices that can enhance the ability of individual teachers to encourage their students to think historically—that is, to gain an understanding of the past through the construction and communication of the human story.... To get students to think historically is to have them act as historians. Historians define their own purposes; students need to do likewise." (24-5)

Gordon Mork (Purdue University): "Present-mindedness ... seems to have given way to future-mindedness. In such a context, how can we hope to get students to think historically? Thinking historically ... means that students should think about things the way historians do. They should take a critical view of things by placing them in a historical context. They should realize that everything has a historical past, and that we can understand it better if we see it in relation to that past. Further they should have a sense of curiosity about how to achieve this greater understanding, and a sense of achievement when they succeed in doing so." (29)

Carol Pixton (Polytechnic School in CA): "History teachers ... have to 'hold two opposing ideas together at the same time' [a quotation from F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-up* (1936)]: that our students need to memorize facts and chronology, an endeavor inspiring to no one; and they need to understand and make the past meaningful by reflecting on interpretations and causation, and by seeing the relationship of history to their own lives.... We [teachers] might demonstrate in our teaching that we grapple with problems rather than provide preprogrammed answers. We should tackle difficult questions, and invite our students to do some of the answering.... (31)

"Though it may be difficult to define 'thinking historically,' it is possible to identify some common stances to teaching history which will not produce 'historical thinking': 1. History is not a story. It does not have a beginning, middle, and an end. 2. History is not alien. The past is prologue. 3. History is not chronology.... Such factual information alone ... yields no historical understanding. 4. History is not a

civics lesson. 5. History is not a morality play. 6. History is not boring, unless teachers and textbooks make it so.” (32)

Eric Rothschild (Scarsdale High School): “Thinking historically includes avoiding judging historical figures by today’s values.... To think historically, students need to question historical authority. Thinking historically means developing historical empathy... [which can lead to profound understandings of the complex positions in which people in the past found themselves].... Students must learn to recognize bias and the sources of bias.... The lessons they learn about their own biases and how they are writ large in their own history is a powerful one.” (32).

David Trask (Guildford Technical Community College): “A strong introduction to thinking historically...should introduce and involve students in the thought processes of historians, including how we know what we know, how and why events are interpreted differently over time, and how some events and trends are related to others. Historians ... need to reveal the unstated ideas and processes that underlie the production of lectures and other finished works of historical study. Classroom teachers should not be content simply to convey to students the results of their work.” (35)

Peter Stearns (Dean of the College of Humanities at Carnegie Mellon): “The essence of thinking historically involves a consistent focus on changes and the cause of change, with a concomitant ability to recognize continuities even amid change. Using historical data to define what significant changes occurred in the past or to note developments that do not constitute significant changes lies at the core of historical interpretation. Explaining why – that is, identifying the major causes of change or continuity – completes the chief task of historical analysis. At the intersection of history and many other disciplines, sorting out the areas of potential change from those fixed by the nature of the human species or by the inevitable qualities of social organization constitutes the principal challenge of interdisciplinary discussion.

“Historical thinking is simple enough to define, but it is not easily taught or learned. References to change over time, or to the balance between change and continuity, come so readily to professionals, that it is chastening to step back and realize how many students never quite get the point. These students seem far more comfortable with fixed patterns of human or social behavior, or with stark before and after contrasts, than with the real subtleties of historical thinking about change....

“Historical thinking depends on a number of other skills. It presumes 1) an ability to form an argument, using data for a purpose...; 2) a capacity to glean data from primary sources and to weigh the reliability of such sources (source assessment)...; 3) some capacity for handling diverse interpretations and testing theories about change...; 4) when possible, comparative analysis, which links history with anthropology, but which can also be applied to an understanding of change, as in, quite simply, asking students to compare ‘then’ with ‘now.’ [change over time].” (33-34)