

Condemned To Repeat the Past

Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past

by Sam Wineburg, Temple University Press, Pennsylvania, 2001

Reviewed by Joan Hays

Why study history? What do people need to know about the past? If we are bent upon studying history how can we best go about it? These are some of the thoughtful questions that lurk in the pages of this book. According to author Sam Wineburg we seem to be doing a poor job of teaching history, especially when compared to other subjects, such as the sciences and literature. He tells us that as far back as 1917, educators—especially those concerned with the psychology of learning—have been bemoaning the fact that American students are failing miserably when it comes to knowing the facts of American history. Even more disturbing, this level of poor performance has been essentially stable for the past 85 years.

The author of *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* suggests that we may be asking the wrong questions of these students for a number of reasons. One problem, according to Wineburg, is that the moment we decide to assess teaching effectiveness or student achievement we immediately opt for “objective” standardized tests. These measurements are easily scored and give us nice clean data sets but tell us little about how to improve teaching effectiveness. Wineburg also observes that we put a lot of effort into finding out what students don’t know and little effort into discovering what they do know and how they obtained that knowledge.

Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts is based on a number of well-developed case studies that allowed the author and his research colleagues to observe teaching/learning in a variety of environments using a

variety of techniques and strategies. The insights drawn from these research projects are potentially valuable for the teacher of history and those responsible for training teachers of history for many reasons.

For one thing, the studies are firmly based in the research literature. Wineburg and his colleagues have done their homework, and their work is carefully documented. The authors allow the reader to enter into the process of teaching/learning as experienced by the study subjects, and the subjects include teachers of varied experience and students of several levels. In addition, the studies are thorough, with clear and limited goals for each of the studies. Much time was spent gathering the anecdotal data that he reports clearly but almost too concisely. Finally, the studies offer practical ideas about how to better teach history in the typical classroom setting.

Several other important ideas emerge from Wineburg's studies that expose some of the persistent problems in the teaching of history. For example, it is clear that history is an extremely difficult topic because no one can enter into it completely. It is always filtered by our own "time" and our natural bias, no matter how we try to immerse ourselves in the milieu we're studying. Also, there are usually several points of view for any given point in history that should be considered.

Another problem, Wineburg points out, is that it is extremely difficult to engage students in the study of history because they do not see its relevance. People who think last month is the distant past don't easily connect to events from a generation or more ago. And finally, perhaps more than anything else, what is presented in textbooks is often selective, its importance established by its placement in the "user friendly" format, and it is presented as though spoken by the oracle.

Wineburg, in designing strategies for teaching history, is particularly concerned that students frequently do not have an opportunity to evaluate the original materials of history—documents such as letters, newspaper articles, and speeches. Therefore, students do not encounter the natural questions that arise: the contradictions, the anomalies for which there may be no available answers. He thinks it a great weakness that these contradictions, nagging questions, and other puzzlements, what he calls the "metadiscourse," are removed from textbooks and, as a result, from the curriculum.

Certainly, the examples that he gives of using original documents to engage students actively in the learning process demonstrate a high degree of success. But the limited set of original documents he used in the study might well bring up questions that students could need additional documents to answer. But where does it stop? How many documents does it take? Is this recreating history "wheels"?

Another disturbing issue arises from Wineburg's case studies of a

number of teachers of various experience and educational background. It becomes clear that students are at the mercy of the individual teacher. Sometimes, an excellent teacher may have a set of biases that so skew his or her viewpoint that everything taught is filtered by those lenses. Sometimes, teachers ill-prepared to teach history are expected to serve in that capacity. The results are students who may get totally incorrect information about aspects of the history curriculum. We see examples of these types of practitioners revealed in Wineburg's studies.

After reading Wineburg's book, I am compelled to agree with him that the process of teaching history may need a complete overhaul to engage students in the critical thinking process that can, perhaps, make history come alive and make them capable of understanding what history actually is.

Meanwhile, as he suggests, the assessors are busy making new standardized tests and deciding what isolated facts of history might demonstrate knowledge and what teaching strategies are acceptable for the evaluation checklist. He wistfully suggests that excellent teaching may be a personal gift and no amount of developing it as a "strategy" will make it as effective for everyone else.

I heartily recommend this book for history teachers and for teacher preparation courses at the undergraduate and graduate level. It is intelligent, provocative, well-written, and practical.

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