

Glimpsing at Pedagogy while Teaching History: A Mixture of Metacognition, Bird-Walking, and Quick Tips for Future Teachers

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HOWARD GARDNER, a Harvard professor of education who is best known for his multiple intelligences theory, published his *Unschooling Mind* in 1991.¹ In his chapter dealing with the social sciences and humanities, he paraphrases the work of Gaea Leinhardt, who described the complex “moves” that good history teachers typically make. Her depiction of what historians do in class suggests that historians have at least as difficult a time making sense of their subject as do practitioners of the hard sciences:

[The] teacher must present the story or narrative (what happened); the defining structures (the political and economic forces that were operating); long-term interpretive themes (the tensions that operated across eras or populations); and also the metasystems of history (the kinds of analysis, hypothesis testing, and synthesis in which a competent historian habitually engages). The student must not only abandon a simple fact-script-and-personality view of history but also orchestrate and integrate these different perspectives. For many students, the task proves as formidable as the kinds of integration required in mathematical and physical studies.²

Thus, effective history teachers manage to present the forest and the trees concurrently, meanwhile keeping both within a historical setting

and a historiographical framework, throwing in as well evaluations of the tensions between change and continuity unique to the period. And they make it look easy. This essay seeks to add to our discussion by arguing that, even given the challenges relating to the complex “moves” required when teaching history in a way that students find meaningful, adding advice about sound pedagogical techniques during class is both possible and desirable.

History professors should find time, especially during upper-division history courses, to incorporate instruction on teaching practices that would be useful both to our students who plan to earn secondary teaching certificates and to those who are headed to graduate school and, eventually, their own college courses. Modeling good teaching is important. But reinforcing methods you think are worthy of being copied by pointing them out while teaching will encourage your students turn your models into actual practices once they are standing at the front of their own classrooms.

My first suggestion is to use the initial class meeting of the term to lead a metacognitive discussion about how you put your course together. Social studies teacher education candidates in college history courses benefit when instructors share with them why particular topics, out of many, were chosen for the syllabus. How did you go about selecting topics, giving the course focus and themes? Why did you choose to leave out some parts of the history of the period in favor of others? Similarly beneficial is explaining on the first day of class why certain readings, out of many, were chosen for the course, as well as how these texts will help accomplish the goals of the course.

The first day of class is also a good time to share the problems associated with periodization. This issue is more important in some courses than in others. I can expect, for example, that students entering my Renaissance and Reformation class will come to me with a generally positive opinion of the Renaissance. Getting them to think about the difficulties associated with assuming one period of time to be superior to the periods before and after it goes a long way in helping them to see that breaking history into eras is not a neutral process. Awareness of the implications related to assigning reputations to historical periods helps make better teachers. Normally, I have them respond in writing to the words “renaissance” and “reformation,” asking them to describe associative words or images those terms invoke for them. Then we talk about how to connect the two periods, which seem on the surface to be so different. Sometimes, I bring in such pictures as Savanorola’s bonfire of the vanities and defaced Catholic churches, as well as quotes from Zwingli’s sermons, to use as examples of how the “vulgarity” of Renaissance art provoked cries of idolatry and

triggered an anti-aesthetic impulse among many early Protestants.

I go on to remind students that they will be writing every day in class and that I had them jot down their thoughts about these somewhat abstract terms because the first day of class is an ice-breaking day and I wanted as many students to speak as possible. Even shy students are more willing to give oral responses in class when they have something they have just written in front of them. I also tell the students that I will expect them to teach each other the most difficult book on the course reading list. They choose partners within larger groups of eight, with each pair teaching one-fourth of the book. Their grade for teaching is based in part on the instructional materials they bring to their groups.

Another practice I have found useful is to take some time during the semester to compare what my course has taught with what the state education department expects secondary students to learn. I usually do this near the end of the semester. As a specialist in seventeenth-century British history, I am aware of the dissonance between what professional historians have found out in the last several decades and what high school students will be tested on during their New York State Regents' Exam in Global History. The state still wants students to think that a Puritan-dominated Parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell, defeated and executed a tyrant, using democratic principles as the main justification for regicide. Following the toppling of a second tyrant in 1688, William and Mary came over from Holland to seal the deal of the triumph of Parliament. The New York state syllabus also throws in Magna Carta for good measure, indicating that the English Revolution still holds a central position in the story of the inevitable march towards democracy, a march that started, in the thirteenth century no less, with a baronial revolt against King John.

After sharing the seventeenth-century Britain section of the state social studies syllabus, my students come to class having written a short essay about which parts of my course they may be able to teach as secondary school faculty, while also getting done what the state wants. Since John Locke is also on the state syllabus, I suggest that they might want to focus on the transition from traditional rights of the English to universal natural rights instead of on good Puritans versus evil Royalists and the fall of tyrants for the good of the common man and woman. Part of the purpose of this exercise, of course, is to demonstrate that they are entering a profession that is unlike law or medicine in that practitioners in the grades seven through twelve level do not necessarily take into account the most recent research findings of professional historians. I want them to know how much of what they learn in college differs from what is contained in the textbooks and syllabi provided by the state, as part of the process of their developing professional judgment.

The above discussion on the discrepancy between the New York state core curriculum and recent scholarship on seventeenth-century Britain relates to one of the six problems students often encounter when reading history, as listed in Gardner's *Unschooling Mind*.³ In his problem number four, the reader is reminded that students reading history have a tendency to fall into "stereotypical thinking." It is easy to think of examples of this pitfall. When I used to teach U.S. history, I noticed that my students tended to think that all the Puritans came to Massachusetts instead of only some; that the abolitionists (again, meaning all of them) who wanted enslaved people freed also believed in the equality of the races; that the American revolutionary patriots were good and the loyalists were enemies of the future; etc. Though making such judgmental separations is a form of critical analysis, the practice too often yields results that are misleading, even unfair. So, whenever anyone in class, including myself, makes a statement that hints at a good-guy, bad-guy scenario, I say something like, "White hats and black hats. That won't work." Then we go on to adjust the analysis by making it more nuanced and complicated, and thus more accurate.

My final set of suggestions has to do with "bird-walking." Bird-walking carries the built-in potential of wasting class time. This teaching technique encourages classes to follow a line of thought tangential to the topic at hand so that both you and your students can see how the issue under discussion applies to other areas. This is doubtless a good thing, except that the bird sometimes walks too far from the topic, and the lesson dissolves, especially when students start asking questions about the new topic. It is crucial, therefore, that the bird either walk or fly back to its starting place in order to drive home the connection between the topic as first undertaken and the class's subsequent findings. What I have tried to add in recent years to Gaea Leinhardt's description of the multi-faceted aspects of teaching history is what may be termed pedagogical bird-walking. This practice consists of sharing tips about teaching, too brief to result in distracting the class from the subject matter topic at hand. They are, of course, given in the hopes that some future teacher or teachers in class will file them away for consideration when they start working with their own students. Examples were mentioned above when I explained, during my course introduction day, that students will be expected to write every class period and that I will often ask them to respond in writing to a question before asking them to answer out loud in order to encourage more participation.

It is not my intention to share my entire repertoire of tips here, but just enough, I hope, to show that much can be accomplished towards pedagogical-

cal instruction with little classroom time expended. At some point early in the semester, while I am waiting for a student to volunteer an answer to a question I have just posed, I talk about wait time, and how important it is for me not to appear impatient or frustrated, especially given how difficult some historical questions are. When no response comes after a reasonable amount of time has lapsed, I sometimes ask them how I can either re-phrase the question using more accessible terminology, or break the question into smaller parts designed to return us to the larger question. Additionally, I try to use the last few minutes of at least two classes during the semester to get students to write out anonymously what is going well and what could go better for them in the course. The brief discussion that occurs the following class meeting always touches upon teaching methodology and sometimes even on pedagogical theory.

Dread of not being able to manage the behaviors of their future teen-aged students is a central concern for many of our young people entering secondary teaching. Although the college-level course they are currently taking with me does not contain serious threats of disruption, it still seems beneficial to impart from time to time techniques that I have found useful for fostering an orderly classroom, both while I was teaching high school in east Tennessee and now. Some of the best classroom management tips are applicable across grade levels: Arrive to class with plenty of time so that you can set up your classroom and materials according to your lesson. Include enough time before class to interact with students individually while you are waiting for the start time. Begin teaching the class promptly, with a short description of what is to be accomplished posted on the board or screen. Do not talk while handing out papers, since this is a practice that will ensure that many if not most of the students will not hear your instructions. One could go on listing classroom management techniques, but, of course, each class of students will have its own nuances for future teachers to discover. Teacher education is not to hand down a proscribed set of classroom rules, of course. Helping the novice educators in our classes find good teachers within themselves should be central to our mission as historians.

Notes

1. Howard E. Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

2. Ibid., 174-175.
3. Ibid. Central to Gardner's thesis in the book is his explanation of how children bring to school a tendency to separate the world between the good and the bad. In order to help our students think like a "disciplinary expert," we need to help them break these "scripts" and interpret events on a more sophisticated and less moralistic way.