

Escaping Myopia: Teaching Students about Historical Causality

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THERE ARE SO MANY ASPECTS to teaching history that are vital to creating well-rounded historical thinkers, but one of the most fundamental and most overlooked elements is the idea of causality. Far too many students do not understand the idea of causation, that there are multiple reasons for why historical events occurred and transpired in the way in which they did, and that there is not a neat and linear progression from start to finish for a historical event. Creating multiple and frequent opportunities for students to engage in authentic historical inquiry helps students to escape this simple, myopic way of thinking that far too many of our students have become accustomed to utilizing when learning and thinking about historical events.

Many novice historical thinkers approach history as being preordained or as following an uncomplicated path that is inevitable. It is easier to see the one path already traveled by looking backwards than to see the from the perspective of the agents themselves looking forward into what was yet unknown. This is akin to a strategy many use to find the correct path of a maze. If one starts from the end, the path between two points seems much more direct and apparent, but if one starts from the beginning, the options seem much more numerous.¹ We need to help our students to see the maze of history from the beginning and to realize all of the possibilities available to the agents involved.

Necessary for contextualizing beginnings and ends, chronological thinking is a major element to enabling students to reason historically.² Without a clear understanding of chronology, when events occurred, and in what order, it is extremely difficult for students to compare and contrast events within a chosen time period, to relate studies to the present day, or to be able to have the capacity to explain probable causes. Chronology and causation are integral and intertwined elements in enabling students to organize their historical thinking and construct plausible historical narratives.

The Cause for a Historical Event

Recently, I was in a fifth-grade classroom and listened as the teacher asked the students as to what caused the beginning of the Second World War. Several students proclaimed quickly and proudly the bombing of Pearl Harbor started World War II. The teacher praised the children and moved on to the next portion of content to be covered, without batting an eyelash. This troubled me and brought to mind an experience Sam Wineburg had in a high school classroom when students neatly reduced the causation for four hundred years of racial history in the United States to a one-word answer: “Prejudice.”³ We should not and cannot allow students to package such complex issues and causes neatly into one-word answers. Nor should we, as educators, teach them that there is a singular, “correct” answer that can be found when discussing the cause of a historical event.⁴

Such simplification does not happen just at the elementary school level. In a recent in-service training for secondary social studies teachers, the facilitator asked the participants what the cause was for the relocation of the “Indians” during the “Trail of Tears.” Several answers were provided, including ideas such as demand for the land, racial policies, and greed, but these answers were not correct in the eyes of the facilitator, who then prompted the question, “Why were they not removed in 1810, 1805, 1776, or 1620?” Without any answers, a further question was posed: “What was the most important or abundant export from Georgia and Florida at this time?” With knowing looks on their faces, several of the participants chorally stated, “citrus.” They were informed sternly that they were wrong. A last brave respondent incorrectly attempted, “cattle.” After several more grueling minutes, the facilitator informed everyone, as if they should have known already, that the single cause of the relocation during the time known as the “Trail of Tears” was the need for access to the white tail deer. The deer had become extinct in other parts of the southeastern United States, and the people of the United States decided it was thus necessary to move the “Indians” to other parts to gain access to the white tail deer and their much-needed skins.

It is vital that we move away from this way of thinking and allow students opportunities to see that historical events have multiple causes and perspectives. Students also need opportunities to discuss probable causes without having their passion and interest for history immediately stifled. One effective way to go about doing this is to create and share a story, separate from any actual historical content or emotional attachments, which students analyze for causation and content so they can come to the realization that multiple causes can and do exist.

Did the Straw Break the Camel's Back?

When exposing students—of any age—to the idea of causation, one of the most effective methods I have utilized incorporates the story of Cam the Camel.⁵ This is a fictional tale about a camel and his demise due to massive back collapse:

Once upon a time, there was a camel who went by the name of Cam. After numerous complications during birth, Cam the Camel had been born with severe back problems that would affect him throughout his life. Once Cam completed his camel schooling, he decided to join the traveling circus. Unfortunately for Cam, the circus camel trainer, Mack the Camel Slayer, was one of the most vicious and vengeful individuals you could ever have the misfortune of meeting. When Mack was a young child, he was involved in a nasty incident that included a camel's foot and his rear end. He hated camels from that moment on and did not trust the "nasty beasts," as he would like to call them.

After several years in the traveling circus, Cam became the star of the Animal Review Show that took place every night under the big top, and he became the favorite of all the children. Mack thought that a great way to make a little extra money would be to start selling Cam the Camel rides for fifty cents per ride. Unfortunately for Cam, Mack did not place any restrictions on the combined weight of the riders and, thus, often allowed multiple riders to sit on Cam's back at the same time. He also forced Cam to give rides all day long, without breaks, until the time of the Animal Review Show each evening. After many months of this, Cam's back problems began to affect his work. Mack thought that Cam's work performance was slipping, so he felt the need to discipline Cam by forcing him to sleep outside in the cold without a proper bed.

Cam continued to perform at a high level, but nothing he ever did was good enough for Mack. One day, Mack thought that it would be great to see how many people he could load onto Cam's back. He thought that he could become famous if he were the one responsible for organizing this feat, and he even began imagining his name in the *Guinness Book of World Records* and thought about all of the talk shows on which he would appear.

Mack picked up a piece of straw off the ground and started chewing on it as he brashly began to invite people to be a part of history in the making. He was able to load three adults and four children on Cam's back. Meanwhile, Cam struggled to remain standing and groaned as the weight of his load became overwhelming. Mack stood back and was proud of his efforts to set a new world record. He then took the piece of straw out of his mouth and casually tossed it onto Cam's back. Cam dropped to his knees, keeled over, and died of massive back collapse.

The main question that arises from all of this is, "Was it the straw that broke the camel's back?"

After the story is shared with the class, students are broken up into groups of four or five and are asked to highlight all of the causes from story. To take this one step further, they are asked to determine which are necessary causes (N) and which are contributory causes (C). I define necessary causes for them as being any causes that are essential; that the presence of "x" necessarily implies the presence of "y." Contributory causes are defined as causes that help to produce an effect, but cannot produce the end results independently. Once groups have sufficient time to complete this activity, we discuss their thoughts as a class and determine, from their perspective, if it truly was the straw that broke the camel's back. During these discussions, we find that each group, as well as each individual, has different thoughts as to what were necessary causes and contributory causes. We generally agree that it was not the straw, in isolation, that broke the camel's back.

The groups are then asked to create their own graphic representation of the demise of Cam the Camel, keeping in mind all of the necessary (N) and contributory (C) causes that they listed. Among the types of graphical representations utilized by the students are hierarchical graphic organizers, sequential graphic organizers, Venn Diagrams, fact webs, event chains, and pictographs.⁶ Leaving these options open allows the educator to examine further the choices made by the students and to delve deeper into the modes of thinking going on within individual groups.

The last step of this activity is for the students to construct a narrative documenting the life and causes for the death of Cam the Camel. This step is important, as students must have multiple opportunities to construct historical narratives to gain a better understanding of historical causality and how the narratives that they consume have been constructed.⁷ Within the narrative, the students must explicate the problem, the multiple causes (necessary and contributory), and the ultimate result, with a detailed discussion of how the elimination of one of the necessary causes would alter the eventual outcome, the passing of Cam the Camel.⁸ Students are provided with a list of vocabulary words (e.g., "consequently," "deterred,"

“exacerbated,” “initially,” “subsequently,” “ultimately,” etc.) to assist them in the construction of their historical narrative. This enables them to think more deeply about the causes, effects, and ultimate outcome in regards to the life of Cam and helps them avoid creating a list of items one after another using non-descriptive words such as “next” and “then.”

During the discussion and debriefing of this activity as a class, the students are asked what evidence or primary sources would be available for the historian or biographer documenting the life and times of Cam the Camel. After this discussion, they are asked which, if any, other perspectives would be helpful in understanding this individual’s life and could be utilized in the construction of a historical narrative or biography based on the life of Cam. Typically, students come up with Mack the Camel Slayer, Cam’s family members, and other camels working for Mack, and they decide that looking at this incident from multiple perspectives is essential for gaining the best understanding of what may have occurred.

As an optional addition to this, students can be presented initially with just the introduction and conclusion of the story of Cam the Camel. The students can then discuss and debate what is needed to determine what caused Cam’s demise, speculate on what events and causes may have been present, and decide what sources would be helpful for finding information. The students can then be exposed to the entire story and conduct the steps outlined above.

Summary

Far too often, history classes and textbooks present students with a singular cause as to how historical events unfolded.⁹ One of the most dangerous practices by history teachers is allowing students to believe that there are simple, monocausal explanations for why and how history happens.¹⁰ It is essential that students are exposed to multiple perspectives, representations, and causes with the opportunity to investigate history in authentic ways.⁹ It is up to the history teacher to allow students to escape historical myopia.

Notes

1. Carol Berkin, “A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution,” Paper presented at the Teaching American History Symposium, Orlando, Florida, 6 December 2008.

2. Organization of American Historians, "National History Standards, Part I: Standards in Historical Thinking," *OAH Magazine of History* 9 (Spring 1995), <<http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/standards/nhs1.html>>.
3. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 17.
4. Daisy Martin and Sam Wineburg, "Seeing Thinking on the Web," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 3 (May 2008); Aaron Gillette, "Why Did They Fight the Great War? A Multi-Level Class Analysis of the Causes of the First World War," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 1 (November 2006).
5. This story and process is based on a story first written by Arthur Chapman in "Camels, diamonds and counterfactuals: a model for causal reasoning," *Teaching History* 112 (2003) and later modified by James Woodcock in "Does the linguistic release the conceptual? Helping Year 10 to improve their causal reasoning," *Teaching History* 119 (2005).
6. Examples of graphic organizers can be obtained from Nancy P. Gallavan and Ellen Kottler, "Eight Types of Graphic Organizers for Empowering Social Studies Students and Teachers," *The Social Studies* 98, no. 3 (2007) and Education Oasis, "Cause and Effect Graphic Organizers," <http://www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/GO/cause_effect.htm>.
7. Organization of American Historians, "National History Standards, Part I."
8. Richard N. Lebow, "Counterfactual Thought Experiments: A Necessary Teaching Tool," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 2 (February 2007).
9. David Hicks, "Lies, Damned Lies, and History: An Interview with James Loewen," *Social Education* 64, no. 4 (2000): 212-216.
10. Linda S. Levstik and Keith R. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, third ed. (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005).