



Introduction

Each of us is, in one way or another, a historian. We all learn from the past, whether it takes the form of what's happened in our own lives, or in those of our families, or in our neighborhoods, our city, our country, or the world. Too often, though, we talk too little about *how* we use the past. What's the difference, for example, between a fact, an interpretation, and a consensus? Since you can't re-run experiments in history, as you can in a science laboratory, how do you know when you've got it right? Are you trying to understand the past, to predict the future, or both? Or simply to try to figure out who you are? Why even bother with history in the first place?

This seminar sought to package what professional historians have been saying about these issues in such a way as to make their findings accessible to elementary- and secondary-level public school teachers and students. It proceeded from the hypothesis that sophisticated ideas can be communicated, even to first graders, if one starts with the students' own curiosity: if one lets *them* decide what aspect of the past they'd like to explore, and then relies on the skill of their teachers to help them do this.

My role was to distill the thinking of my fellow historians, drawing in particular upon metaphors provided by the "new" sciences of chaos and complexity. For this purpose, we organized the seminar around my book, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (2002), supplementing it with samples of both macro- and micro-history. Our objective was to show that the study of the past involves comparisons across the familiar dimensions of time, space, but also across *scale*. That last idea was the link between academic historians among whom I move, and the public school classrooms in which my seminar Fellows teach. For it allowed the seemingly small questions students raise to expand outward into some very big answers about the nature of history itself. How this worked is best understood by beginning with small students, and then moving to larger ones.

Christine Elmore's curricular unit for first-graders, "Buttons through the Ages," took a practical principle they all already know – that clothes must be fastened to remain in place – and asked whether fastening had always been done in the same way. The illustrations she located (as well as some real buttons she will bring to class) reveal many approaches to the task of fastening over several thousand years. But what, she will ask her class, does it mean to talk about that much time? How do thousands of years differ from the three or four years they can remember, or from the thirty or forty years their parents may recall? She'll then display a timeline, perhaps across an entire wall of her classroom, with her students a tiny speck at one of it, and the first buttons way off at the other end. She'll also show selective examples of what comes in between.

Christine's students will see from this that the function of buttons has not changed significantly over time, but that their style – how they look, what they're made of, what they cost – has varied enormously. They'll take

from this an important point about history: that continuity and change coexist within it. And from this, in turn, they'll have a basis for answering the question Christine poses in her unit sub-title: is the newer always better?

Deirdre Prisco, who teaches fourth-graders, has noticed their fascination with gadgets – mostly, of course, electronic. But gadgets of one kind or another (we tend to call the older ones artifacts) have existed throughout history, and the more ancient they are, the harder it often is to determine their purpose. David Macaulay's 1979 book, *Motel of the Mysteries*, made this point by envisaging the excavation of a Holiday Inn, with an adjoining McDonald's, some 4000 years into the future: Macaulay's engaging narrative and drawings suggest how archeologists of that era might misunderstand our own. Deirdre has built her curricular unit, "HOT on Artifacts," around Macaulay's book, but she will ask her students to go beyond it in three ways.

The first will be to determine the uses of real but more recent artifacts that Deirdre and her students will bring to class: what was the purpose, for example, of clunky devices with rotary dials, tethered by wires to walls, into which people once spoke? The second will be to guess what future fourth-graders might make of an iPhone, or a trove of plastic water bottles, were they to run across them a hundred years from now. Deirdre's third exercise will be to point out to her students that they *inhabit* an artifact: the school they attend is a hundred years old, and most of the original building survives. What, then, would they have seen – how would they have dressed? – how might they have behaved? – had they walked into their school on the day, a century ago, that it opened?

The point of Deirdre's curricular unit is to show her fourth-graders (the unit would work equally well, she notes, with younger or older students), that our understanding even of the recent past is only approximately accurate – and that accuracy degrades as time passes. That's a critical issue for historians, who work with artifacts (we call them archives) all the time. But Deirdre's youngsters, through this unit, will also be able to grasp it.

Fatima Nouchkioui, who teaches Arabic to grades nine through twelve, has encountered a different kind of curiosity among her students: she is Muslim but very few of them are, and they are full of questions about Islam. Her curriculum unit responds to their questions by focusing first on the practice, among many Muslim women, of head covering, and by then moving to polygamy, a more controversial custom certain to fascinate her students. Her approach will be comparative: do similar traditions exist within the two older religions with which Islam shares roots, Judaism and Christianity?

She will show that observant practitioners of all three religions cover their heads in certain circumstances – Christian women are expected to do so upon entering Catholic or Orthodox churches, for example, as are Jewish men upon entering synagogues. Each religion has reasons for these requirements, which Fatima will explore as a way of placing the Islamic tradition within a wider perspective.

That, then, will provide a basis for studying polygamy. Fatima will explain how it works in contemporary Islam, but she will also make the point that no Jew or Christian familiar with the *Tanakh* or the Old Testament can regard polygamy as a wholly alien. Nor, for that matter, can Americans, given its practice among 19th-century Mormons, or the remnants of it that survive today. Her purpose will be to show, through these comparisons across time, space, and scale (the scale in this case being culture, which transcends things big and small), that what may seem unfamiliar, even alien, tends to become less so the more history you know.

Marialuisa Sapienza's curriculum unit approaches alienation in another way, through the careful reading of an American classic, Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. Her tenth- through twelfth-graders,

overwhelmingly African American, have already experienced marginalization, the theme of Ellison's book. How, though, can a teacher make use of such personal histories in the classroom? To ignore them would convey cluelessness; to harp on them would suggest hopelessness. There needs to be something in between.

One of my own students pointed out to me, not long ago, that we read the classics "because they make us feel less lonely." All great literature, I think, rests on this premise that the dramatization of particular experience can take on universal significance: that by reading Homer, or Shakespeare, or (in the case of my student, Tolstoy) we learn that others have endured what we have endured or worse, and that we can enrich our own ability to cope by seeing how others – successfully or unsuccessfully – did so. That's how Marialuisa will use Ellison.

Invisible Man is arguably the most evocative account of what it was like to be a Southern-born and educated African American in New York in the middle of the 20th century. The novel is both distant from the lives of her students (because so much has changed legally) and proximate to them (because so little has changed socially). Reading it will encourage conversations with parents and especially their grandparents who experienced this history, thereby turning *them* into teachers, which surely is part of what education should be. So this too is comparison across time, space, and scale, for a single novel, in the classroom of a good teacher, can open up much wider worlds.

Our final three units, all intended for high-school students, shift the emphasis from explaining the past to predicting the future. Jeremy Landa begins his with two quotes from Thomas Jefferson showing that this Founding Father – like most of his contemporaries – believed that "all men are created equal" but that some races are inferior to others. The contradiction runs throughout American history: at no point in the 20th century did it become more obvious, however, than during the 1960s, a decade dominated by peaceful civil rights protests and violent urban rioting.

Jeremy will try to explain why by focusing on two riots: one that happened, in 1967, in his home city of Detroit, and one that did not happen – but could have – in 1970 in New Haven, where he teaches. He sets up a comparison between these situations to let his students determine why their outcomes differed. In doing so, he relies on what chaos theory – a set of principles drawn from mathematics, physics, and meteorology – suggests about "butterfly effects": how small differences at the beginning of sequences can produce big differences in their results.

Having introduced this concept, Jeremy will leave it to his students to decide whether urban riots – or, for that matter, any other historical events – are predictable. Their answer will be less important than their having asked the question, for the task of distinguishing between predictable and unpredictable systems is a major preoccupation of modern scientific research. Jeremy's unit links that problem to urban sociology while focusing on histories that happened in settings with which his students can readily identify.

James Brochin's curriculum unit also focuses on violence and predictability. He will present his high-school students with brief biographies of five "domestic terrorists," drawn from 19th- and 20th-century American history, all of whom *appear* to have killed for causes – but without any clear sense of what was supposed to happen as a result of what they did. Their lives raise disturbing questions. Is it ever justifiable for an individual – outside of law enforcement or the military – to kill for a cause? If the cause can't be articulated, does it really exist? If it does, what distinguishes such killing from random violence, which is to say, mass murder?

Domestic terrorism is very much with us, as this year's attacks in Arizona and Norway make abundantly clear. Predicting such horrors may be impossible, but that should not preclude a search for commonalities – even if

none, in the end, are found. That's the premise of the cases Jim will present to his students. In this unit too, the value lies in the inquiry – in the careful comparison of apparently dissimilar individuals who seem to share only the claim to have advanced a cause. Once again the procedure is comparison across time and space, with the scale this time being the interior of disturbed minds.

Charlene Woodland's unit, "Solving Environmental Problems," focuses on another form of violence, that inflicted upon the environment by its own inhabitants. Drawing on Garrett Hardin's classic 1968 essay "The Tragedy of the Commons," she reminds her students that human "progress" has weakened the self-regulating mechanisms that, throughout most of history, stabilized ecologies. Now the sheer pace and complexity of life is outstripping the earth's capacity to sustain it – but how do you get this idea across to technologically adept, consumer-oriented high-school students, who are themselves part of the problem?

Charlene's answer is dramatization. She will take several seemingly small situations – whether to replace a wooden boardwalk with cement or plastic slats, evidence that fireworks pollute reservoirs, the possibility of making a highway safer by destroying part of a nature preserve, whether people should give up using plastic bags because sea turtles confuse them with the jellyfish they like to eat – and have her students read, perhaps perform, the dialogues she has written reflecting conflicting viewpoints in each case.

From these, she will show the larger environmental issues at stake, as well as contrast political, economic, and ecological philosophies for resolving them. Once again, this unit will make comparisons across scale: by starting with specific cases her students can relate to, Charlene will expand their awareness outward. Their own curiosity, in effect, will instruct them.

That's what my seminar Fellows and I hope will happen with all of these curriculum units: they share a commitment to making teaching an *interactive* process. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to work with – and learn from – these experienced teachers, and to the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute for having provided it. I look forward to seeing how these ideas work, both in their teaching, and in my own.

John Lewis Gaddis

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>