

Introduction to historical thinking

The nature of historical thinking

The popular American television show *The Sopranos* is an on-going epic story about a New Jersey Mafia boss—Tony Soprano—and his family. Tony is a brutal killer when dealing with “business” matters, but he also lives an ordinary suburban life with a conventional family in New Jersey. He is a ruthless bully, but he’s charming. He is merciless but he’s also sensitive to the point of needing psychiatric therapy for his anxiety attacks. He’s a sociopath with a close affection for his family.

An interesting episode, historically speaking, is one titled “Christopher” which takes place on a Columbus Day. One of the main themes of the episode is that a Native-American group has mounted a demonstration to disrupt the Columbus Day parade in Tony’s town, and Tony’s “associates”—his Italian-American gang thugs—have decided to break up the demonstration in the name of Italian pride.

A particularly relevant scene occurs in Tony Soprano’s kitchen the morning of Columbus Day. Tony, his son A.J. (Anthony Junior) and Tony’s wife Carmella are discussing Columbus Day. The following dialogue takes place:

Carmella: (speaking to Tony) His history teacher, Mr. Cushman, is teaching your son that if Columbus was alive today, he would go on trial for crimes against humanity, like Milosevic in, you know, Europe.

Tony: Your teacher said that?

A.J.: It’s not just my teacher. It’s the truth. It’s in my history book!

Tony: So you finally read a book and it’s bullshit.

Carmella: Tony!

Tony: Look, get into Columbus’s shoes to see what he went through. People thought the world was flat for crying out loud. Then he lands on an island with a bunch of naked savages on it and it took a lot of guts. You remember when we went to Florida, the heat and those bugs?

A.J.: Like it took guts to murder people and put them in chains?

Carmella: He was a victim of his time.

A.J.: Who cares? It’s what he did!

Tony: He discovered America is what he did. He was a brave Italian explorer. And in this house Christopher Columbus was a hero. End of story!¹

¹ “Christopher” Episode Three, Season 4 of *The Sopranos*.

This scene touches upon most of the kinds of issues facing historians. The characters confront the essential issues of historical thinking: What really happened? How do we know that it happened as the history books suggest? What did it feel like to be Columbus? How did it feel to be a native of Santa Domingo? Should we remember Columbus as a hero or a brute? Was Columbus' "discovery" of America really such a big event? These questions and others like them form the body of inquiry we call history.

Most high school students do not think of history with the passion shown by the Soprano family. More typically they see it as learning detailed facts of numerous past events in chronological order. Yet, whether students realize it or not, in their own lives history plays a much more vital and dynamic role, because all of us, from little children to the elderly, think about who we are and where we are in the continuum of time. And when a version of history challenges our conception of ourselves, it suddenly becomes relevant and, as Tony, Carmella and A.J. demonstrated, often crucially important to us.

Despite the fact that Tony is a mobster, A.J. is a bust as a student and Carmella seems to care only about appearances, they all invested in being Italian and are concerned about how Italians are represented. Part of that perception depends on how Italians behaved in the past and how those actions are represented in contemporary historical accounts. Without much conscious thought, they are showing how present understandings and self-perceptions depend on past events and our interpretations of them.

In that short scene from *The Sopranos*, we see the difference between history and the past. The past is everything that has happened and can never be recounted in its totality. History is the telling of what happened and is by nature selective in that telling. In creating that narrative, by identifying what we include and exclude, and by making judgments about the merits of various actions, we make sense of the past and signal what is important to us now. The history we create depends on our present situation and purposes. Thus history, unlike the past, is never static—it changes with emerging values, ideas and audiences. *Historical thinking is the act of interpreting and assessing both the evidence from the past that has been left behind and the narratives that historians and others have constructed from this evidence.*

The importance of historical thinking

We can appreciate the importance of historical thinking by distinguishing between history as an *educational* and an *informational* subject. If history is an informational subject, its content is to be passed on by teachers and remembered by students. There is little need to question or problematize the received narratives. Teaching history as an informational subject typically means presenting an account—often framed as *the* true story of the events—which students learn and accept by absorbing the relevant factual details laid out in their textbook. In short, history becomes a body of information teachers can transmit.

This informational account of history teaching is inadequate for at least two reasons:

- students cannot properly understand history unless they know what is involved in thinking deeply and critically about it;

- students are more likely to be engaged in the study of history if they are encouraged to think critically about the subject matter.

Promoting historical understanding

Students' ability to grasp both the nature of the discipline we call history and the content they learn in history class is impaired if they do not see history as consisting of accounts that must be constructed, interpreted and assessed. In other words, neither the *subject* nor the *subject matter* of history can be properly understood without engaging in historical thinking.

The need to think critically in order to understand the discipline arises because history inevitably consists of partial accounts constructed for specific purposes. No account can present all that is known—historians must be selective in the topics they focus on and the details they mention within these topics (for example, stressing daily life over political events, famous peoples over ordinary citizens, World War I and II but not the Crimean and Korean wars). In addition, all accounts must be framed within a perspective (for example, Canadian history might be written from any number of points of views including pan-Canadian, French-Canadian, First Nations, immigrant, or American perspectives).

As new social, economic and political issues arise, we revise our perspectives on the past. Many of us were taught in school that Christopher Columbus *discovered* America; yet this is no longer the “truth.” In this sense “revisionist” history is the only history there is. Though it is about the past, historical knowledge is also shaped by conditions and priorities in the present. Recently the environment, religious conflict and gender issues have acquired greater focus. Current textbooks differ in content from those in use twenty years ago and even more so than books written fifty years ago. Ten years from now, other issues will arise and our narratives and our historical understanding of the past will change with them. Unless students are taught to recognize and explore the factors that influence what gets represented as history and to understand that there can never be *the* history of an event or a period, they will not understand the nature of the subject. In this respect, history must be an educational subject.

Not only does the informational view of history teaching misrepresent the discipline, it undermines students' understanding of the subject matter. This is obviously true insofar as it is unrealistic to expect students to understand what they are learning if they misconstrue the discipline which gives rise to this knowledge. But there is an even more compelling pedagogical reason for involving students in historical thinking. Simply presenting historical facts to students typically results in this information remaining “inert,” to use Alfred North Whitehead's term. By inert, Whitehead means “ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combination.”² Students won't develop an understanding of the subject matter through passive recounting of historical details but only by thinking deeply about and with the ideas they encounter. As Walter Parker notes “Thinking is how people learn.”³ Of course students must learn the “facts” of past events, but they must think about these details and how they are selected and used to construct history.

² A.N. Whitehead. 1929/1967. *The aims of education and other essays*. New York: Free Press.

³ W. Parker. 1989. How to help students learn history and geography. *Educational Leadership*, 47(3), 39-43.

Engaging students in the study of history

Instead of embracing history as a stimulating course, many students are bored by it. The challenge is not simply to find ways of making history more relevant to students. It's more importantly a matter of making the study of history more active. As long as students remain passive recipients of historical facts instead of inquirers into the dynamic nature of history they are less likely to be engaged. In short, involving students in thinking historically is more likely to excite students because it is inherently more appealing to be invited to think of one's own beliefs and not simply find answers that others have produced.

Dimensions of historical thinking

Peter Seixas has identified six concepts that underpin our ability to think historically. Each can be seen as a portal, as an accessible entry point to involve students in thinking critically about history. These concepts are described briefly below and elaborated upon in subsequent chapters.

Historical significance. Behind the selection of what and who should be remembered, researched, taught, and learned is the issue of historical significance. Questions of significance are foundational to thinking about history because historians cannot include all that has happened in the past and students must be concerned to learn about and appreciate the most important events. But what is important, historically speaking? How do we decide whether an historical event is significant for everybody or just for some people? Whose history is it? For Canadians, Columbus Day is not a major holiday. To Tony Soprano and the Native American people, it has major cultural and social significance. Thinking about significance helps students learn how decisions about what to report and study in history are made and to recognize that the very nature of historical inquiry is open to ongoing change.

Evidence. The concept of evidence is concerned with the validation, interpretation and use of primary and secondary sources of historical information in the construction of history and historical argument. Issues of evidence invite questions such as: How do we know what happened? Which version of events should we believe? Is this a reliable source of information? In our Sopranos' example, according to A.J., the textbook and his teacher are the sources of evidence. For Tony, the evidence is derived from his memory of what he learned in school and perhaps from his family. Their opinions are based naively upon secondary sources rooted in popular cultural. Issues of evidence invite students to scrutinize the information found in various kinds of sources, and to explore the role of primary and secondary sources in constructing accounts of the past.

Continuity and change. The concepts of continuity and change confront two historical stereotypes: either nothing really changes over time or events that occurred long ago must by definition be completely unlike modern times. The former misconception has been called "Flintstone history"—the notion that the only real difference between ourselves and people in the past is that they wore funny clothing. The latter is a form of radical relativism. Students need to investigate what has changed or stayed the same over periods

in history and between past and contemporary times. Not only are the subtleties of change and continuity difficult to discern, our conceptions of each depend on life experiences and worldview. A student who has come from a country where profound change has taken place in a short period of time may view change differently than a student from a more stable environment.

Cause and consequences. The concepts of cause and consequence focus on the contributing influences in history. Understanding these influences makes it possible for students to see the structural and individual factors that shape their world and to begin to imagine their own role as citizens in shaping history. Questions of cause and consequence that the Soprano’s might have but did not ask about the Columbus story include: Was Columbus primarily responsible for “discovery” of the “New World?” In what ways were events influenced by prevailing social, economic and political factors? Why did the natives of Santo Domingo not resist Columbus? Had they done so might it well have been “end of story” for Columbus. How would the events of history been altered?

Historical perspective. Entering into the perspective of historical individuals and groups requires understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional contexts that shaped people’s lives and actions. Without an appreciation of how people in the past saw themselves in time and place, students will be trapped in a simplistic viewing of the past, seeing events exclusively through present experiences and values. This problem of “presentism” is apparent in the Soprano’s example, when Tony equates Columbus’ feelings with his own feeling towards “naked savages”. Without a more sensitive understanding of the realities of another time, Tony unintentionally but mistakenly imposed his frames of reference upon the actions and beliefs of this historic figure.

Moral judgment. Moral judgments in history arise in the context of drawing ethical conclusions about historical actions and people or in assigning moral culpability to historical figures or to contemporary individuals and groups for past actions. Students must learn to consider the complexities and dangers associated with passing judgment on historical events and people. For example, Tony assumes that Columbus’ “discovery” of America was a good thing. “End of story.” Yet from the First Nations perspective, what was so good about the European occupation of their homeland? Should we remember Columbus as a hero or a brute? What responsibility if any might contemporary institutions and groups who have benefited from this conquest owe to descendants of First Nations people who suffered losses because of it? These are the kinds of moral judgments that students must learn to make thoughtfully and cautiously.

Inevitably as teachers we will have used these concepts periodically in our classrooms. The operative questions to ask are:

- Can we use them more frequently and systematically?
- What might we do to help students make thoughtful use of these concepts as entry points to deepening their thinking about history?

Challenges for teachers of history

Teaching about historical thinking presents challenges and will require adjustments. Below are some of the more significant ones that we may wish to embrace more completely in our teaching:

Making history problematic. We need to consistently present historical information in the context of exploring genuine inquiries where the conclusions are open for critical debate and not already prepackaged for students.

Assembling of multiple resources. Teaching historical thinking requires that students have access to a variety of primary and secondary sources that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives on the topics they explore.

Accepting alternative interpretations. We must be willing to put aside our preferred historical interpretations and welcome differing perspectives and understandings presented by students.

Using history to inform the present. We should regularly help students see that history can inform their understanding of contemporary questions and issues.

Teaching the tools. Students must understand the concepts that underpin their ability to think historically and have regular opportunities to apply these concepts as they make sense of and use the historical information they acquire.

Shifting the focus in assessment. When evaluating student work, our expectations should focus on well-justified or well thought-out explanations rather than on provision of the right answer.

In short, teaching students to think historically will require additional effort, openness, and student independence. The objective of this resource is to help teachers meet these challenges by providing practical ways to use six concepts of historical thinking as portals to deepening students' understanding of the past.

Introducing historical thinking to students

Before introducing students to specific concepts that will assist them in thinking about history, it may be useful to explore the very idea of historical thinking.

Distinguishing 'history' from 'the past'. One approach to introducing the idea of thinking historically is to distinguish between 'history' and 'the past'—history is an account of past events. The objective is to show that an historical narrative is not a static account of the truth but a constructed story based on evidence. Write the two terms on the board and invite students to identify elements that distinguish these concepts. You may want to offer examples

of a past event (e.g., an accident that happened the night before) and a history of the event (e.g., a newspaper account of the accident). Eventually students will generate a list such as the one outlined below. Discuss the idea that the past is gone and only history is alive. Invite students to identify the problems in accepting history as the story of the past.

The Past	History
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The past consists of all the things that ever existed, all the words that were uttered and all the deeds done. • The past is no longer here; it no longer exists. • There's no organized story to the past, but only remnants that have survived over time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History can account only for a small sampling of the past. • History is a way to remember the past through an organized story and analysis of the evidence of past events. • History is influenced by a selection of aspects of the past that are considered meaningful to us in the present.

Distinguishing ‘myth’ and ‘history’. A strategy for helping students understand that history is not simply any old story of the past is to distinguish ‘myth’ and ‘history’. Although both are stories about the past, their purposes differ. Students may have difficulty distinguishing myths and historical accounts. To assist them in this task, read a Greek myth and an historical account of an incident in ancient Greece. Through guided questions help students generate the following comparisons.

History	Myth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History is based on evidence. • Can be challenged and changed. • We want it to be challenged and revised. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Myth is based on belief or faith. • Can't challenge or change a myth. • We don't want to challenge or change it.

Viewing the study of history as inquiry. For many students, the study of history is largely a matter of finding factual information on a topic—the answers already exist in textbooks. Students are simply “re-searching” the answers—locating ideas and facts that others have uncovered. Notice the term ‘original research’ (which may be an oxymoron) is used to indicate that a study is intended to produce new knowledge and not simply reproduce what others know already. Understood in these terms, “researching” questions in history does not require historical thinking, but simply skill in information retrieval. Students need to appreciate that the study of history can be a genuine inquiry where their task is not merely to find out what others know (they must, of course, do this) but to reach a conclusion using this information. Even if others already know the answer, in a genuine inquiry students’ task is to reach their own conclusions and not simply locate the conclusions offered by others. *This feature defines an inquiry question: it requires that students make a reasoned judgment about the most justifiable conclusion to reach.*

To illustrate the difference between “research” questions (involving mere factual retrieval) and inquiry questions (requiring reasoned judgment) present students with a list of parallel questions/tasks of both types as suggested below. Invite students to discuss the differences between the pairs and what is involved in answering each type. As an extension, invite students to develop their own samples of each kind of question/task.

Research questions and tasks	Inquiry questions and tasks
List five factors leading to the decision of colonies to join in Confederation.	Rank in order of importance the five identified factors leading to the decision of colonies to join in Confederation.
Describe John A. Macdonald’s contributions as leader.	Was John A. Macdonald a great leader?
Compare life in New France with life in the American colonies.	What was the biggest difference between life in New France and in the American colonies.
What were the stated reasons for internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II?	What were the real reasons behind the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II?

Writing the history of an event. Inviting students to write the history of an event they have encountered is helpful in introducing the historian’s role in constructing a history. Wait for an opportunity when students have witnessed an event with various elements or turns (e.g., an incident at a school assembly or in the classroom). Ask students individually to write an eye witness account of the event. Arrange for students to compare their accounts and to discuss the differences and why these might arise. Now ask students to work in groups to write a history of this event, using evidence from the various accounts. You may want to help students structure their narrative around four questions:

- What are the root causes of the incident?
- What are the key actions in the event?
- Who is responsible?
- What are its implications or consequences?

Compare the histories prepared by each group and discuss the reasons for the differing narratives.