

The Urgency of History

John P. Ryan

Abstract

I begin by thanking Professor Unoke for his invitation to write for the KCKCC E-journal. The journal is committed to sharing scholarship with our community, and I am grateful to contribute to its important work. That I write this essay during the centennial of Kansas City Community College prompts me to express admiration and praise for the college during its impressive milestone. I had the privilege of a long career at KCKCC, teaching history to its hard-working students, and with staff, administration, and faculty providing students with countless stepping-stones toward personal growth and opportunities. Turning from past to present, I express my appreciation and encouragement to those who today continue the College's long and impressive tradition.

Introduction

I want to make a case that historical thinking can be an important addition to our thinking now. I assure readers that previous familiarity with history is unnecessary, that we can replace bad memories of it with good ones, and that we can apply historical thinking throughout our lives. Anyone reading this essay can, if they choose, benefit from it. I write this in the spirit of a community college classroom where the value of history is examined and promoted, and where students also confront the demands and challenges of everyday life. Just as we must.

Declining History

I write now because history in schools, K-12 through college, is declining. The difficulty or impossibility of including history in increasingly popular STEM programs has also contributed to the decline in history-education. Also, history is now a focus of intense partisan controversy. What if one effect of this crisis is that fewer and fewer people practice historical understanding? What if an essay like this one is unimaginable in several decades, or sooner? Those questions motivate me to write this. (1)

Referring to historical understanding directs me to the two definitions of history. History means the past, and it means accounts about the past, any past. (We might pause and consider the ways that we have encountered the past; for example, our favorite relative's stories, a fond memory of a museum, your example?) The two meanings are separate and interrelated, and, unfortunately, they are sources of continual misunderstandings. It's helpful to "practice with" the two definitions. Again, back to our personal experiences. Can you recall an example of liking history? A tour of historical sites in a favorite city? Ken Burns on PBS, or a history podcast? All are accounts. Comparing a new interest in history to personal improvements that we have adopted, like working-out, cooking, your choices? can be helpful. Despite unrelenting demands on our time and attention,

our new attitudes may lead us to new opportunities for entertainment and serious thought. We may come to appreciate history as a gift that keeps on giving. We may come to regard our reconsideration of history as a good change in our history (account) of our thinking.

Discussing the distinction between definitions of history is pertinent to controversies roiling the nation. Whose, or what, accounts do we accept or reject? On what basis? Who makes these decisions? Why have questions like these taken on urgency now? I suggest that we consider these controversies as teaching-moments of history's inescapable importance.

My second purpose is to discuss historians' thinking-skills that we can use. I intend this essay as an opportunity to readers, including history buffs and the newly curious, to freshen up, or get acquainted with, useful thinking-tactics. In this essay I use understanding in its dictionary-meanings, including "the power of comprehension," and "to achieve a grasp of the nature, significance, or explanation of something." Requirements for professional historians are more demanding than opinions. (Reviewing distinctions between understanding and opinion are helpful here.) Understanding earlier times present an array of complex challenges that are continuously considered and re-considered by professional historians. I shall refer to these assumptions and skills as historical literacy, or HL, because literacy requires skills. In its one-paragraph statement, *Why Study History*, The American Historical Association includes these phrases: "the laboratory of human experience," "some usable habits of mind," "relevant skills," and "critical thinking." (2)

We shall consider five HL skillsets. The first poses questions of evidence, about its authenticity and meanings. Those questions have recently become controversial. (My recent historical interests include topics about truth and propaganda in the twentieth century. Examining them in totalitarian contexts, where falsehoods were transformed into "truths, has been educational in new ways.) HL, in contrast, poses stringent demands of evidence. Doubts about authenticity, accuracy, or reliability become "red flags" to historians. The history profession's requirement to ask questions about the origins of evidence, for example, is a vital standard. The continuous questioning, reconsidering, and revising that historians do is, for me, a valuable alternative to other ways of reaching conclusions. (3)

2. A second HL skillset asks us to understand "the times," the historical context, of our topic. The word for this is empathy. First, a clarification. Empathy is not sympathy.

Historical empathy, as an example, might focus on the norms and values of an earlier society, from within its thought-worlds, on its terms. In contrast, sympathy implies favorable attitudes. An example of this distinction: a historian empathizing with Germans who became Nazis is not sympathizing with them, but exploring how and why, they became Nazis. Also, it is important to realize that we are familiar with empathy. Patiently listening to a friend, trying to understand, without criticism, their explanation of a mistake they made, having ignored our cautions? We were being empathetic. The following are examples to consider when practicing empathy. I intentionally set aside my ordinary thinking-habits (which I shall refer to as OT, and which is everyone's "default,") and, instead, focus on questions and observations that help to understand other people in different times and different places. First, what must I learn about their cultural, economic, political, and social contexts? Am I able to describe and explain their beliefs and values?

Relying on various kinds of evidence, I try to figure out what, to them, was normal, commonplace, ordinary, or habitual. What was necessary? What were their fears? What did they assume was inevitable? Or impossible? What was good, admirable, or desirable? Bad, dangerous, or evil? What was attractive or ugly? How did their accounts of their past shape them? As we saw earlier,

Americans are wrestling with the last question. I want to make three more points. You will likely prefer some contextual questions more than others. That my interests tend toward what historians refer to as the “mental” aspects of a society direct me to questions about beliefs and values. If your curiosity leans toward material factors, like natural environments or economies of subsistence, you will ask different questions. Of course, we learn that the mental and material are woven together. Also, we will tweak or change questions as we “work with” a historical context, and when we change topics. Finally, these questions are important sources of the different emphases among historical disciplines that have been enriched in recent decades by innovative scholarship about class, race, culture, society, race, and gender,

3. Embracing challenges of historical empathy, requires working with three other HL skillsets, all related. These I shall discuss briefly, but like seeds, once planted, their benefits grow. The empathetic questions that I described above reflect HL’s assertion to presuppose complexity when trying to understand historical contexts. That advice prepares us to make contextual sense of topics rich with challenges. In addition, it serves as a caution against errors of incompleteness and simplification.

4. Analyzing complexities inform us of countless ways that a context’s past has formed its identity and shaped its society and culture. Studying those ways is the fourth HL requirement, and historians refer to them as continuities. Pasts are integral to presents, always and everywhere. They may be celebrated or damned, obvious or subtle, ignored or repressed. But continuities matter. That a characteristic of modernity is its distancing from the past, reminders about continuities are, for me, welcome correctives. Recent historical “reckonings” attempt to reveal and examine experiences and continuities in the experiences of African-Americans, women, and Native Americans. They are important new accounts that can inform us about distinctions among historical accounts.

5. The fifth and final HL skillset instructs us to pay attention to changes occurring within the historical context that we are investigating. A reason the twentieth century interests me is the rapidity, frequency, breadth, and depth of its changes, generalizations which only hint at their existential effects. Historical accounts of all eras often focus on studying change. Indeed, historians typically assume that studying history is studying change, including conditions which speed it, promote it, slow it, resist it, interrupt it, or block it. It can teach us to become more familiar with rates of change: the seemingly imperceptible, the gradual, the rapid, or the sudden, often in the form of an event (s). Histories can also educate us about the consequences of changes. We learn, again and again, of their vastly different effects on people: benefits, rewards, opportunities, demands, troubles, or calamities that they enjoyed, or endured, or suffered.

I shall make several suggestions and observations that I hope are helpful.

* I recommend that you abbreviate the five HL skills as E4Cs: **evidence and the 4Cs of context, complexity, continuities and changes**. They will become part of your mental- muscle memory, as HL questions become a reliable go-to checklist for historical topics and for issues of everyday life, both public and personal.

* Although I advocate HI, I caution that its demands may at times ask too much of us. If the topic is personally sensitive, or understanding it is repugnant to me, I stay away from it.

* When practicing empathy, expect to be diverted by OT. Returning frequently to questions like, “why did ‘they’ think that their beliefs or actions were good or necessary?” can remind us to focus on issues of context.

* I am cautious about hindsight. I like it because it guides me to new topics, but it has led me into simplifications, which I eventually corrected. Hindsight offers appealingly simple perspectives of history. But it assumes that history only could turn out as it did, and it misses a lot. Empathy teaches us to pay attention, to look for opportunities missed, to alternatives not chosen, to surprises, to quirks, mistakes,” chance-events,” or coincidences,” that resulted in one outcome, and not others. Historians refer to these considerations as contingencies. “Lessons” based on hindsight (“History teaches us....”), also ignore important differences between the historical context and the present. Policies based on historical analogies have infamously turned out badly. I prefer, therefore, “history rhymes,” to “history repeats itself.” Hindsight, we think, is an incomparable advantage because we know how things turned out. But HL trains us to handle hindsight carefully, never forgetting that we possess knowledge denied to our historical subjects. Also, judging earlier cultures with our beliefs and values, and holding them to our standards is another violation of HL. Modern inclinations to hold the past in lower esteem is another formidable obstacle to contextual understanding. Historians refer to these hindsight-errors as present-mindedness. But a benefit of hindsight, I think, is that we can become familiar with examples of personalities, policies, or popular opinions that were confident and dismissive of alternative options, and which ended up badly, often with irreparable human costs. These blunders of arrogance and over-confidence are politely referred to as “unintended consequences.” Historians’ judgments frequently are harsher and more colorful. I must conclude our discussion of hindsight on a grateful note: it introduced me to the attractions and benefits of “spending time” in the past.

* Thinking with HL has influenced me to distrust expressions like “it has always been that way,” or “both sides,” or “two sides,” or “change is good,” or “the good old days, or “it was inevitable,” or, “they weren’t perfect,” as a criticism of someone. Historians assume that humans are imperfect.

* I’ve tended to drop expressions like “crazy” or “weird “because they tend to replace historical understanding. I am also careful when using phrases like “bottom line” or “laser version.” Awareness of our context will tell us when they are appropriate, or when they are incompatible with HL requirements.

* I hope you understand now why complaints that “they did not teach that in school” are unconvincing for various reasons. One, and I’ll leave it at this: we do not limit other important knowledge and skills, say, nutrition, to schooling. We may discover, as many do, that our

experiences, life, can make histories more appealing. Here's hoping for a renewed commitment to history-education.

* We may have associated historical dates with memorizing and filling in the blanks. Ugh! But dates are_essential context-markers. Depending on the era, certainly the modern one, a difference of a year may be consequential.

New or renewed interest in history, enhanced by your HL skillbox, will result in immediate benefits. You will have made a personal choice, free of pressure or necessity. Yours will be an expression of personal freedom. Your choice is not fashionable or popular, and it will express anew your uniqueness.

To begin practicing HL, I recommend compressing the requirements into an abbreviation: E4Cs, and then use them as prompts to begin understanding. Internalizing them like this, I have learned, has helped me to use them in different situations when understanding is necessary. For example, empathy may improve a friendship. Or an HL evidence-question may prevent a judgment based on gossip or rumor. I have also learned that noting my HL successes has become an incentive to continued practice.

You can expect to be educated by countless discoveries. Some will be painful, some simply interesting, all important to you. I regard those who confront difficult pasts as courageous, and I admire and respect historians whose work requires them to face cruel and painful pasts, despite popular and pervasive encouragements to avoid what is unpleasant. Other tours, of different pasts, will be rewarding in less difficult ways, some even entertaining. However, each journey to different times and places, motivated by personal reasons, and accompanied by our curiosities, imaginations, and our new HL skill box will affect us in ways that modern moments cannot.

Conclusion

I intend my final words to encourage us to add HL to the ways that we try to make sense of the crises we face today. Understanding, in the dictionary sense, is after all, one of the roots of our crises. Historical Literacy can be practiced by every citizen; it poses no barriers and offers only opportunities. We can tailor it to our identities as we, together, confront our nation's challenges with deeper and broader understanding. Emboldened by evidence-skills, practicing empathy, rejecting appeals of simplification, knowing that consequences endure despite the lures of cultural amnesia (I write this during the twentieth anniversary of the American invasion of Iraq.), and insisting on a voice in the changes they confront, citizens can begin a new era of humaneness in American history. To charges of naivete, they can argue that they are voices of a new realism, dismantling the naivete that brought us into crisis. When they suffer criticism and doubts, they will look to history for lessons and reassurance, for it was the urgency of history that encouraged them to think in new ways. Theirs will be a revolution in understanding, a new American Revolution.

Notes

1. See Heller, Nathan, "The End of the English Major." *The New Yorker* (Online), February 27, 2023 for the plight of the Humanities. Also, [The History Teacher](#)

published by The Society for History Education, Inc., at California State University, Long Beach offers countless examples of creative history-instruction.

2. [Historians.org/Teaching and Learning](https://www.historians.org/Teaching-and-Learning/)”Why Study History.”
3. Three books about HL skills that have been invaluable to me Salevouris, Michael and Furay, Conal. The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide. Fourth Edition. Malden, Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons, 2015. The second is Wineburg, Sam. Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. And by the same author: Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

About the Author

The author taught history at Kansas City Kansas Community College for more than four decades. He won the *Henry M. Lois Teaching in Excellence* award. He received his bachelor's degree in history from Merrimack College. He earned his Master of Philosophy degree and his Ph.D. degree at the University of Kansas. The subject of his dissertation was the origins of American foreign policy toward Iran. Since retirement he has renewed his focus on the importance of historical literacy to a democratic republic.