

Was Columbus a Hero? A Study of Students who have been Confronted with Multiple Historical Narratives

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Abstract

This paper compares two attempts by the author to teach two different grade 12 world history classes to think historically. Both classes were presented with a similar assignment that revolved around the conflicting historical accounts of Christopher Columbus. However, the second group of students was also provided with direct instruction about the nature and construction of historical accounts. In the end, this second group of students demonstrated, on average, a more sophisticated understanding of the study of history. These results correspond with a growing body of research, which suggests that historical understanding can be taught by carefully crafted lessons.

Over the past few decades a growing body of research into historical thinking has found that students' understanding of history progresses through a series of stages (Lee, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2000). These stages range from the naïve view of history as corresponding directly to the past, to the recognition that history is a reconstruction of selected events, based upon evidence, that is undertaken to answer specific questions (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Sandwell, 2005).

This essay describes one of my own attempts, as a practicing high school history teacher, to improve my students' understanding of what history is. This endeavor, described in detail below, required my students to consider conflicting historical accounts of Christopher Columbus. Unfortunately, this activity was only moderately successful (at best) when first used. At the time, the reasons for this mystified and frustrated me. As I became more familiar with the research on historical thinking however, I came to realize that the lesson failed because I had not taught my students to apply important historical thinking tools to this task. In particular, I had failed to see the need to teach my students about historical empathy, I assumed that my students would naturally know how to analyze conflicting historical accounts, and I had failed to discuss with my pupils how the concerns of the present influence our interpretation of the past. I also added to my students' difficulties by placing far too much stress on the detection of bias in historical documents and accounts. This had given them a faulty impression of what it means to study history, and this conception had made it difficult for them to complete my Columbus assignment in a sophisticated way. Armed with these realizations I was able to make a few small changes to the assignment, discussed below, that transformed it into a more powerful teaching tool.

In the end, this rather personal essay is meant to highlight two facts. First, it demonstrates how students' understanding of history can grow when their naïve beliefs are challenged directly. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this essay illustrates the need for teachers to clearly understand what history is and how this knowledge can be translated to students. Without a clear

conception of what it means to “do” history, it is easy for both teachers and students to mistake a moderately sophisticated historical epistemology for a fully developed one.

This paper begins with a discussion of recent research into students’ conceptions of history. It then outlines my original Christopher Columbus assignment and analyzes the responses of the 12 students who completed it in 2005, using Lee and Ashby’s (2000) typology of historical thinking. I then discuss the changes I made to the Columbus assignment and analyze the responses of the 12 students enrolled in the same course in 2009. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of my experience for other teachers.

Existing Research on Historical Epistemology

In recent years there has been a growing amount of research into the way that students understand history (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2008; Husbands, Kitson & Pendry, 2003; Husbands & Pendry, 2000; Lee, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Morton, 2011; Peck, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). This research has gradually solidified to the point that Lee and Ashby (2000) have proposed a six-stage typology that describes the evolution of students’ historical thinking. Students working at the first level in this continuum believe in “the past as given” (p. 212) and see historical accounts of the past as perfect and complete. These students uncritically accept the historical accounts they are presented with, seeing these stories as completely accurate. The second stage of development is the conception of “the past as inaccessible” (p. 212). Students who have adopted this point of view believe the study of history to be impossible because we were not alive in the past to directly witness events. The third stage in the progression of beliefs about history is the view of “the past as determining stories” (p. 212). Students at this phase of the epistemological continuum continue to believe that there can be only one account of the past. When these students are confronted with two conflicting descriptions of the same event, one of them is believed to be wrong. The source of this error, according to these students, must be a lack of information. Lee and Ashby’s fourth stage of development is “the past as reported in a more or less biased way” (p. 212). At this point in the developmental progression, students recognize that authors create all historical accounts and there is therefore a potential for bias. Despite the recognition of the active role of the author, students working at this conceptual level still believe that there is a single story of the past that could be told if only the authors could avoid their biases. The fifth step in the typology marks a significant break with all of the previous stages. At this level, labeled “the past as selected and organized from a viewpoint” (p. 212), students recognize that accounts do not directly correspond to the past. All historical narratives are seen as being written from a legitimate point of view, with the differences between them resulting from the selections made by the author. The sixth, and final, stage of the continuum is “the past as (re)constructed in answer to questions in accordance with criteria” (p. 212). Individuals functioning at this level focus less upon the author and more on the account. They recognize that it is natural for accounts of the past to differ, and as such more attention is paid to the sort of question(s) the author is seeking to answer and the criteria he/she uses in the construction and justification of his/her interpretation of the past.

While Lee and Ashby (2000) have found that students tend to move through the stages of this topology over time, there is a great deal of variability within any grade level. Lee and Ashby are careful to note that progress along the continuum is not akin to developmental theories; that is, it is not automatic that as one gets older, one has a more sophisticated understanding of history. Thus Lee (2005) has reported finding students in the 8th grade operating at the fifth and

sixth level of this continuum, while Lee and Ashby (2000) have also noted that there are undergraduate history majors who maintain a naïve historical epistemology. The failure of many older students to progress to the highest stages of historical thinking has also been confirmed indirectly by the work of Adey and Biddulph (2001), whose survey of student perceptions of history and geography found that many students held unsophisticated views of history. While more research is needed into the later teenage years, the existing evidence (Adey & Biddulph, 2001; Britt, Rouet, Georgi, & Perfetti, 1994; Lee, 2005) seems to indicate that many students do not progress beyond the view of the “past as reported in a more or less biased way” (Lee and Ashby, 2000, p. 212).

Situating Myself and my Students

The Columbus assignment discussed below was given to two classes. The first, a group of 12 girls, undertook the assignment in 2005. The second group, also a group of 12 girls, completed the assignment in 2009. Both of the groups of students described in this study were enrolled in a grade 12, modern world history course and ranged from 16 to 19 years of age. All of the students had completed at least one history class in high school and most of them had also studied ancient world history in grade 11. The two groups were also comparable in terms of academic ability. The majority of the students tended to get grades in the 80-90% range in courses in the humanities and social sciences throughout their high school careers.

I have a background in world and European history, having specialized in these areas during my undergraduate degree. While I was a very successful student at university I must admit that my historical epistemology was rather underdeveloped when I began teaching. This is not to say that I held a naïve view of the study of history. I clearly recognized that history was made up of many narratives and accepted the validity of different interpretations of the past. However, I had never consciously considered how this should influence my own teaching, and, as a result tended to teach history as if it were comprised of a single narrative.. Reflecting back on my own past as a teacher I would say that in 2005 I had a somewhat sophisticated, but largely tacit understanding of what it meant to study history¹. As a result of this I was often unable to clearly communicate how one went about studying history. For example, while I had successfully completed many historiographical analyses, I had never considered how I went about comparing conflicting interpretations of the past and was therefore ill equipped to explain this process to others. My lack, of what Shulman (1987) calls pedagogical content knowledge, would have a significant impact upon my teaching.

The Columbus Assignment: Version One

This lesson was originally used in a grade 12 world history class in 2005, as part of a unit on the European “voyages of discovery.” I had decided to make Columbus a focal point for this unit because my students seemed to be largely ignorant of the historical controversy surrounding him and tended to view him as a heroic figure. As such, my goal for the lesson was to illustrate to my students that historians have conflicting interpretations of many historical events. I also wanted to sharpen my students’ critical-thinking skills by presenting them with accounts that had clear and distinct perspectives.

¹ Schön (1983) has discussed in detail the tendency for expert knowledge to take a tacit form, as well as the implications of this for the transfer of knowledge from master to apprentice.

The lesson began with a group discussion as I asked my students what they knew about Christopher Columbus. Their knowledge about Columbus was quite limited; encompassing little more than the (erroneous) fact that Columbus discovered America, that he sailed to the west with three ships, and that he braved many dangers in order to arrive in the new world. Once the students had exhausted their knowledge of Columbus, I asked them what image they had of this man? After a few seconds of awkward silence some tentative answers were volunteered. The picture that emerged in the ensuing discussion was positive, with Columbus being described as brave and heroic.

Having brought the students' conception of Columbus into their conscious mind, we went on to read two primary documents. The first was a letter written by Christopher Columbus (1493) to Lord Raphael Sanchez. This letter, written after Columbus's first voyage to the Indies, was meant to generate support for future voyages. It depicts the west as a paradise, rich in resources and gold. The people of the Indies are described as being kind, generous, and timid. Throughout the letter Columbus also stressed his own virtues, telling Lord Sanchez how he prohibited his men from swindling and mistreating the "Indians." When asked about the purpose of this letter, the students were quick to pick up on its subtext, recognizing that Columbus's remarks were meant to convince the reader of the letter that more voyages to the Indies should be undertaken.

Having read Columbus's own account of his voyage, we turned next to an excerpt from Bartolome de Las Casas's (1542) *Account of the Devastation of the Indies*. This document paints a very different picture of the men who "discovered" the "new world." According to de Las Casas, the Spaniards who traveled to the "new world" were not noble, but were in fact avaricious and cruel. They mistreated, abused, and enslaved the inhabitants of the Indies whom they subsequently worked to death in order to quickly obtain the riches that had attracted them to the "new world"

De las Casas's account stands in glaring contrast to that of Columbus. It also seemed to capture the imagination of the students who were both horrified by the sheer number of people who were killed, and repulsed by the methods used by Europeans to maintain control of the local population. Having piqued my students' curiosity, I then assigned them three secondary accounts of Columbus to read.

The first was drawn from Zinn's (2003) *A People's History of the United States*. This book aimed to undermine the traditional grand-narrative of American history, which tends to depict the history of the United States as one of continual progress. The chapter that addressed Columbus provided a very negative account of the explorer, largely focusing on the disastrous impact that the Europeans had on the native Caribbean population. It paints an unsavory picture of Columbus as an avaricious, deceitful, and duplicitous character bent on self-aggrandizement and enrichment. The second account comes from Boorstin's (1983) *The Discoverers*. This book focused upon humanity's drive to understand the world; it is a story of progress and discovery. Boorstin's chapter on Columbus focused largely on the difficulties he had to overcome in order to begin his journey and the impressive nature of Columbus' sailing skills. While Boorstin does acknowledge, in passing, the negative impact of Columbus' voyage on North American indigenous groups, the narrative depicts Columbus as a hero. The third, and final, account is from the textbook I used for the world history course, Haberman and Shubert's (2002) *The West and the World*. The chapter dealing with the voyages of exploration discussed Columbus only briefly. It mentions both his strengths and weaknesses, but it does this in the brief and matter-of-fact fashion that is typical of textbooks. As a result, it is possible to draw different

understandings about Columbus from the text, depending on what aspects of the account one focuses on.

Having read these three accounts, students were asked to write a short essay that “analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of each piece.” Students were also asked to indicate “which account they found convincing, if any, and why.” Students were given no assistance or guidance as they engaged in the reading of these three pieces as I assumed (quite incorrectly) that they would naturally engage in the process of historical thinking and analysis.

The Results (I)

The essays that my students produced contained a mixture of promising insights and peculiar mistakes or omissions. My students clearly recognized the different nature of the three accounts, and were able to describe them clearly. All of the students were also able to make some criticisms of Zinn and Boorstin; usually pointing out that both of these authors had provided one-sided accounts that ignored evidence that would have undermined their argument. For example, Elsa² stated that: “the major problem with both Zinn and Boorstein [*sic*] is that they only tell half of the story, therefore neither of their pieces are trustworthy.”³

This tendency to reject both accounts due to their obvious bias was widespread amongst my students, occurring in 11 of the 12 cases. This tendency to adopt a sort of intellectual agnosticism when faced with the bias inherent in historical accounts has also been noted by Lee (2005). According to him, many students aged 16-18 struggle with the idea of bias in historical sources, often disregarding a source entirely once it is deemed to be biased. The problem seems to be that many students still believe that a “pure” account of the past is possible. They fail to see that all accounts are trying to answer a question and that all accounts use evidence, as opposed to simply relating facts. Lee (2005) describes the epistemological thinking of these students nicely, stating that:

If accounts are not clearly and unambiguously true or untrue, they must be matters of opinion. This view carries with it the idea that it is impossible to choose between conflicting accounts and, for some students, the idea that therefore anything goes. (p. 60)

Interestingly, this same group of students all saw their textbook as unbiased and reliable. This seemed to be in part a result of the neutral, omniscient tone of the textbook. The lack of a clear authorial voice and point of view led many students, such as Victoria, to feel that: “the textbook gives an even, more un-bias [*sic*] account and less personal interpretation of Columbus and his journeys.” No one in this group attempted to compare the accounts given by Zinn and Boorstin to that of the textbook, and no one in this group objected to the tendency of the textbook to compact significant aspects of Columbus’ story, such as the treatment of the local population, to a sentence or two.

The remaining one student was able to adopt a more sophisticated conception of historical accounts and evidence. She recognized that accounts are not copies of the past and that

² All student names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

³ Those familiar with the work of Zinn and Boorstin will recognize that there is some truth to this comment as both authors do focus upon facts that support their chosen narrative. However, what is important in this quote is the implication that there can be a single, definitive, trustworthy history.

all accounts have a point of view. She criticized all three of the narratives and argued that all three should be read:

Looking at the three texts one can see that they all are shaped by the intentions of their author. This is why it is so important to read a wide range of texts. People do this quite naturally when dealing with the present day, reading different newspapers for different points of view for example, so it is only sensible that we do the same thing when studying history.

While I was somewhat pleased with my students' performance- they had after all met some of my initial goals- I was also frustrated by many of their essays. I could not understand, for example, why my students were so reluctant to criticize their textbook. Nor could I understand why so many of them failed to apply any sort of criteria to their analysis of Zinn and Boorstin. Realizing that this assignment was useful, but far from perfect, I continued to use it in various ways for the next three years.

Modifying the Assignment

In 2009 I enrolled in a graduate course that focused on current research into the purpose and methods of teaching history. Much of the material for this course dealt with the concept of historical thinking. My encounter with this writing led me to consider how I might recast my Columbus assignment in order to make it more effective.

The first change I decided to make was in response to the work of Sandwell (2003). Her research has highlighted how students can learn, through simple question and answer sessions, to see history as an interpretation of the past, based upon evidence, in response to specific questions. Having read about the powerful impact of this direct instruction upon Sandwell's secondary and university students I decided to try this approach myself. My own Socratic questioning came after my students had already read the three accounts of Columbus' journey. I focused at first on drawing out two points: first that all the accounts focus on Columbus because he is seen as significant and second, that our perception of what is significant changes over time. Once my students had begun to see the role of significance in the construction of a historical account, I was able to turn their attention to one of the implications of this fact: that if only significant events become history, and if our conception of what is significant changes, then history is subject to revision as conceptions of significance change.

The turning point in this conversation, in my opinion, came when I was discussing Zinn's account of Columbus with my students. At one point I asked my students if Zinn's account of Columbus could have been written 100 years ago. They felt it could not, as the concern with indigenous rights and history in the west is a recent phenomenon. I asked them, pretending to be puzzled, if we had just discovered the fact that Columbus' voyage led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of the Tanio people living on Hispaniola. They explained to me that we had always known, but that it had not mattered to people in the past, as they had not valued the lives of indigenous peoples. Once the connection between the present and our conception of the past was laid bare, many students seemed to pick up on the idea that many historical narratives of a singular event were possible.

My second alteration to the assignment was inspired by Seixas' (2006) research into the so-called "second order concepts," which are vital to historical understanding⁴. In particular, my reading of Seixas led me to believe that my students would benefit from a greater understanding of the concept of historical empathy. This concept, which is often also referred to as historical perspective taking, requires students of history to try and understand the point of view of historical actors. Thus historical empathy is not about sympathizing with those in the past, but is instead an attempt to understand how a person alive in a particular period could have believed and acted as they did. In the case of Columbus engaging in this sort of thinking would require my students to go beyond repulsion at the mistreatment of the indigenous peoples and to wonder if Columbus was a reflection of his society. It was my belief that if my students could be armed with this tool, they would be able to judge the arguments of Zinn and Boorstin more competently. They could respond, for example, to Zinn's characterization of Columbus as a villain by considering Columbus' motives, or by researching the time period more deeply to see if Columbus' beliefs and behavior were typical or atypical of the time. Without the ability to engage in this sort of historical perspective taking my students would be left to judge Zinn and Boorstin using non-historical criteria, such as the apparent bias of the two authors or the emotional appeal of the authors' arguments. The challenge was finding a way to encourage my students to engage in historical empathy. The existing literature indicates that students find this form of historical thinking quite difficult (Lee & Ashby, 2001). In particular, students tend to engage in presentist thinking (Lee & Ashby, 2001), often lack the request background knowledge to engage in historical empathy (Levstik, 2001), and are inhibited from engaging in historical empathy by prominent historical narratives, such as the idea that history is a story of uninterrupted progress (Levsik, 2001).

With all of this in mind, I decided that the best approach to teaching my students about perspective taking was to be direct. Once they had read both Zinn and Boorstin's account of Columbus, we discussed how the two accounts contradicted one another. I then asked my students what sort of evidence would be necessary to disprove Zinn's depiction of Columbus as a villain. At first the students focused on evidence that would directly challenge Zinn (e.g., proof that Columbus had tried to prevent the mistreatment of the indigenous population). I then asked my students if Columbus' treatment of indigenous people would be more understandable if his society had not had any taboos against slavery or torture. They quickly agreed that it would, and then after a few seconds hands began to shoot up to ask if the Spanish had believed slavery was acceptable. I refused to answer these questions, but instead explained that finding out this information would allow them to engage in what historians call "historical empathy." After a brief discussion of this concept, during which I stressed that empathizing with Columbus did not mean one had to condone his actions, I moved on to discuss some ideas I had drawn from Wineburg's (1991) research into the way that historians and students read primary documents.

In particular, Wineburg's (1991) work highlighted the tendency of students to focus on the extraction of content and their subsequent failure to consider the subtext of the documents. This led me to believe that my students' failure to read their textbook critically could be a result of the heavy amount of content it contains, as well as the neutral, factual tone it assumes. I

⁴ Second order or procedural concepts are not historical concepts or ideas, such as "empire" or "nation-state." Instead this term refers to the concepts historians use (often implicitly) as they "do" history. Different authors have created slightly different lists of second order concepts (e.g., Levesque, 2011; Lomas, 1990) and Seixas' list has changed slightly over time. In 2006 Seixas' focused upon seven second order concepts: evidence, significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy/perspective taking, moral judgment, and agency.

decided to address this issue by having them re-read the section of the textbook that dealt with Columbus. Instead of simply reading the text in a linear fashion, however, I asked my students to stop periodically and consider the implied meaning that lay behind the text. While my students were somewhat reluctant to analyze the text at first, many of them quickly warmed up to the idea of questioning the choices of their textbook's authors. For example, the text's description of the decimation of the population of Hispaniola is limited to two sentences:

In order to establish a government that could benefit Spain economically, the people (natives of Hispaniola) were enslaved, and a system was established that ensured labour service from the population. The hardships of forced labour and the spread of diseases brought by the Europeans killed many of the island's (Hispaniola's) people by the end of the sixteenth century (Haberman & Shubert, 2002, p. 48).

When asked if they saw any problems with this brief factual statement, my students were quick to criticize the textbook for its failure to expand on this idea. One student argued that the authors of the text had "turned a genocide into something that sounds natural," and another student wondered why there was no mention of the torture and abuse that many people had to endure.

As part of this discussion, I also asked my students to consider how their textbook differed from the accounts provided by Boorstin and Zinn. Through the use of leading questions about the content, tone, and structure of the textbook I was able to guide my students toward the realization that their text was far from neutral⁵. In particular we discussed how the tone of the textbook, its failure to use foot or endnotes, and the lack of a clear argument on the part of the authors, made the textbook feel more factual, even though the authors were making choices about their portrayal of the past. Having thus pushed my students towards viewing history in a new fashion (i.e., as a narrative about the past based upon evidence) and challenged them to apply some new historical thinking tools, such as historical empathy,, I turned them loose on their essays.

The Results (II)

The 12 students who completed the revised version of the Columbus assignment performed much better than their predecessors. All of the students approached the three texts critically; five made direct comparisons between the documents, and four attempted to empathize with Columbus in order to more fairly analyze Boorstin and Zinn's accounts. One of the students also considered the evidence that Boorstin and Zinn were using to construct their accounts, often criticizing their use of primary sources by Columbus and De las Casas. The students were also much more critical of their textbook. While four of the students continued to feel that the textbook was unbiased, the remaining eight criticized the textbook in some way.

The most frequent criticism was with regards to the tone of the textbook. This type of criticism is captured well by the work of Carol, who wrote that:

⁵ As part of this discussion I challenged outright the idea that the text was neutral and argued that by providing only limited information the text was depicting Columbus in a particular way. We then discussed as a class what sort of image of Columbus the text was trying to provide and analyzed the information on Columbus line-by-line, identifying areas where additional details or choice of words would have changed the picture being presented.

The textbook does give many valid facts, and some good interpretations but it is worse for readers, especially in high school, who have a harder time differentiating the interpretation from the facts when the textbook uses this (neutral) tone.

Three of the students leveled even more sophisticated criticisms at their textbooks. Farrah, for instance, criticized the text for its brevity, arguing that: “the textbook’s failure to go into more depth makes the text a bad source...you would often need advanced knowledge about history in order to understand how a simple sentence is actually alluding to something.”

In the end, the students’ essays seemed to indicate that eight of them were working at level four of Lee and Ashby’s typology (compared with eleven previously), while two (compared with zero previously) were working at Lee and Ashby’s fifth level, and two (compared with zero previously) showed signs of having reached the highest of the epistemological categories. The students working at the fourth level, like their predecessors in 2005, struggled with the idea that there is not a single “true” historical account. Ava, for example, claimed that: “Zinn’s obvious anti-Columbus bias and Boorstin’s pro-Columbus attitude make them both questionable accounts...if Zinn could just tone down his rhetoric he would be much more reliable.” Despite their failure to see that there is no single, pure account of the past, these students were much more likely than their 2005 counterparts to engage in criticism of their textbook, though this was often limited to a discussion of the book’s omniscient tone.

The students who were working at Lee and Ashby’s (2000) fifth epistemological level gave clear evidence that they did not believe in the existence of objective historical accounts. They also recognized that historical narratives are not a copy of the past. Sydney, for example, wrote that: “historians will always disagree with one another about how they should interpret the past.” These students also recognized the legitimacy of the differing accounts, making comments like: “He (Zinn) has a valid point about Columbus’s negative impact...he probably should not be so highly regarded today....but Columbus had to have had some serious skills in order to make his voyage.” What separated these students from those I have classified as working at the sixth level of Lee and Ashby’s (2000) typology were references by the later group to the potential reasons why historical accounts might differ.⁶

Farrah, for example, demonstrated signs of being at the sixth epistemological step of Lee and Ashby’s (2000) progression when she claimed that:

It is only natural for Zinn and Boorstin to write such different accounts. Zinn is focused, by his own admission, upon stories of oppression. He is rooting for the historical under-dog. Boorstin, however, is telling the story of human progress. His hero’s are naturally Zinn’s villains.

Students working at the sixth level of the thinking continuum also spent more time analyzing Zinn and Boorstin’s use of evidence, and went to greater lengths when trying to engage in historical empathy. Gillian, for instance, reminded her readers that: “the discovery of millions of “new” humans came as a surprise to Renaissance Europeans, who believed that all of the peoples

⁶ It should be stressed that it was often unclear if a student should be placed in the fourth or fifth stage of Lee and Ashby’s (2000) typology. Often students were excluded from the sixth group not because of what they said, but because of what they failed to say. It is possible that further probing of these students could have revealed that more of them were operating at the top epistemological level.

of the world had been accounted for. In fact, it was not until 1537 that a papal encyclical declared that the Native Americans were rational beings with souls.”

Taken as a whole, I was left with the impression that the 2009 group of students had performed better, even though they did not seem more academically able than the 2005 cohort. This seemed to indicate that my adjustments to the Columbus assignment were beneficial. However, there were still two aspects of the results that I found curious.

The first was with regard to my students’ use of historical empathy. As mentioned above, four of the 2009 student cohort made some attempt at engaging in historical empathy. This group contains all of the students who were working at Lee and Ashby’s (2000) sixth level of historical thinking and most of those working at the fifth level. While this figure represents a tremendous increase in the number of students engaging in historical empathy, it is interesting that none of the students working at Lee and Ashby’s fourth epistemological level, “the past as reported in a more or less biased way”(Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 212), attempted to use this historical thinking tool.

The existing literature on historical empathy points to many possible explanations for this phenomenon. Potential variables include: student confusion about what it means to engage in historical empathy (Cunningham, 2009), a lack of background knowledge on the subject (Lee & Ashby, 2001), or the inability to effectively work with conflicting historical evidence (Yeager & Dopen, 2001). Interestingly, my conversations with my students after this assignment was returned do not point to any of these potential culprits. Instead, these discussions revealed that many of the students who failed to engage in advanced historical empathy did so because they could not, or would not, step outside of their own worldview and attempt to see things from the perspective of Columbus. Caught up by the story as told by Zinn, these students were determined to see Columbus as a villain and had no interest in evidence that might help to explain Columbus’ actions. When confronted with evidence that might encourage historical empathy, such as the fact that some Europeans were unsure if the indigenous peoples were human, these students retreated from the evidence arguing that this point of view was “clearly wrong.”

These findings fit with VanSledright’s (2001) claim that overcoming our own “historic positionality” or worldview is one of the greatest barriers to historical empathy. While this problem is not easily solved it seems likely that the development of this sort of thinking will require students to be frequently exposed to lessons that bring the existence of their worldview to the forefront of their minds. In the case of my Columbus assignment this could be done in various ways, such as requiring my students to discuss in groups their beliefs about Columbus’ motives and to consider what sort of evidence they would require in order to change their view of Columbus.

A second interesting aspect of my results was in regards to my students’ analyses of their textbook. Again the 2009 cohort performed much better than the 2005 group. Nonetheless, four students in the 2009 class continued to see the text as an unbiased source. There are many possible reasons for this. I suspect, however, that the failure to criticize the text represents unwillingness on the part of my students to engage in the process of unpacking the authors’ apparently factual prose. This sort of analysis is an intellectually demanding process that requires an unusual form of active reading (Wineburg, 1991). Students are rarely taught the requisite skills (Wineburg, 1991), and have long been socialized to accept, uncritically, the facts offered by seemingly omniscient textbooks (Paxton, 2005). Again, it seems likely that addition

of specific scaffolding and practice would be needed to ensure that all of my students successfully analyze their textbook.

Conclusions

In the end, this personal and reflective essay has offered a few points that should be of interest to a more general audience. While the groups used for this study were far too small to be statistically significant, the stark contrast between them is interesting, as it suggests that focused direct instruction on what it means to “do” history can have an impact on students’ thinking. This finding is in keeping with the existing literature (Hynd, Holschuh & Hubbard, 2004; Sandwell, 2003; Stearns, 2000).

At the same time however, the failure of the 2009 group to improve uniformly indicates that while powerful, brief direct instruction cannot guarantee improvement for all students. The failure of some students to engage in historical empathy, for example, highlights the need to monitor and assist students as they develop their historical epistemology (Seixas, 1998)

Finally, this essay indirectly raises some questions about the preparation of history teachers. While it is unknown how many teachers leave university, as I did, with a deep but tacit understanding of history, it is clear that this sort of knowledge is difficult to translate into a form that students can comprehend. While this problem could be solved in many ways, the easiest solution might be for professors of history and history education to devote more time to discussions about what it means to study history. Given the importance of historical thinking for the study of history, this would surely be time well spent.

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