

Power and the Past: A Philosophical Approach to Historiography

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Abstract

This unit aims to change the way that students think about history. Ideally taught at the beginning of the year, it would set the pace for the remainder of the school year and provide students with the proper tools and habits of mind to think like a historian. This unit will task students with conducting their own historical inquiries, thinking critically about a variety of topics and examples in historiography, with participation in small group and whole-class discussions, conducting research--both archival and empirical, and more. Students will also explore the philosophical underpinnings of historiography; specifically how knowledge of the past is constructed, disseminated, and widely understood. The unit ends with students completing an "Ask a Historian" project in which they use their newfound knowledge and skills as an interview framework.

Keywords

History, Historiography, Historical Thinking Skills, Social Studies, Philosophy, Epistemology

Problem Statement

Historiography is the writing of history and the study of historical writing. It helps us understand why events have been interpreted differently over time. It also helps us examine and develop understanding of the broader characteristics and trends that shape the ways in which history is recorded. Many of us learn about history as a set of facts, dates, and important people, but it is much more than that. History is a way of thinking and knowing. The phrase "think like a lawyer" instantly evokes certain characteristics and habits of mind, however, "think like a historian" is probably a bit trickier to employ for many. Historical thinking skills are essential in subverting the tendency to think of history as a static procession of events. Historians must constantly engage with new emergent evidence, counter-arguments, and their own shifting interpretations of a given period, event, or individual.

When considered through the lens of epistemology, historical thinking skills can become quite complex. Epistemology is defined as the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. As in most cases dealing with philosophical questions, one query leads to another, and another. The juxtaposition of fact versus opinion leads to the question of "what is a fact?" and the answer is not simply "the opposite of an opinion." Epistemology

requires the investigation of a justified belief versus an opinion; it is a value judgement--what evidence exists to substantiate this belief? Students of both history and philosophy must grapple with these questions and more as they consider how historical knowledge and narratives are constructed, recorded, and disseminated.

Rationale

I work at a small neighborhood high school in Kensington, Philadelphia. The school population is comprised of 70% Latino students, 25% African American students and 5% listed as "other." As a social studies teacher, I have observed that many students do not possess the requisite historical and critical thinking skills appropriate for high school level study. This unit seeks to remedy this unpreparedness by studying topics such as the philosophical theory of knowledge (epistemology), power dynamics related to the writing of history, positivism, and constructivism. The primary focuses of this unit will be preparing students to better understand the construction of historical narratives, the process of historical revision (historiography), and comparative viewpoints on various topics in history. The readings and activities in this unit will help students to understand the aforementioned theories and topics. In addition to a rich body of texts, students will also consider and analyze visual art and media, maps, and numerous digital resources, both individually and collectively.

Content Objectives

"The common factor in all these discussions is a blurry image of the learner and what that learner brings to instruction. To be sure, historical knowledge, as Michael Shudson put it, 'seeps into the cultural pores' even if such knowledge is not 'readily retrievable by seventeen-year-olds answering a quiz.' Large-scale tests may tell us something about what young people know, but to assume that they constitute the alpha and omega of historical knowledge thwarts any serious investigation of American intellectual life and culture." (Wineburg, 2001, ix)

Ancient history begins with mostly chronological records of what is said to have happened. Civilizations such as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia produced accounts of events as they happened in order, producing a coherent and linear historical narrative. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus established the discipline of historiography most closely resembling what is used today in the west in 5th century BCE with *Histories*. Chinese historiography can be traced back to 2 BCE, and served as the foundation for the Korean and Japanese models that emerged around the Middle Ages. These also fall within the genesis of Medieval historiography, including the chronicles of medieval Europe and Islamic histories. During the 18th-century Enlightenment, Voltaire, David Hume and Edward Gibbon, among others, would help to modernize the discipline.

While the methodologies and research interests of historians change over time, the debate over how history is recorded and what is generally considered to have happened has been debated since the beginning of recorded chronicles. As Sam Wineburg says in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, “There is no easy way around the tension between the familiar past, which seems so relevant to our present needs, and the strange and inaccessible past, whose applicability is not immediately manifest” (Ibid, 6). Wineburg goes on to argue that we need to feel a connection with the people we study, engaging our interest. In a similar vein, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that human beings are both actors and narrators in the production of history. Human beings can approach the recording, interpretation and understanding of history in myriad ways, but the need for a connection between the actors and the narrators presents an interesting lens through which to consider the way that historical knowledge is constructed (Trouillot, 1995, 2-3).

Epistemology is defined as the theory of knowledge. Philosophers and other scholars who consider the epistemological dimensions of a variety of subjects and specialized knowledge often weigh a justified belief against an opinion. Christoffer Lammer-Heindel explains it as such in *Facts and Opinions*. He claims that while we are trained from a young age to discern fact from opinion, the way in which we understand that dichotomy is sometimes flawed. He goes on to say that “...facts are properly opposed to what we variously call non-facts, merely alleged facts, fictions, or falsehoods; and opinions really stand in opposition to considered judgments” (Lammer-Heindel, 2016, 1). Understanding what exactly makes something factual gets trickier when considering that something can be a fact even if we cannot know it or see it firsthand ourselves.

It is making a value judgement; in other words, in the face of what evidence is this a justified belief, or is it merely an unsubstantiated opinion? Andrew Chignell phrases the question as such, “Is it ever or always morally right (or epistemically rational, or practically prudent) to believe on the basis of sufficient evidence, or to withhold belief in the perceived absence of it?” (Chignell, 2018, 1). This begs the question then, to what extent can historical evidence be considered sufficient enough to foster a belief that something *has happened*, and what about in the face of new or contradictory evidence? It is important to understand the development of historiography as a discipline in order to attempt to answer these important questions.

Historiography

The discipline of historiography was created in the 5th century BCE with the *Histories* of Herodotus. Herodotus is considered to be the first systematic historian, bucking Homeric traditions of contemporaries such as Socrates, in which narratives were simply passed down from generation to generation. From the Classical period to the Renaissance, historians pushed

particular narratives, ones that emphasized facts and sought to improve mankind. Most histories at this time were biographies of monarchs or epic poems describing heroic feats and exploits. Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* in 1377 paved the way for a more philosophical approach to history, incorporating Islamic ethics, political science, and historiography, while also denouncing superstition and the blind acceptance of historical data without critical thinking (Khaldun, 2020). Historians turned towards a factually-oriented approach in the 18th century, in line with positivism, but still emphasizing the ways that such histories could teach and improve readers. In the 19th century a more scientific approach was adopted, and during the Victorian era historiographers cared less about how history could improve the reader, and more about change over time and how historical change could be understood.

Given the ways that the disciplines of history and historiography have evolved over time, it is no surprise that there is still considerable debate over the myriad approaches to understanding the past and change over time. Two principal approaches to history, the historical narrative approach and the theory of causality--both of which are explained in more detail later in this unit--are often seen by historians as contradictory or opposed to one another, however, they can also be seen as complementary (Hewitson, 2014, 127-48). Arthur Danto, philosopher of history, claims "explanations in history and elsewhere" describe "not simply an event—something that happens—but a change." When thinking about more nebulous topics than just an event that is said to have happened--especially one with strong evidence to support it--such as the emergence of nationalism and other ideologies, things become more complex. One must consider the confluence of multiple events, key individuals and subtle shifts in actions and attitudes over time when approaching history in this way (Danto, 1968, 233-249).

Historian John Lewis Gaddis distinguishes between exceptional and general causes in the study of history. He explains the difference between causal links with the following example, "In accounting for what happened at Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, we attach greater importance to the fact that President Truman ordered the dropping of an atomic bomb than to the decision of the Army Air Force to carry out his orders" (Gaddis, 2004, 64). There is widespread disagreement regarding historical determinism, or the extent to which historical events are predetermined or limited by various forces. History is seen by some as the combination of economic forces, geography, and culturally prescribed laws that determine outcomes. Others still see history as sequential, however, even determinists accept that certain catastrophic and unpredictable events can change the course of history.

Another important philosophical approach to historiography concerns the question of neutrality. Neutrality mostly has to do with the analysis of historiography and the potential biases of historical sources. One way of thinking about neutrality is exemplified by the famous quote, "History is written by the victors." This quote originates from U.S. statesman George Graham Vest in 1891 and was used to explain the Lost Cause mythology of the losing Confederates in the

American Civil War (Abilene, 1891, image 1). Michel Foucault and others expand upon this idea further by explaining that the victors of military or social struggles use their newfound political strength to push their own historical narrative or propaganda (Foucault et al., 2003, 73).

Since the twentieth century, however, western historians have denied responsibility in passing judgment via historical analysis and retellings. Historical judgments and interpretations are meant to be less definitive than legal judgments, especially when considering the potential implications and consequences. In other words, historical judgments are not final, binding, or static; they are ongoing, ever-changing in the face of new evidence and shifting cultural values and understandings. Neutrality and objectivity are essential elements of this type of analysis, and form the basis of much debate among analytic and critical philosophers of history. When thinking about historiography through an epistemic framework, positivists would denounce any value-judgments as unscientific, while constructivists might disagree (Parkinson, 2002, 800-820). Both of these schools of thought will be elaborated on in the next section. In any case, with so many dimensions, both analytical and philosophical, to historiography, the need for strong historical thinking skills is clear.

Epistemology

There are myriad theories and philosophical underpinnings regarding how knowledge is constructed. The field of social epistemology, or “...how societies come to some kind of public understanding about truth...” presents several important questions with regard to historical thinking (Rauch, 2018, 125-7). Who should decide who is right? Who should decide who gets to decide? Who can be trusted to resolve questions about objective truth? Jonathan Rauch argues that the best answer turns out to be no one, specifically.

Though nowhere encoded in law, the constitution of knowledge has its own equivalents of checks and balances (peer review and replication), separation of powers (specialization), governing institutions (scientific societies and professional bodies), voting (citations and confirmations), and civic virtues (submit your beliefs for checking if you want to be taken seriously). The members of the community that supports and upholds the constitution of knowledge do not have to agree on facts; the whole point, indeed, is to manage their disagreements (Ibid, 128).

The communities that subscribe to some basic rules about the collective constitution of knowledge are not restricted to just academics. They can also include journalists, courts, law enforcement, and others. However, the two sects of epistemology that best frame the debate over how historical knowledge is constructed are that of constructivism and positivism.

Constructivism presents reality as subjective, because it is regarded as a construct of the human mind. In *Constructing Coherence*, Yonathan Shemmer argues that constructivists rely on a process of norm construction in order to see the world in this way. This process is undergirded by what is called practical consistency, and supplemented by the broader principle of coherence. As Shemmer states, “The principle of consistency is a thin principle of rationality that prohibits agents from both adopting and rejecting the same goal at the same time” (Shemmer, 2012, 160). In other words, much like Rauch reasons, there are a set of basic rules that must be accepted in order to understand the fundamental ways in which knowledge is constructed and universal truths are accepted.

Constructivism can be used as a teaching and learning philosophy, and helps one to understand one of the dominant theories regarding how knowledge is constructed.

Ultimately, constructivist thinking dictates that understanding is based on a form of metacognition, or relating personal experiences to new knowledge or knowledge that one already possesses.

Positivism, on the other hand, alleges that factual knowledge can only be gained through observation. Subscribers to this theory would therefore believe that all knowledge considered trustworthy comes from experts such as scientists who are trained professionals, able to conduct fieldwork and observe these results firsthand. This obviously presents a problem for historical knowledge, because the number of people who witness a given historical event is considerably low, and the farther back in history one goes, there will be fewer living firsthand observers, or in many cases none at all. Positivists may still trust the analysis of historians however, especially in the case of the aforementioned “basic rules” of the construction of knowledge.

It should be noted that there is a clear distinction between the basic idea of a collective construction of knowledge, and the more specific constructivist philosophy of knowledge. Things become more complicated yet when comparing constructivism and positivism, and considering the implications on the recording, interpretation, and analysis of history. While there are merits to each theory of knowledge construction, it falls to the specific individual and what their beliefs and intellectual habits of mind are in choosing what to use as a framework for historical thinking. With all that said, whatever the selected methodology and philosophy may be, the need for historical thinking skills is as apparent as ever.

Post-truth and the Need for Historical Thinking Skills

There is a stronger need for solid historical thinking skills among students today than ever before. In *Post Truth*, C.G. Prado borrows Wikipedia’s definition, citing a “political

culture ‘in which debate is largely framed by appeals to emotion...and by the repeated assertion of talking points to which factual rebuttals are ignored’” (Prado, 2017, 1). Given that much of historiography and human understanding of the past is based upon dialogue, argument, and factual rebuttals, if post-truth ideology were to become the dominant framework, the fabric of reality and collective knowledge could fall by the wayside. While this may sound like hyperbole, there are very real risks in an intellectual culture that subsists on emotion rather than evidence and logic.

Prado goes on to define a core element of post-truth, what he calls “rhetorical exuberance.” Rhetorical exuberance is perhaps best exemplified in the way that some politicians make emotional appeals in the heat of the moment, as opposed to employing them as a calculated stratagem. The gradual acceptance of rhetorical exuberance is a telltale sign of the relationship between dictators and their supporters throughout history. Beyond the “spontaneous embellishments, exaggerations, and outright fabrications...” of post-truth, another dangerous element lies in the tendency of press secretaries, journalists, and others in supporting rhetorically exuberant claims. If all of this does not appear problematic enough for rational discourse in the humanities, another accompanying element of the post-truth era is the type of anti-intellectualism that actively foments these types of ideologies (Ibid, 2-5).

There has been a history of selectivity in teaching particular histories in the U.S. education system, with a number of books written elucidating the ways in which critical elements are left out of the mainstream historical narrative. In James Loewen’s *Lies my Teacher Told Me*, he examines twelve popular highschool history textbooks used across the country, and finds a shocking number of important omissions. “Why are history textbooks so bad?” Loewen asks. “Nationalism is one of the culprits. Textbooks are often muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism.” He goes on to say that these hulking texts, some over 1,000 pages, “bulge with detail,” yet they often do even reach 1960 in their relative chronology. The textbooks used in public school feature a paragraph or more on every American president, but often leave out critical information about topics such as slavery, genocide, and war (Loewen, 2007, 5-7).

Modern history textbooks do not promote critical thinking skills, historical thinking skills, or the very type of historical inquiry they ostensibly promote. Many present a one-sided view of conflict and almost never reveal the evidence or source of information upon which each side bases the information contained therein. Loewen ends his book with several suggestions for ways that historical thinking skills can be fostered in students. He recommends that teachers introduce fewer topics in history classes and explore those select topics more deeply. Rather than emphasizing the rote memorization of facts and

dates, teachers can help students focus on the larger picture, i.e. the cause-and-effect relationships that are present throughout almost any period in history. Focusing on historical controversies, not merely the events themselves but the scholarship and debates surrounding them are yet another way to pique student interest (Ibid, 302-361).

As Eric Foner asks, “Who owns history?” The answer is clear: “Everyone and no one-- which is why the study of the past is a constantly evolving, never-ending journey of discovery” (Foner, 2003, xix). As students take ownership of their learning, and as teachers help to facilitate stronger historical thinking skills, the emerging era of post-truth may crumble under the weight of a generation of students prepared to think critically about the past, especially as it relates to the present and future. Whether students are thinking philosophically, in the veins of constructivism or positivism, or are merely looking beyond the simple memorization of facts, dates, and key individuals, what is most important is that they develop the ability to be metacognitive, understand multiple perspectives--many of which may conflict or contradict one another--and generally refuse to believe everything they hear or see at first glance, no matter how emotional the appeal. There is power in the past, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot says, and that power is ripe for the taking by a more prepared and informed group of emerging students.

Standards

The Core Curriculum of the School District of Philadelphia is aligned to the Pennsylvania Department of Education Academic Standards for History. These standards support instruction and development of content knowledge related to Historical Analysis and Skills Development, United States History and World History. The goal of this unit is to encompass these topics and more as we develop strong historical thinking skills, understand the process of historiography and its importance, and synthesize unit material with the philosophical underpinnings of the unit.

Academic:

8.1.U.A. Evaluate patterns of continuity and change over time, applying context of events

8.1.U.B. Evaluate the interpretation of historical events and sources, considering the use of fact versus opinion, multiple perspectives, and cause and effect relationships.

8.1.U.C. Analyze, synthesize and integrate historical data, creating a product that supports and appropriately illustrates inferences and conclusions drawn from research.

8.3.U.A. Compare the role groups and individuals played in the social, political, cultural, and economic development of the U.S.

8.3.U.C. Evaluate how continuity and change have impacted the United States. • Belief systems and Religions • Commerce and industry • Technology • Politics and government • Physical and human Geography • Social organizations

PA Core:**CC.8.6.9-10.A.** Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

- Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
- Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form and in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns.
- Use words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.
- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from or supports the argument presented.
- **CC.8.6.9-10.C.** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- **CC.8.6.9-10.D.** Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
- **CC.8.6.9-10.E.** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
- **CC.8.6.9-10.F.** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- **CC.8.6.9-10.G.** Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
- **CC.8.6.9-10.H.** Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- **CC.8.6.9-10.I.** Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Teaching Strategies

This unit is intended for students in an 11th Grade African American History course, but is also applicable to other history courses such as U.S. History, World History, and Social Science. The students meet two to three times per week, on a rotating A/B block schedule, for 90-minutes at a time.

This unit will see students engage in a myriad of activities, including but not limited to:

- Analyzing a variety of primary and secondary sources, including discerning the differences between the types of sources and their formats
- Interpret and assess the different ways that historians ask questions, make inferences and assumptions, and construct historical narratives through written and oral pieces
- Conduct a historical review of their own on a given topic, incorporating a number of diverse sources and grounding their work in the philosophical underpinnings of the unit

Source and Data Analysis

Students will analyze primary and secondary source data, as well as different historians' interpretations in order to better understand continuity and change in historiography over time. Sources will include primary source documents such as newspaper, political cartoons, speeches, secondary sources such as book excerpts, peer-reviewed journal articles, newsmedia, and others. Students will analyze these sources within the context of each lesson, both in a supplementary capacity as well as an inquiry-based approach that requires them to question and draw their own conclusions. These analysis activities will take place in individual, small-group, and whole-class formats.

Gallery Walk/Stations

In addition to the source analysis activities that will occur throughout the course of this unit, gallery walks and station activities will also be utilized. A traditional gallery walk activity consists of about 6 stations posted around the room. These stations can either be posted on the walls, or set up at different desks or tables depending on the classroom layout. Students will be divided into groups, and each group will begin at a different station. Once the activity begins, students will have a fixed amount of time at each station, typically 5-7 minutes depending upon the class size. At these stations, the teacher can post primary/secondary sources, text, images, etc. Students can complete the gallery walk with a companion analysis tool such as a worksheet or graphic organizer, or they can conduct a graffiti-style gallery walk, in which students write and/or draw their analyses and commentary on a piece of chart paper or poster board surrounding the source.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One: Differing Perspectives

Objectives: Students will begin to consider how there are a number of different perspectives regarding a given historical figure or event. This lesson serves as an introduction to the unit and historical thinking skills in general, and seeks to show that there is no one “true” interpretation of a historical event, rather it is a summation and conclusion drawn from existing evidence, perspectives, and scholarship.

Materials and Resources:

- Teacher-selected articles from <https://allsides.com>
- *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts, Chapter 4: Reading Abraham Lincoln*

Step one: Explain that the purpose of this lesson is to challenge students to consider the different ways in which history is told and understood. Throughout the classes that follow, students will learn about the different ways in which knowledge is constructed, and how different philosophical approaches inform the ways in which we understand history. This lesson is particularly important because it sets the foundation for the rest of the unit. This lesson could be expanded into multiple class periods, depending on the length and depth of the activities that follow.

Step Two: As a warm up, ask students to respond to the question, “Can different people understand or retell a story or event differently? Why or why not?” There will likely be a variety of answers, but it is important to highlight different and contrasting examples in student responses. Some students may take the stance that if two or more people witness the same event, they would have the same understanding or retelling of it. Others may feel that there are a number of different interpretations of the same event. The variety of student responses will be helpful in facilitating a discussion after asking students to expand upon their written or verbal responses. Close the warm up portion of the lesson by explaining that engaging in this type of metacognition, discussion, and even debate are crucial historical thinking skills, and they are utilized constantly in the field of historiography.

Step Three: Distribute copies of *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. Chapter 4 is a case study in contextualized thinking. It begins with an examination of a quote by Abraham Lincoln and poses several key questions for consideration. Part of the chapter is written specifically for teachers of history, and those sections may be omitted from the class reading if deemed necessary.

Step Four: The chapter can be read as a whole class, or in small groups. Regardless of the approach, begin this portion of the lesson by displaying the full text of the Lincoln quote at the front of the room. In the quote, Lincoln discusses his disregard for fostering political and social equality among the white and black races. Clearly a controversial selection, this is meant to highlight the complexity of historical figures and how their images have been subject to change through various interpretations and evidence. After reading the quote together, pose the following questions from the next section of the chapter to students:

- How are we to regard these words?
- Is the image of this American “patron saint” a sham?
- Should the image of Lincoln as “ the Great Emancipator” be replaced?

The responses to these questions can be either written or discussed as a class.

Step Five: Allsides.com is a website that presents balanced news by offering three articles on the same topic, each leaning either left, right, and center. For this portion of the lesson, students should be organized into small groups of about three to four students. Assign each group an article on the same event or topic, but ensure that each group receives a different side of the political spectrum. In their small groups, students will read their article, identifying the tone of the article, the wording of the headline, and key highlights, including how the formatted article highlights certain key phrases or quotes. Groups should finish their work together by writing a short summary of the article.

Step Six: After everyone has finished their analyses, the groups should be reformed so that each member previously analyzed a different article. Students will then complete a small group discussion and analysis in which they examine the ways that their articles were alike and different. Students should highlight the ways in which language was used across the left, center, and right sides of the political spectrum and how it differed, if the focus of each article differed from one another, and if there was any special emphasis or omission of information between the three readings.

Step Seven: In order to close out the lesson, students will submit a brief reflection in which they describe how their thinking either has or has not changed regarding the different ways that the same event, figure, or phenomena can be interpreted between different people. Students should include specific examples from the readings and activities to support their claims. This activity can be extended by asking students to share their reflections, highlighting the fact that the work they engaged in during this lesson is the same work that historians do.

Lesson Two: Philosophical Underpinnings

Materials and Resources:

- *Crash Course Philosophy: What is Philosophy?* Accessible online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A_CAkYt3GY&t=291s (epistemology begins at 4:51 mark)
- *Crash Course Philosophy: The Meaning of Knowledge.* Accessible online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXhJ3hHK9hQ>
- “Facts and Opinions” by Christoffer Lammer-Heindel. Accessible online at: https://philosophynow.org/issues/115/Facts_and_Opinions

Objectives: Students will gain an understanding of the basic tenets of philosophy, with a special emphasis on epistemology. Students will also begin to make connections between the previous lesson and how historical thinking skills and the constitution of knowledge are interrelated to the field of philosophy.

Step One: Begin by making connections to the previous discussions and activities that students have completed in the lesson prior. Ask for students to provide 2-3 things they learned from the previous class. After a number of students have responded, draft a summary of the previous lesson that the class can agree upon. Explain that this is the way that collective knowledge is formed, and that this lesson will focus on philosophy and the ways in which knowledge is constructed, including how to differentiate between facts and opinions.

Step Two: Play *Crash Course Philosophy: What is Philosophy?* for the class. The video is about ten minutes long, and serves as a good introduction to the field of philosophy. If time is a consideration play the video from 1:54 - 6:20 to cover the basics, including a brief definition of epistemology. Following the video provide students with the following terms and have them transcribe their definitions:

- Philosophy
- Ideology
- Epistemology
- Historiography
- Positivism
- Constructivism

Step Three: With the basic tenets of philosophy and epistemology defined, distribute copies of “Facts and Opinions” for a whole-class reading. Before beginning the reading, have students create a T-chart with “facts” on one side and “opinions” on the other side. Give students time to record several examples of each. After students have furnished a sufficient number of responses, ask them to share out with the rest of the class. Pose the question, “What differentiates facts from

opinions?” After letting students share their thoughts, begin reading “Facts and Opinions” by Christoffer Lammer-Heindel.

Step Four: After reading “Facts and Opinions,” ask students to revise their T-charts, if necessary. After making revisions to the charts, students may share how their lists changed. To conclude this activity, ask students to reflect on how their understanding of facts vs. opinions changed after reading the article. Additionally, students should cite specific examples from the text in support of their answer. If their thinking was already in line with the thesis of “Facts and Opinions,” they can furnish evidence from the text that confirms their prior knowledge and thinking on the subject.

Step Five: After discussing the ways in which knowledge is constructed and facts and opinions, students will explore two subsets of epistemological thought, positivism and constructivism. Students will already have these terms defined in their glossary from an earlier portion of the lesson. After providing time for students to review the definitions of each, separate the class into two groups, one for positivist thinking, and one for constructivist thinking.

Step Six: Once the class has been divided into the two groups, explain that they will have seven to ten minutes to prepare an argument in favor of their chosen philosophy. They may use anecdotal evidence, as well as supporting details from the previous lessons and activities in this unit. Students should structure the discussion with an opening statement, at least three supporting details, and a closing statement.

Step Seven: After both sides have completed their respective portions of the discussion, students may return to their original seats. Conclude the lesson by having them individually assess positivism and constructivism, and which philosophy seems more compelling after the discussion. Students may share their reflections, which can be expanded into a larger discussion if appropriate. Conclude the lesson by explaining that even though there are several different philosophies surrounding how knowledge is constituted, disseminated, and understood, they all incorporate the necessary critical and historical thinking skills that historians and historiography employ regularly.

Lesson Three: Ask a Historian

Objectives: Students will contextualize their learning throughout this unit by completing a project in which they ask a historian questions on a selected topic, or about the process of historical inquiry and review. The projects can take a variety of different forms depending on the level of access to the necessary personnel, technology, and other resources.

Materials and Resources:

- *Ask a Historian* Podcast. Accessible online at: <https://history.wisc.edu/ask-a-historian/>
- *Have a Historical Question? Ask a Historian!* Accessible online at: <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~kjolly/outreach.html?>
- Recording device such as a camcorder or cell phone with video and audio recording capabilities
- Any print materials from the institution such as visitor guides, pamphlets, biographies, or others

Step One: Explain to students that the final project for this unit will task them with utilizing the knowledge of historiography and philosophy to “ask a historian” a number of questions. Each student, depending on access to technology and other potential resources, will create a project that includes either a written series of questions and their responses, a video interview, or an audio presentation or podcast. A list of local and national historical sites, museums, universities, and other historically and civically focused institutions should be provided to students. The teacher can assist in facilitating contact between the students and their selected historians.

Step Two: As preparation for the project, students should review *Have a Historical Question? Ask a Historian!* on the University of Hawaii website. The article will provide students with a good basis for how to conduct themselves in a conversation and informal interview with a historian. While students go over the article, explain that they will also need to incorporate unit content and terminology in their interview, such as the different philosophical underpinnings of knowledge and historiography that the activities have been centered around.

Step Three: Students will next listen to the *Ask a Historian* Podcast. “History Lab 3: How do historians determine what’s true when working with primary sources?” In order to gain further understanding of the structure of their project, as well as more insight into the epistemological dimensions of historiography. Students should brainstorm ideas for their projects while reading the aforementioned article and while listening to the podcast.

Step Four: Students will reach out to their chosen historian to establish a timeline and format for their interview. Based on the degree of access to technology, students may submit written questions to be answered via email or in a separate document, schedule an audio recording session to create a podcast episode, or schedule a video interview via Zoom, Google Meet, or Skype. Over the course of the week, students will individually conduct their “Ask a Historian” interviews and will edit the materials into a format that is suitable for presentation.

Step Five: Students should arrive to class on the due date with a finished project to present. Students will take turns presenting their materials to the class, Following the presentation, students should speak for 2-3 minutes about how the concepts learned in this unit helped to guide

their project and understanding of the historian they interviewed. Each project should conclude with questions and comments from the rest of the class.

Bibliography

Appadurai, Arjun. "The Past as a Scarce Resource." *Man*, New Series, 16, no. 2 (1981): 201-19.

An anthropological text that refutes the scarcity of historical evidence, instead arguing that the major limitation is the ways in which historical debates can be framed based upon existing evidence. This text informed some of the core ideas of the unit, and could also be helpful in class activities as well.

Arnold, John H. *History: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

The Very Short Introduction series offers primers on a variety of texts. John Arnold's contribution provides a wonderful summary of the field of history, and was instrumental in providing the necessary background for the introduction and section on historiography as a process and field of study.

Chignell, Andrew, "The Ethics of Belief", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/ethics-belief/>.

The Ethics of Belief offers a philosophical, ethical, and psychological approach to understanding how human beings formed beliefs and understanding. This article is helpful in understanding the different ways in which people come to accept things as true, under various burdens of proof, and questions whether there is a normative set of guidelines that one must accept in order to operate within these ethical boundaries.

Danto, Arthur. *Analytical Philosophy of History*. Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Arthur Danto's analytical approach to the philosophy of history informed the section about the evolution of history as a field of study. His work is informative for both teachers and students in understanding that history and historiography are fields that are subject to change in the face of cultural, intellectual and ideological shifts across a given population.

Foner, Eric. *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*. Hill and Wang, 2003.

Eric Foner's *Who Owns History?* is both a wonderful resource for all historians and teachers of history, as well as a summative question for much of this curriculum unit. Excerpts from this text can be incorporated into classroom activities in the same way that Wineburg's text is, therefore this will also appear in the Reading List section.

Foucault, Michel, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, François Ewald, and David Macey. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures At the Collège De France, 1975-76*. Picador, 2003.

This curriculum unit would be incomplete without mentioning ubiquitous philosopher Michel Foucault and his contributions to the field. This book, a series of lectures and interviews collected from 1975-76, covers a wide range of topics, but is most helpful for this curriculum unit when pulling from the lecture where he describes the power dynamics of recorded history.

Gaddis, John L. *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Famed Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis provides a helpful primer in explaining the work of historians, how they operate, and relevant examples to the process of historical understanding and revisions.

Hewitson, Mark. *History and Causality*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Hewitson's text proved essential in defining the philosophy of historical causality, which when juxtaposed with the philosophy of chronology becomes a useful teaching tool in the evolution of historiography throughout various centuries.

Khaldun, Ibn, Bruce B Lawrence, and Franz Rosenthal. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History - Abridged Edition*. Edited by N. J. Dawood, Princeton University Press, 2020.

Ibn Khaldun's work provided a very useful basis for expanding upon the early philosophical underpinnings of recorded history.

Lammer-Heindel, Christoffer. "Facts and Opinions." *Philosophy Now*, no. 115 (2016): 1-4.

Included in both the bibliography for teachers and the Reading List section, "Facts and Opinions" was a central text in shaping some of the most important ideas in the unit, as well as an extremely valuable classroom resource.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York, New York. The New Press, 2007.

This text should be required reading for all teachers and students of history. Loewen surveyed a dozen popular history textbooks used in schools throughout the country and found fault with each of them. More than a hit piece, the book closely examines the methodology of teaching history in primary and secondary schools and how seriously flawed it is.

Parkinson, G.H.R. *An Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Taylor & Francis, 2002.

Parkinson's section on positivism was extremely helpful in defining the term and thinking through the philosophy's practical application for the curriculum unit.

Prado, C.G. "Post Truth." *The Philosopher's Magazine*, no. 79 (2017): 27-32.

"Post Truth" served as an essential informant for many of the core ideas in this unit. Prado argues that some live in the post-truth era right now, and this article exposes the need for strong metacognitive and historical thinking skills.

Rauch, Jonathan. "The Constitution of Knowledge." *National Affairs*, no. 37 (2018): 125-137.

This article was central in defining the core epistemological values that form the backbone of this curriculum unit. Excerpts of this article could be used in extension activities in a number of lessons.

Shemmer, Yonathan. "Constructing Coherence." *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, edited by James Lenman and Yonathan Shemmer. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Part of a larger anthology on constructivism and practical philosophy, the importance in fleshing out the section on constructivism and positivism is obvious. It is recommended to scour the other essays for useful information as well.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing The Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Mass. Beacon Press, 1995.

One of the first books used in the background research for this curriculum unit, this is another text that should be required reading for students and teachers of history. Many of the arguments and claims in this book appear throughout the unit, supported by other citations, showing the timelessness of Trouillot's important work.

Wineberg, Sam. *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Temple University Press, 2001.

Historical thinking can be somewhat unnatural until some solid habits of mind have been established. This book serves as a fantastic manual for teachers of history as they reflect upon the ways in which they think and teach about history and the social sciences.

Reading List

Foner, Eric. *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*. Hill and Wang, 2003.

Foner's book appears again in the reading list section as it is enormously useful as a classroom resource. This text can be incorporated into a number of lessons, including but not limited to those on historical thinking skills, epistemology, and the summative "Ask a Historian" project.

Jolly, Karen. *Have a Historical Question? Ask a Historian!* Department of History, University of Hawaii at Manoa. Accessed on June 30, 2021. <<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~kjolly/outreach.html>?>

Karen Jolly's digital article provides a wonderful baseline as students begin their "Ask a Historian" projects at the end of the unit. It includes many do's and don'ts, as well as some very useful frameworks in how to conduct a conversation with a professional historian.

Lammer-Heindel, Christoffer. "Facts and Opinions." *Philosophy Now*, no. 115 (2016): 1-4.

Included in both the bibliography for teachers and the Reading List section, "Facts and Opinions" was a central text in shaping some of the most important ideas in the unit, as well as an extremely valuable classroom resource.

National Endowment for the Humanities. (August 27, 1891). "Abilene weekly reflector. (Abilene, Kan.) 1888-1935, August 27, 1891, Image 1"

A newspaper article from 1891 in which the phrase "History is written by the victors" is attributed. Helpful in providing a supporting anecdote, but it could also be a useful resource for classroom activities.