

Milton Reynolds – A Few Thoughts on 21st Century History

In thinking about what to share with the group in regards to teaching history for the 21st Century it is difficult to divorce my thoughts from the recent news cycle or rather the patterns revealed by these events and what it suggests as to why a critical understanding of history is an important 21st Century skill, maybe one of the most essential skills to develop.

The patterns of violence, the targets of that violence, the rhetorical underpinnings, not to mention the makeup of the shooters themselves all suggest that the teaching of history must equip all students to grapple with the complexity of history. To help them understand that history is messy and that sitting in the generative tension of that messiness can be cognitively and civically productive. In this sense, the pursuit of history may run counter to more familiar classroom approaches that seek to avoid discomfort through simplification, selective omission, or the selection of the narratives that feel most fitting for the teachers, but not necessarily the students they serve. Though I am speaking about the teaching of history in high school/middle school it still has implication for the teaching of history for incoming freshmen.

I imagine that many folks, especially those who aren't history majors, probably had history presented as a series of pre-digested facts, as opposed to a series of arguments about the past, arguments that are ongoing in most cases. Exposing students to history as it is practiced by historians would likely prove more interesting, but also invite the students to engage with the broader set of implications historical illumination and critical thinking such exposure is likely to generate. Understanding cause and effect, change and continuity, understanding context and perspective or engaging in turning points in history, differing levels of curatorial agency all provide conceptual anchors for knowledge construction that seem especially critical in this moment and for the foreseeable future.

The growing balkanization of our civic discourse also seems to suggest that folks are imbibing in different historical narratives or are at least inhabiting them differently. Some of the dissonance may be generated by exposure to emerging counter narratives or novel interpretations of the past generally speaking. These tensions also comport with research documenting extensive cultural differences between White or white identifying American and those from historically marginalized communities who may hold fundamentally different understandings in their perception or racism and other oppressive forces. These are at least in part the byproducts of Whig History filtered through our different lived experiences and likely speak to the issues of declining interest in history, especially amongst an increasingly diverse student body.

While not suggesting any group is monolithic, these differing understandings of the world represent very real challenges to the practices of democracy. Though not new, these differences in perception and the likely shifts in political and economic power attendant with these shifts are not without consequence. The current moment reveals that the possibility of a functional and inclusive democracy is not guaranteed. I operate with the faith that we will have a shared future a potentially amazing one, though not without considerable work and much of that work will require a deeper historical reckoning.

Current controversies regarding historical representation, be those Confederate monuments/memorials, the renaming of schools and other buildings or even the most recent organizing efforts related to some historical murals in SF indicate a larger process of reckoning with the past is underway. Engaging with these kinds of historical interactions will be an important pedagogical tool for engaging an increasingly diverse student body, but also cultivating critical thinking and skills of civic engagement. These efforts will also require utilizing pedagogies of engagement that help students develop the capacity to hold tension, honor multiple perspective and see those different understandings as assets that support their learning.

Getting into the mix of these conversations is not only important for students to understand history as a form of narrative, but one that can't be separated from power relationships, curatorial agency, the intentions and purposes that shape those narratives, but also their legitimacy.

The issue of legitimacy is particularly important, not simply in relationship to what having access to that history allows one to see and understand, but also that for an increasing number of our students, whether history is seen as relevant and worthy of engaging in the first place. As the demographic makeup of classrooms becomes increasingly diverse there is a growing gap between the questions the students in the seats may be asking, the narratives they hold and their understanding of the material realities. The learning of history shouldn't simply be a performative act of mastering the content or defined body of knowledge, but rather a more existentially rooted process of reckoning with the past and engaging with the larger set of questions it should surface for how we live our lives and how we might imagine a shared future in which a sense of social order or normalcy isn't predicated on the predictable patterns of human hierarchy that have been naturalized. It must also confront the role that history has played in these processes. Though not dismissing the need for students to generate products that demonstrate their understanding, it seems important to consider the various ways in which their historical understanding will be utilized and leveraged over the course of their lives.

In our emerging digital world, the ability to curate one's own reality or to be seduced by those who would seek to manipulate history is something we will have to increasingly attend to, but also prep our students such that they can become critical consumers of history, regardless of their political leanings. To the extent that digital architectures mimic our brain's own associative architecture the need to present counter narratives that help to complicate understanding seems critical. Digital tools can also be affectively distancing and in some ways make more difficult the task of face to face engagement, which is all the more reason to think about how courses might be structured to intervene in these patterns. This is more anecdotal than anything, but there seems to be an increasingly fragmented and disconnected understanding of history among other things that seems to reflect patterns of hunting and seeking facts or information to bolster arguments rather than understanding narratives coherently. I've heard this referred to as the Google Effect. There may be ways of using certain points of entry as a means of helping students develop or reclaim the ability to hold the complexity and nuance of historical narratives.

I've found the history of eugenics to be a great way to tie together what appear to be disconnected historical themes, but have also used it to generate more critical understandings of the present. With the language of biological essentialism increasingly entering the political discourse nationally and abroad, paying attention to this history, especially the role of the US in promulgating these notions seems like something worthy of attention. Interestingly enough most folks think of these ideas as having been defeated or only being reflective of a particular moment in our history, rather than constituting an ongoing process that's in many respects tied to national identity.

I'm not sure how coherent this is, but these are some of the things on my mind and that I would like to surface for discussion at the conference. I look forward to meeting and making meaning with you all soon.

Milton Reynolds

