Creativity and the Past: How Teaching History Shapes and Challenges Collective Memory

We all are interested in some way about the past—whether it is our family histories or catching up with friends after summer break. Thinking about the past fulfills a human need to make sense of the world. The idea for this talk came from an attempt to synthesize my reflections over the past two years about how to teach history to my students better and how to prepare them to use historical thinking skills in their lives and vocations after graduation. Recently, we have seen many examples of the conflict between historical accounts and collective memory. Many of the concepts I have been contemplating have come from readings assigned in my classes on Historical Methods and Public History and my own personal reading preparing to teach. One important book guiding my thinking, especially about creativity in History, has been David Staley’s *History and Future* where he argues one can use historical thinking skills to write scenarios of the future.¹ In my classes, I tell my students that History is story, investigation, identity, and conversation. Teachers and professors have a great influence on their students as they present accounts of the past in class and as they guide students in developing and practicing historical thinking skills—especially in the use of historical imagination to create their own accounts of the past. Students go on to become members of the public who build collective memories that both shape and challenge what scholars share in class and through their research. Conversations about the past leading to conflict highlight the impact on the world of creating accounts of past events. History faculty and students need to be aware of how this exercise in creativity shapes humanity and the world.

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History as story is at the basic level of inquiry asking the question, “What happened?” Like all good stories, history as an account of the past has characters, a plot, and a setting. In other words, people did something somewhere. We all consume these narratives of the past. Unlike a Hollywood movie, or an episode of the Brady Bunch, a narrative of the past may not have a neat resolution. The past is a messy, foreign land. David Staley writes that past events are part of an entity called History1 which historians and students use evidence from to create the accounts of the past Staley calls History2. Thus, the use of historical thinking skills and methods take the stuff of History1 to make something that inhabits History2. Assessing and evaluating these accounts of History2 are also valuable historical thinking skills for students to learn and scholars to responsibly practice.

History as investigation helps create these stories as it intersects consuming accounts of the past and producing accounts of the past. It asks, “Why did it happen?” This is also the facet of history that takes professional historians to the archives and students to the library. History as investigation is based upon looking at things left behind—not everything that every happened was observed, and not everything that was observed was written down, and not everything written down has survived or been saved. Investigation, in other words, gets us from looking at History1 to populating History2. Yet, not everyone may agree with the content and construction of the accounts of the past.

History as identity looks at how past events seem to pile on top of each other and influence what people think and the possible choices they can make. Identity in many ways provides the context for past events as it sets up the question, “Why is this significant?” History as identity also develops collective memory—a set of important stories and interpretations of the

past that shapes a community. So, what happens when collective memory is challenged by new investigations? Or, when investigations lead to different conclusions?

History as conversation is the dialog that ensues from disagreements or when your professor wants you to think more deeply about an event. Conversation builds community among historians and creates connections among people investigating the past. Conversations about the past might lead to conflict and dissention—the opposite of like-mindedness.

However, like-mindedness is in the practice of History rather than in forcing a consensus view of the past. Historians all aim to create responsible accounts of the past desiring to know what happened, why it happened, and why it is significant. Responsible accounts are those that relate accurate information about past events, ideas, and people. Historians—most often—base their accounts on reasonable conclusions drawn from the information they have collected and analyzed. The goal is to create explanations of the past that take into account the complexities and chaotic nature of human actions. Teachers and students strive to describe and explain what has happened at a time and place that they never personally experienced.

We can broadly define the field of Public History as presenting History—that is, accounts of the past—outside the classroom. Public History professionals work in museums, historical societies, libraries, movie production companies, and legislative support services. These are all professions in which students can enter after graduation. The work of Public History professionals also relates to the construction and use of collective memory in ways similar to the work of teachers and professors. Historian David Thelen describes collective memory as a construction of ideas about the past “made in conversations with others that occur in the contexts of community, broader politics, and social dynamics.”

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professionals, although not in traditional classrooms, still impact and are impacted by schools and other scholars.

Collective memory can present challenges for both academic historians and public historians. Collective memory as a socially constructed account of the past develops from a consensus of ideas and recollections of the past among many people and shared with a broader community or communities. In many ways, we can see the idea of collective memory as a paradigm explaining the world and guiding research. As new research produces accounts that challenge the consensus paradigm (collective memory), the paradigm is adjusted or remade. Another way collective memory presents challenges is when there are competing memories within one large group of people. Some members of the community hold fast to one understanding of a past era while others may adhere to a different account or find a different meaning in the events. One example of this is the memory of the Civil War and monuments remembering that conflict and era.

What is taught in History classrooms—both in K-12 education and in colleges—and the goals college History professors work toward have profound effects both on building collective memory and on creating conflicts surrounding memories. Often History professors are charged, rightly or wrongly, with bias and brainwashing students as they present accounts of the past that challenge collective memories of the community. The accounts of the past presented in class do not match the accounts of the past community members hold or were taught in schools. This clash between class and public has immense social impacts that deserve attention as students prepare to be active citizens. High school History teachers aim to prepare students for end-of-course exams that focus more on content than on historical thinking skills; the material for the EOC exams mirrors the “important stuff” according to a community’s collective memory (which
is itself an account of the past). College professors build upon the information students bring to them from high school. Professors want not only to add to their students’ understanding of past events (asking “Why did it happen?” and “Why is it significant?”) but also to get students to think historically (having them create accounts of the past). This nugget of creativeness is a transferable skill honed in general education courses and a key skill for History majors. Pre-service teachers in college history courses use what they learn in preparation for teaching their own students in the future. Thus, history teaching comes full circle. However, there is a lag in building consensus for new accounts of the past as part of collective memory.

In our universities’ history classrooms one goal is to encourage responsible accounts and another goal is to have students think while they analyze events. An understanding not only of past events but also of how they have shaped the world today is important for being active, engaged citizens in communities. Students should learn that people may look at the same evidence and create different accounts of events. Students come to class with some understandings and professors need to activate prior knowledge to begin the learning and creative processes. This prior knowledge is part of the community’s collective memory. Students as future citizens take the accounts of the past they develop into the world shaping collective memory for future generations. This is a slow process, yet professors have a duty to prepare students for life after graduation.

Teaching History at a university includes presenting scholarly accounts of the past and guiding students in practicing the responsible creation of those accounts. Doing so should liberate the students’ thinking and thoughts as they satisfy their human nature to make sense of the world. Understanding the world in which they live—controversies and all—will make them responsible citizens.