

What's So Hard about Thinking Like an Historian? Historical Thinking as a Goal of History Education – and its Alleged Unnaturalness

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Some key statements by Sam Wineburg, in “Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts,”
Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts (2001)

1. “The sustained encounter with this less-familiar past teaches us the limitations of our brief sojourn on the planet and allows us to take membership in the entire human race.” (p. 7)
2. “Historical thinking is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement ... actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think.” (p. 7)
3. “Presentism is ... our psychological condition at rest, a way of thinking that requires little effort and comes quite naturally.” (p. 19)
4. Derek’s initial conclusion, based on studying a set of documents: “the engagement might have been more one-sided than the term ‘battle’ suggests.” (p.8)
5. Derek’s explanation for why he chose the second picture: “They’re thinking they got to hide behind something, get at a place where they can’t be shot. Their mentalities would be ludicrous if they were going to stand, like, here in [the depiction showing the minutemen in disarray,] ready to be shot.” (p. 8)
6. Wineburg’s conclusion about Derek: “His existing beliefs shaped the information he encountered so that the new conformed to the shape of the already known. Derek read these documents but he learned little from them.” (p. 9)
7. One reason why Derek’s interpretation is wrong: “What Derek perceived as natural [i.e., hiding behind walls in order to protect oneself as much as possible] was perceived as beastly by the Puritans when they first encountered this form of combat.” (p.9)
8. Wineburg’s general conclusion about Alston: “Alston’s reading shows a humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience and an openness before the expanse of the history of the species. It grants people in the past the benefit of the doubt by casting doubt on our ability to know them as easily as we know ourselves... Other readers used these documents to confirm their prior beliefs. They encountered the past and labeled it. Alston encountered the past and learned from it.” (p.22)
9. Wineburg’s more specific depiction of Alston’s expertise: “His expertise lay not in his sweeping knowledge of this topic but in his ability to pick himself up after a tumble, to get a fix on what he does not know, and to generate a road map to guide his new learning. He was an expert at cultivating puzzlement.” (p.21)

Internal contradiction in the argument

- Wants to claim that **A** → **B**: studying history humanizes us (i.e., sensitizes us to difference)
- Argues that **B** → **A**: humanity (sensitivity to difference) enables good historical interpretation